1. Women's Writing in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century

From the Domestic Novel to Representations of the Foreign

1.1 Methodological Premise: Feminist Narratives of the Rise of the Woman Writer

In her seminal essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf located the birth of the professional woman writer in the eighteenth century. Bringing together historical, social and economic issues and examining their impact on the literary field, she seems to anticipate Watt's theory about the role played by the middle class in *The Rise of the Novel* (1987). However, the two studies diverge in their analysis of gender constraints on literary production, an analysis which is totally absent in Watt's research but which constitutes the essential contribution of Woolf's work. Woolf perceives the emergence of women's writing in the eighteenth century as a momentous event in literary history and aims at restoring the relevance it had been denied until her own time:

> The extreme activity of mind which showed itself in the later eighteenth century among women – the talking, the meeting, the writing of essays on Shakespeare, the translating of the classics – was founded on the solid fact that women could make money by writing. Money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for. It might still be well to sneer at 'blue stockings with an itch for scribbling', but it could not be denied that they could put money in their purses. Thus, towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write (1929: 97).

In recent years feminist historiography has begun to question some of the assumptions regulating its own practices (J.W. Scott 1996; Shapiro 1994; Perrot 1992). Although what J.Kelly (1986) defined as a feminist 'vantage point' in social and literary history, namely a radical focus on gender, has been widely acknowledged in the last decades, feminist critics have questioned current models of women's literary history.[1] Barker and Chalus (1997) argue that, until recently, scholars working within the tradition of women's history generally laid more emphasis on the common aspects of women's historical experiences,

[1] J. Kelly's notion that feminism is a perspective on social history which allows critics to adjust their vantage point in order to create "new contours, possibilities and realities" is one of her most important contributions to feminist historiography (1986: xviii).

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

at the expense of their extreme diversity, a diversity which is best exemplified by women's manifold relations to such constitutive elements as time, place, class, race and culture. Identifying a tradition of female writing often implies a monolithic view of women's history as a long but steady process of improvement. On the one hand, this procedure allows both critics and readers to draw parallels with women of the past. On the other, however, it risks to escape historical analysis. Thus, for example, early women writers who appear to be at odds with current feminist criteria may easily be excluded from new versions of the canon with a feminist agenda.

Ezell argues that histories of female writing often display a paradoxical tendency to "exclude or obscure significant blocks of early texts through the choice of certain models of historical progress" (1996:2). She points out that many studies on eighteenth-century women's writing are still characterized by an underevaluation of earlier female traditions. For example, lack of group identity, privileged social position and access to male patronage are the most common arguments used to belittle pre-1700 women and their writing. Aristocratic women such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu or the Duchess of Newcastle are usually depicted as isolated *dilettante* figures, whose literary ambitions were not taken seriously by their (male) contemporaries.

Yet most of the arguments against women who wrote before 1700 appear to be grounded on a twentieth-century aesthetics which privileges the novel over other genres of writing. The pervading heritage of Watt is still to be found in seminal feminist approaches to eighteenth-century literature published in the late '80s, from Spencer (1986) to Armstrong (1987). The feminine, private world depicted by the novel, and the fact that women appeared to dominate this genre as both producers and consumers, have been taken as evidence of the rise of the woman novelist in the eighteenth century. Publication and commercial success have been considered the hallmarks of a notion of female authorship tailored to a specific literary genre, that is the novel.

Feminist concern with signature is also a case in point**.** Signature has often been seen as a token of the emergence of a new female professional awareness (Todd 1989), rather than a phenomenon linked to the radical changes in copyright laws which were established in the eighteenth century. Such a concern with intellectual property has led some feminist critics to underrate the importance of social and non-competitive outlets for writing, such as manuscript circulation, whose importance was fundamental at earlier times, for example.

A perspective focusing on gender (socially and linguistically constructed), culture (discursively constituted as a set of meaningful social relationships, to be negotiated by individuals in the specific contexts of time and place) and on a notion of women's writing that resists traditional categories of literary genres, is particularly fruitful in feminist studies of eighteenth-century literature. This historical period has often been considered as the dawn of the modern age in

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

traditional approaches to the rise of phenomena such as the novel, the middle class, the woman writer, and the idea of the British nation. Gender considerations are more or less implicit in all of these issues. Questioning the assumptions behind these narratives of historical progress, however, does not automatically mean that such phenomena should no longer be worthy of critical attention. On the contrary, feminist studies have benefited from the insights of seminal studies such as those of Watt (1957) and R. Williams (1961), and have developed the connection they identified between a pre-bourgeois form of subjectivity and certain literary forms.[2]

Literary historians have often linked the emergence of a new class awareness, defined as bourgeois only in the nineteenth century, with the rise of a new ideology of femininity soon after the mid-eighteenth century. This ideology, which stressed the importance of innate virtues over physical appearance, has been interpreted as masking the opposition between the traditional aristocratic notion of display and a more recent fascination with the natural qualities of the individual. The real aim of the ideological struggle of the period – defined by G. Kelly as a cultural revolution that "founded the modern state in Britain" (1996: 2) – was a new notion of subjectivity, defining itself in terms of qualities of mind rather than in the aristocratic parameters of status and rank. The female image was instrumentally used to embody this new subjectivity, as it was the only identity which could stand for a power essentially different from those already existing.

The new ideal of femininity came into being in a discursive mode exemplified by conduct books, novels and periodicals that specifically targeted women. Conduct books, which addressed primarily an aristocratic male readership in the seventeenth century, began to appeal almost exclusively to young women at the end of the century. From the early eighteenth century onwards, texts such as magazines, memoirs, letters and above all the domestic novel, took the place of the conduct book and marked the emergence of a feminine form of subjectivity. Kelly argues that by the mid-eighteenth century an ideal of domesticity specifically coded as feminine was a reality "not only in Britain, but also in France and elsewhere on the Continent" (ibid: 18). Hence, literature (by no means 'high literature' alone) is regarded as somehow anticipating the way of life it depicted. In fact it addressed those classes, the so-called middling sort, which stood between the aristocracy and the labouring classes. By targeting this readership as a consistent whole at a time when it was not yet perceived as such, literature was eventually instrumental in the unification of a specific social stratum.

[2] Armstrong (1987) has explored the connections between the emergence of a new pre-middle class subjectivity (distinctively male, although disguised under a feminine mask) and the emergence of the feminine domestic novel. With a similar methodology Shevelow (1989) has analyzed the connection between the birth of the pre-bourgeois subject and the construction of a specific female identity in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century periodicals.

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

The ideological changes at work in the new definition of femininity were concomitant with social and economic changes, which were taking place in Britain between the seventeenth and the eighteenth century. Thus domestic discourses can be considered as a remarkable contribution to the establishment of a commercial economy centred on the individual, who could set *himself* apart from the corrupt world ruled by aristocratic privilege. The birth of a pre-bourgeois (male) self had been anticipated by new definitions of femininity. Watt's argument appears to be reversed in this perspective: the birth of the novel (together with other 'minor' literary genres) does not merely reflect social change, rather, it enables it.

The recurrent gendering of the private as feminine, which has become common in feminist and non-feminist historiography and critical literature on the eighteenth century, has been perceived as problematic by some critics. Even ground-breaking narratives of the emergence of an early modern self such as Armstrong (1987) appear to frustrate those critics who do not accept their analysis of the feminine as a broad discursive position to be adopted irrespective of the writer's actual sex. The risk of such an approach is that the writer's gender is not considered a determining factor in her/his achievements, as a result of which women's specific contributions to the rise of phenomena such as the novel, the middle class, and the nation do not receive sufficient attention. By denying women any form of agency, this kind of criticism ultimately assigns them a merely functional, passive role.

To avoid this danger, V. Jones, among many others, makes a crucial distinction between women as historically defined individuals and woman "as a culturally defined category which women had to negotiate and to suffer" (1990: 6). Starting from similar assumptions, Spencer has proposed her own revision of women's involvement in the rise of the novel. She argues that a large number of women began to publish their works at the same time as the British novel was establishing itself as a new genre, and she points out that "the two developments affected each other" (1996: 215). Hence, Spencer postulates a certain degree of agency for the eighteenth-century woman novelist, who is depicted as "struggling for literary authority" (ibid: 217). Women's agency is a heated question for those feminist historians who have been influenced by the post-structuralist thought of Michel Foucault. For example, J.W. Scott defines it as

> the attempt (at least partially rational) to construct an identity, a life, a set of relationships, a society within certain limits and with language – conceptual language that at once sets boundaries and contains the possibility for negation, resistance, reinterpretation, the play of metaphoric invention and imagination (1996: 167).

The increasing interest in (historicized) female forms of agency is both an effect and a stimulus for current modes of feminist historiography. V. Jones

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

defines agency as "a theoretical possibility, and as a historical actuality supported by the growing literary and documentary evidence of women's active involvement at all levels of (print) culture" (2000: 15).

Women writers' complex interaction with the constraints shaping the reception and fortunes of their works and authorial personae is one of those cases in which it seems possible to locate some form of agency. A remarkable change in women writers' self-presentation techniques has been generally regarded as one of the principal characteristics of post-1740 female writing. Spencer (1986; 1996) and Ballaster (1992), amongst others, have argued that the price for the new cultural prestige of the mid-eighteenth-century woman novelist was her rejection of a previous tradition of female writing. It is, for example, significant that Aphra Behn (1640-1689), Delarivière Manley (1663-1724), and Eliza Haywood (1693?-1735), who were collectively responsible for over half the total output of fiction by women in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, were soon erased from the new tradition of the domestic novel. As Ballaster points out, their achievements "were 'written out' of the tradition of the novel, in the attempt to make it respectable" as a new form of writing (1992: 210). The new woman writer had to reject her predecessors, in order to demonstrate her superiority as a virtuous representative of domesticated femininity.

But in spite of having been 'repressed' by their daughters, late seventeenth-century women novelists and playwrights nevertheless bequeathed a remarkable heritage to their 'respectable' eighteenth-century heirs. In particular, their techniques of self-presentation anticipated many traits of the fictional characters of the sentimental novel. As Catherine Gallagher puts it: "Fictional characters developed partly out of the artful employment of female authorial personae in the works of early modern writers" (1994: xix). The case of Eliza Haywood appears particularly significant. She was one of the most prolific writers of the early eighteenth century and her fiction often exploited the names of public figures, who were depicted in political and sexual intrigues. Having involved a friend of Pope in one of her novels, Haywood was publicly ridiculed by the poet in *The Dunciad* (1728). After the publication of this poem her activity as a novelist decreased rapidly.[3] Her return to the literary world with novels such as *The History of Miss Betty Thoughtless* (1751/1998) was marked by a new didactic tone, which signalled that she had now distanced herself from the tradition of scandalous fiction. Criticism has interpreted this sudden turn in Haywood's career not as the immediate result of Pope's attack, but rather as a clever adjustment to changes in the literary market. It is even possible to speculate that Pope's

[3] Haywood had involved Mrs Henrietta Howard in her scandalous novel *Secret History of the Present Intrigues of the Court of Caramania* (1727). Turner points out that in the next two decades Haywood published only three translations and four novels, and experimented with a new periodical, *The Female Spectator*. She may have published other fiction anonymously, but in this case she must have taken unprecedented care to disguise her identity (1994: 51-2).

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

attack had the opposite effect than that probably intended, because it eventually contributed to the shaping of the image of the reformed woman, an image Haywood herself employed in her fictional persona as editor of *The Female Spectator.*[4]

By granting women some complicity in the representation of their public images, feminist criticism such as Gallagher's and Spencer's describes the relationship between authors and the discursive structures of their time as bilateral. Post-1740 women writers were shaping, as well as being shaped by, the literary discourses of the age of sensibility. However, it is not my intention to rephrase a theory of authorial intention from a feminist point of view. Feminist cultural theorists and historians who see discursive frameworks as open to specific forms of negotiation (which are the fruit of contingent socio-historical conditions) and have substituted the notion of self with that of subject positions, argue that a decentered self is not just a passive effect of discourse. On the contrary, as Mills puts it, the very "adoption of certain subject positions is a type of action which has consequences" (1997: 103).

Women's lives were strongly influenced by the new ideology of the age of sensibility, but, at the same time, women writers contributed to fashion it with their works, which were given unprecedented attention by society. Eighteenth-century philosophical, medical, and literary discourses were all permeated by this new ideology.

1.2 The Age of Sensibility

The assumption that life and literature are strictly connected is one of the distinctive traits of the age of sensibility (Todd: 1986). A woman who aspired to the literary profession had to look after her reputation with unprecedented care after the mid-eighteenth century. However, an unblemished reputation was not the result of the author's efforts alone: it was, rather, the product of a complex, discursive negotiation between the author and institutions such as the literary market, patrons, publishers and literary critics.

One example is the well-known reassessment of early women's writing undertaken by a woman critic, Clara Reeve, in one of the earliest studies of the novel. Her *Progress of Romance* was published in 1785: by this time a new

[4] As Shevelow (1989) has demonstrated, Haywood's periodical followed the path traced by Addison and Steele, who had managed to attract the interest of the new female readership emerging in the early eighteenth century. However, the main difference between *The Female Spectator* and its predecessors is apparent in the ways in which the readers/editor relationship is presented. Whereas Addison and Steele had constructed a hierarchical relationship based on the authority of the editor (embodied by the paternal character of Isaac Bickerstaff in the *Tatler,* for example), Haywood did not position herself as superior to her readers. On the contrary, she deliberately undermined her authority by adopting the role of the reformed heroine, in order to attract the sympathy of her readers.

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

ideology commonly defined as sensibility had become established in Britain. In order to demonstrate the superiority of the novel over previous fictional genres, and especially over the romance, Reeve establishes a kind of genealogy by grouping together the most notorious female writers of the earlier part of the century, that is Behn, Manley and Haywood. By positing the superiority of the novel on a strictly didactic and moral basis, Reeve writes off the achievements of seventeenth-century women authors, distinguishing them from the ensuing tradition of respectable women's writing.

Behn, for example, is rapidly dismissed. After a hesitant reference to her "genius of writing", this reluctant praise is redressed by the claim that her works would be "very improper to be read by, or recommended to virtuous minds, and especially to youth" (V. Jones 1990: 184). Manley is judged not as good a novelist as Behn but even more dangerous for the public, as her works display a fascination with scandal. Haywood is placed in the 'same class' as the other writers, but is eventually distinguished from them since she showed signs of repentance. Reeve's assessment is in the form of a fictional dialogue involving two female characters, Sophronia and Euphrasia, and a male, Hortensius. In the following extract the characters discuss whether Haywood's name should suffer the same oblivion they agreed would be proper for the literary reputations of both Behn and Manley:

> Hort: Why should she be spared any more than the others?
> Euph: Because she repented of her faults, and employed the latter part of her life in expiating the offences of the former. There is reason to believe that the examples of the two ladies we have spoken of, seduced Mrs. *Heywood* [*sic*] into the same track; she certainly wrote some amorous novels in her youth, and also two books of the same kind as Mrs. *Manley*'s capital work, all of which I hope are forgotten (ibid 185).

By positing the negative influence her notorious predecessors would have exerted on Haywood, Reeve seems willing to rescue this writer and to acknowledge some of her works as part of the new, moral tradition of female writing.

The period which runs from 1740 to the 1770s, generally known as the age of sensibility, saw the emergence of a stress on feeling and sympathy in the discourses of philosophy, medical science and religion. Against a contemporary society which was viewed as essentially deceitful and dissipated, the discourse of sensibility opposed its own code of complete sincerity, signalled by the recurrent appearance of words such as 'frankness', 'openness' and 'candour' (Erämetsä 1951). This cult of sensibility started in opposition to the new individualistic orientation of society, as part of the reaction against the early capitalist tendencies of the massive commercial expansion at the beginning of the century.[5] At

[5] The eighteenth century is often considered as the age which saw the transformation of England

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

the outset, the new importance of commerce was not greeted with enthusiasm by everybody: on the contrary, it was often regarded with suspicion. For example, both *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* would often present the new commercial entrepreneur in a grim light, and contrasted him with the image of the virtuous landed gentleman. Yet the success and the very existence of these periodicals depended on the economic transformation they seemed to denigrate.

The third Earl of Shaftesbury was one of the main influences behind the reaction against individualism implicit in the cult of sensibility. His concepts of harmony, sympathy and sociability were to become central in the discourse of sensibility. Shaftesbury translated these ideas into his aesthetic theories, published under the title *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1999) in which he argued against the authority of individual taste and substituted for it his own notions of what was 'rightly' pleasing. The discourse of sensibility, with its symptomatic dependence on fixed conventions, was deeply influenced by this kind of aesthetics.

In this period, according to Barker-Benfield, the word sensibility "denoted the receptivity of the senses and referred to the psychoperceptual scheme explained and systematized by Newton and Locke" (1992: xvii). Hence, the word 'sensibility' was used to indicate a particular kind of consciousness, which could be refined and made more responsive not only to internal signals, but also external ones; in other words those proceeding from the body and from nature respectively. 1690 saw the birth of sense psychology with John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in which he countered the prevailing assumption that human beings have innate ideas with his concept of *tabula rasa*, that is the well-known image of the mind as a blank sheet on which sensations are impressed by sensory perception of external signals.

Images of sense impression and words such as 'nerves'and 'spirits' were also evidence of the strong influence early psychology had on literature. Medical science was responding to the same call: the search for a precise definition of the biological differences between men and women, for example, focused on the nervous system as an area of particular interest. Not only were women perceived

---

from a rural economy to a pre-capitalist society, but many historians have located the early phases of the phenomenon later to be known as the industrial revolution in the sixteenth century. By 1700 the enclosure of public land had been almost completed; agricultural reforms and improvements in estate management went hand in hand with the early pre-capitalist transformations which were taking place in urban settings. During the seventeenth century home-made products were gradually replaced by mass-produced commodities. According to Barker-Benfield (1992), Britain was transformed into a mass consumer society in a period which runs approximately from 1650 to 1750. The industrial revolution that came later is seen as both answering and at the same time stimulated by 'needs and appetites' which had already made their appearance in pre-industrial Britain. For an account of the socio-historical transformations of eighteenth-century Britain and its effects on women see Barker-Benfield 1992; Barker and Chalus (1997), Davidoff and Hall (1994); Hill (1989); Sharpe (1996).

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

as essentially different because of their primarily reproductive function, but they were also separated from the other sex by a complex system of bodily afflictions and disorders. The eighteenth-century commonplace which saw femininity as inseparable from 'delicacy' in fact echoed discourses circulating in the field of medical literature, which described women's nerves as thinner, more fragile and softer than men's. The following extract from *The Ladies Dispensatiories*, a medical manual published in 1740 is one among many examples:

> The delicate Texture of a Woman's Constitution, as on the one Hand it renders her the most amiable Object in the Universe, so on the other it subjects her to an infinite Number of Maladies, to which Man is an utter Stranger, or which he is acquainted with only from Report and Observation. And if we add to all this, the Dangers, Difficulties, and various Symptoms attendant on Childbearing, [....] I make no question but the necessity and Usefulness of Books in general on the Diseases of Women, will be acknowledged not only by every one of that Sex, but also by every one of ours who considers the Matter, and is endued with Sentiments truly generous and humane (V. Jones 1990: 83).

Locke's stress on the utilitarian and moral purpose of teaching, which emerged in particular in his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, published in 1693, created a new emphasis on parental involvement in the education of children. As a result of Locke's theories, the child began to be recognized as an individual, who could be moulded into a virtuous person with the help of a proper education. The extent to which this notion was applicable to both sexes, at least in theory, is still a matter of debate. Historians have recently highlighted the emergence of a large number of boarding schools for girls after the 1750s, and therefore an apparent improvement in women's access to education seems to have occurred in this period (Skedd 1997). Interesting data emerge from studies on the degree of literacy in the eighteenth century: if the literacy rate for adult men is supposed to be around 30 percent in the 1640s, by the mid-eighteenth century this percentage reaches 60 percent, with a corresponding rate of 35-40 percent for women (Melton 2001: 82; V. Jones 2000: 3).[6] However, the kind of instruction imparted in female boarding schools seems likely to have concentrated on certain subjects which were defined as 'accomplishments', and which consisted mainly of drawing, music and one or two foreign languages. The great dividing line between the sexes in education was represented by Latin, which was still a traditionally male subject. The principal aim of female schools was

[6] Melton points out that literacy is extremely difficult to measure. The ability to sign one's name is traditionally considered as evidence of a basic degree of literacy. Literacy was very unevenly distributed in eighteenth-century Britain: it was more widespread in towns than in the countryside, for example. Sex was another variant: many more women learned to read than to write, as writing was considered an unnecessary skill for women (2001: 84-86).

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

to enhance women's chances of marriage, and a demand for social mobility probably contributed to their success.

After 1770 a large amount of prescriptive literature, mainly in the form of conduct books, explicitly addressed to young women made its appearance in print. The Reverend Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), Dr Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1786), together with the numerous reprints of Lord Halifax's *The Lady's New Year's Gift; or, Advice to a Daughter* (1688), are only a few examples of this popular genre. Prescriptions for the shaping of a new, highly domestic ideal of femininity are to be found in almost any kind of writing in this historical period. G. Kelly argues that the plentifulness of such prescriptions can be taken to represent the anxiety eighteenth-century culture felt about women, who were perceived as a social problem (1992: 17).

Economic changes contributed to this anxious climate. The impact of capitalism had particularly strong effects on women. In the course of the eighteenth century, traditional female occupations, such as millinery, spinning, weaving and brewing, were transformed into proto-commercial enterprises and in most cases this meant that women were put out of their jobs and therefore deprived of their traditional sources of income. Davidoff and Hall (1987) have pointed out that one of the most detrimental effects of the early capitalist transformation of society was the separation of the workplace from the home: many jobs which had been previously carried out by women at home were now being taken over by men in the new work places. As a consequence, women became more economically dependent on men. However, if the majority of historians agree that women were increasingly marginalized with the advent of an exploitative wage economy, many scholars have began to question the notion of Industrial Revolution, and prefer to speak of a long-term industrializing process (Wrigley 1989; O'Brien and Quinault 1993). According to this model, the effects of industrialization in the eighteenth century were neither so sudden nor so drastic as to give rise to anxious social reactions.

Yet anxiety can be perceived at many levels in this historical period. The discourses of marriage are a case in point. For many women marriage seemed to represent the only alternative to a difficult search for employment. Marriage had been a matter of controversy since the late seventeenth century, and the debate had taken on explicit proto-feminist traits at times.[7] This institution in

[7] Several female voices denounced the exploitation of women in marriage between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries; perhaps the best known is that of Mary Astell, who published two tracts on this subject: *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), in which she suggested that women should create a sort of community for those among them who decided against marriage, and *Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), in which she compared marriage to slavery.

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

fact functioned on principles that were in some ways similar to those regulating the market at large. After marriage women had no legal status, as William Blackstone makes clear in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1753):

> By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is the very being, or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything [...] For this reason, a man cannot grant any thing to his wife, for the grant would be to suppose her separate existence (Hill 1987: 112). [8]

Historians have registered a rise in the rate of marriages celebrated during the eighteenth century and a concomitant drop in the average age of women at marriage, which brought with it an increase in the birth rate (Barker-Benfield 1992: 160). The decline in importance of extended kinship bonds and the decrease in infant mortality rates, both of which have been documented by Stone (1990), seem to have been instrumental in the creation of a sentimental view of family relationships. Stone's well known notion of the 'companionate marriage', which had started cementing the nuclear family through values such as affection and companionship from the late seventeenth century, has sometimes been spurned by feminist scholars, seemingly more inclined to consider marriage an economic transaction in this historical period. Yet, according to Barker and Chalus, some of Stone's ideas are still highly influential for feminist historians today, in particular his stress on affection and on a more symmetrical type of relationship between the sexes, at least among the upper classes (1997: 18). Women were to profit from the apparent lack of coherence of the discourses of domesticity circulating in the eighteenth century, as we shall see later in this chapter.

A new emphasis on women's chastity and fidelity, which was popularized at the time by debates on the so-called 'double standard' (which implied the existence of two different sexual and moral codes for men and women), found its justification in the theory of the moral superiority of women. However, fewer commentators could be franker on this subject than Samuel Johnson, who openly admitted that: "Confusion of progeny constitutes the essence of the crime; and therefore a woman who breaks her marriage vows is much more criminal than a man who does it" (Boswell , 1966: 393). In spite of this, women were gradually confined to the home on the basis of sentimental love, which gave them exclusive authority over domestic life, as well as over the field of emotion.

[8] In 1753 Lord Handwicke's Marriage Act represented a step further in the process of regularization of marriage: it introduced the need for parental consent for people under 21, and increased control over clandestine marriage and bigamy, a control which was implemented by the publication of banns and by stricter regulation of the marriage register.

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

Women dominated the literature of sensibility: the widespread expectation of a moral and didactic tone in women's writing meant that a large number of female authors could now enter the literary profession without risking their reputations. As women saw their income opportunities restricted in this period, some of them eagerly ventured into writing for publication. One of the central themes of their narratives is the archetypal motive of 'virtue in distress', in which the victimization of women in a male-dominated society is given special attention. Some critics see the gradual emergence of a new self-awareness for women precisely in the development of this theme.

However, any parallel between the discourses of sensibility and a nascent feminism appears problematic in this historical period. It is true that a few years before the end of the century the woman question found some of its most outspoken representatives, not only in Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), but also in Mary Hays (1760-1843), Mary Ann Radcliffe (1745?-1810?) and other women who published anonymous essays advocating women's rights. In spite of this, the fact that women writers were given unprecedented prominence in the culture of their time does not necessarily imply the emergence of an early feminist tendency in literature. As early as 1986 Spencer argued against the commonplace assumption that a woman's writing is necessarily oppositional to the culture in which it has been produced simply because it has been written and published in a 'patriarchal' society.[9]

The mid-eighteenth-century ideology of femininity, one of the most important effects of the culture of sensibility, rests on the notion of woman's special nature, a notion which, by focusing on men and women as essentially different rather than on the male-superior, female-inferior dichotomy, gradually displaced the hierarchical Aristotelian viewpoint. The nineteenth century went further, in conceiving the theory of separate spheres for men and women, identifying them with the Habermasian public and the private domains respectively. According to traditional narratives of bourgeois ideology, women did find a legitimate place in the home on the basis of sentimental love, but they paid dearly for this in being gradually excluded from the public sphere. The domestic realm was therefore set apart from the public, and this eventually helped to establish a distinction according to which family life was gradually perceived as governed by 'natural' laws, and hence excluded from political analysis.

[9] As early as 1986 Spencer wrote in her influential text, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist*: "If my analysis of the eighteenth-century acceptance of the woman writer is correct, the relation between women's writing and patriarchal society is not simply one of opposition. Women's writing has not been totally suppressed, but on the contrary has (in certain forms) been encouraged; and it is capable of being appropriated for male domination" (ibid: xi). The notion of patriarchy as a transhistorical social reality has come under scrutiny in many feminist analysis of culture. Several literary critics and historians adopt the categories defined by Foucault to draw maps of the multiple sites in which power is enacted and resisted (Mills 1997: 93-4).

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

However, this appears to be one of the cases identified by Ezell (1992), in which nineteenth-century models of historical analysis have been superimposed on the study of previous periods. Traditional applications of the public/private dichotomy to eighteenth-century studies have been severely criticized recently. Apart from the fact that historians are discovering an increasing number of documents that demonstrate that actual women's ventures into the public were not so uncommon, scholars such as Klein (1995) argue that the terms 'public' and 'private' held a variety of meanings, and warns contemporary critics against the danger of attributing an anachronistic significance to them. In the eighteenth century these terms were in fact fluid categories, with a substantial degree of overlapping meaning. Here Spencer's discussion on the gendered opposition between the two spheres is particularly helpful. She argues that the realm of the public, which was emerging in the eighteenth century, was very different from the bourgeois 'public sphere'. The eighteenth century did not yet perceive any distinction between private and public: what was emerging was "the realm of *civil* as opposed to state power" (1996: 216, my emphasis). Melton speaks of a "private social realm", a sphere of "sociability and discussion", which admitted female participation (2001: 14). Private institutions such as clubs, societies and, above all, the press made up this new kind of power. It was not politicized, that is it was not necessarily affiliated to a specific political faction, although it operated in a political (i.e. public) environment. In this context, Barker-Benfield has traced the history of societies for the reformation of manners as far back as the 1690s. The religious zeal of some of these associations, such as the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, was combined with an ideology which emphasized civic virtue. These societies in fact aimed at introducing their moral distinctions into conventional configurations of the public, with a new stress on a code of manners modelled on private values such as genuineness, sincerity and benevolence (1992: 55-60).

McDowell has reached similar conclusions by exploring the connection between early forms of feminist political identities and the development of the press in the late seventeenth century. The public sphere meant as a space of civic significance dates back to the Civil War period, according to her reading. Hence, McDowell points out that in the eighteenth century the public sphere is a "*re*construction of something that existed earlier; a remodelling of competing publics into a new idealized 'community' to contend with fears of another Civil War in England" (1998: 9). This argument takes us to the birth of the idea of the nation, which is the subject of the next section.

These new interpretations of the eighteenth-century 'public' do not counter the widespread belief that women's domestic role was emphasized by the ideology of femininity. On the contrary, Spencer for example maintains that women were increasingly confined to the realm of the private. At the same time, however, she argues that the private was given unprecedented attention by the culture of sensibility:

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

> The new evaluation of privacy and domesticity encouraged by sentimental ideology contributed to the ambiguity of public/private distinctions; and the domestic sentimental novel of the late eighteenth century had an ambiguous role as the carrier of private concerns into public print (1996: 217).

The most important effect of the revision of the public/private dichotomy by modern critics is that eighteenth-century women are no longer seen as excluded from the realm of politics, the term being used in the broad sense of power relations. Nineteenth-century narratives of the rise of a bourgeois ideology are therefore completely reversed in this new perspective. The view is no longer that women were granted (liminal) entry into the public world of publishing on condition they limited themselves to depicting the realm of the private. In fact the contrary was the case. As Spencer points out, eighteenth-century women "attempted to delineate a public position for the supposedly private virtues of femininity" (ibid: 216). Hence the domestic authority of the woman writer was given a crucial public dimension, which was magnified by an exploding print culture.

1.3 The Rise of the Idea of the Nation in Eighteenth-Century Britain

In 1707 the Act of Union joined Scotland to England and Wales: Great Britain was united by a common Protestant religion, legal system and freedom of trade. However, as Colley points out, this was mainly a political and economic alliance, which in fact joined countries which were extremely different from each other:

> Great Britain in 1707 was much less a trinity of three self-contained and self-conscious nations than a patchwork in which uncertain areas of Welshness, Scottishness and Englishness were cut across by strong regional attachments, and scored over again by loyalties to village, town, family and landscape (1992: 17).

Great Britain was therefore a mere artificial construct, an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) which was superimposed on older traditions and cultural networks. However, in spite of being artificial, the new national identity was to bring with it substantial changes: for example, both fiscal system and military organization had to be developed on a national scale.

According to Colley, 'Britishness' emerged as a cultural and political reaction against France, stigmatized as the national enemy in the long succession of wars which characterized the eighteenth century. The other two principal themes around which this identity appeared to materialize were the Protestant religion

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

and a single system of free trade. An apocalyptic vision of religion, which identified the British people as God's elect, dates back at least to the Reformation in the sixteenth century. But it must not be forgotten that religion had a strong political flavour in the eighteenth century, when the conflicts with France were still perceived as religious wars. Moreover, the geographical position of Britain as an island protected her from invasion and also from its most disastrous consequences, famine and epidemics. As a consequence, the British economy was more prosperous than that of most countries in Europe (Davies 1999: 720-7).

Not only did the abolition of many commercial barriers (above all internal customs, removed by the implementation of the Act of Union) give a strong impulse to trade, but free circulation of goods throughout the national territory also contributed to shape the image of the nation as a unified whole. People belonging to different classes began to see the newly invented nation as a potential source of profit. A characteristic cult of commerce which cut across social boundaries and class distinctions became one of the essential components of the sense of national identity. In this historical period nation and trade were mutually dependent on each other: the latter brought money into the nation, and at the same time depended on the social order guaranteed by the power of the state.

Nation and trade come together in the mid-eighteenth century with the birth of a large number of patriotic associations, ranging from charity associations and anti-French clubs to the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Commerce and Manufactures, which was established in 1754. Their declared purpose was to reform the nation. They focused their activities in specific public areas: some of them for example promoted the development of national culture, or helped the Royal Navy, in this way filling the gaps left uncovered by the state. At the same time, however, they introduced a new ideology in these areas, one which was surprisingly similar to the civic ethos of the societies for the reformation of manners of the earlier part of the century. Colley argues that this new ideology brought about a radical redefinition of the notion of citizenship:

> Whereas the existing order made access to political rights dependent on rank, property and adherence to the correct religion, the way that the societies worked suggested that it was the willingness to participate that marked out the true Briton. The quality of an individual's exertion, they implied, not conformity to legal qualifications, was what really mattered (1992: 56).

The role played by print in the shaping of the idea of the nation has been thoroughly described by Anderson (1983): by the mid-century in Britain periodicals and newspapers were available practically nation-wide, as local newspapers sprang up in the provinces. The circulation of political and economic news, as well as gossip and scandal, was thus no longer confined to the metropolitan area. Citizens' private lives were now set in the broad context of

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

affairs of state, and the popular press contributed to the depiction of Britain as *one* privileged nation.

The redefinition of subjectivity brought about by the eighteenth-century ideology of femininity examined in the previous section appears to be at the basis of the new ideal of national identity. In the course of the century, older alignments with a centralized courtly power were superseded by gradual recognition of a national identity which was a complex combination of social, local and regional interests. G. Kelly (1996) maintains that this new community was meant as an alternative to the power of the great landowners' families who used to control politics and administration at both national and regional level. Towards the end of the century, moreover, this community provided a viable response to the most radical impulses of the French Revolution. The new subjectivity strategically represented as a female, domestic ideal, disenfranchised as it was from any kind of traditional political power, had a crucial role to play in the construction of the national identity as an imagined community, although Anderson is significantly silent on this point.

Real women contributed in extremely diverse ways to the construction of the new national identity. Guest (2000) has traced the diverse contributions of Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Laetitia Barbauld. Both authors agree on an ideal civic identity, based on the conflation between (private) domestic affections and (public) love for the nation. However, they disagree on the way in which women should inscribe themselves into this identity. Wollestonecraft appears to claim for women the same rights as men (i.e. the right to inhabit the same spaces, be they private or public). Barbauld, on the other hand, seems to believe that women's assumption of civic identity should take place on the basis of a stricter alliance of that identity with the sphere of the private. Guest points out that Barbauld appears to argue that "what seems more private, domestic and feminine is bound up with what is most public and perhaps masculine, and that every citizen, however weak and defenseless they may seem, has a right to a say in how government is conducted" (ibid: 60). In the light of the discussion of the private/public dichotomy presented in the previous section, this position should not be read as disempowering for women. On the contrary, it could be taken as evidence of a certain amount of active participation by women in the redefinition of national identity. By laying greater emphasis on the private, domestic (feminine) component of the civic ideal, Barbauld appears to be opening a public space for what was originally meant to be private.

The popular press was not the only printed medium which served the interests of a developing national identity. Critics have recently highlighted the role played by the eighteenth-century novel.[10] Since Ian Watt's seminal work on the

[10] Warner (1994) examines this development from the point of view of the literary historian and

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

novel, the transformation of standardized characters into true-to-life individuals has been considered as one of the hallmarks of eighteenth-century British fiction. Richetti defines the novel of this period as 'intensely parochial' because of its focus on "the complex local networks of social and linguistic stratification" which characterized early modern Britain (1996: xv). A firm connection has thus been established between a new type of subjectivity and certain distinctively British social and cultural developments, which made a fundamental contribution to the construction of the modern nation.

Apart from very few exceptions (Guest 2000, Keane 2000, Janowitz 1990), eighteenth- century women's writing is usually excluded from critical accounts of how national identity was formed. The most popular fictional genres for women writers in this historical period, the sentimental and Gothic novels, do not display the characteristics defined by critics such as Richetti as signifiers of the rise of a distinctive British identity. Rather, these genres have been often defined as escapist, that is, intentionally set apart from the real conditions of life experienced by their authors. However, this seems to be another case in which the feminization of a literary genre is equated with aesthetic and political marginality. The political import of sentimental literature has already emerged in the discussion of the age of sensibility. The case of the Gothic novel is more complex because of its involvement with complex aesthetic discourses emerging in the course of the century.

Significant changes in the aesthetic field influenced the construction of a specific type of feminine subjectivity which was represented not only in Gothic novels, but also in other kinds of writing, notably travel accounts and autobiographical genres. The language of eighteenth-century aesthetics drew significantly upon gender metaphors. The best known example of this is probably Burke's treatise on the *Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), and the well-known aesthetic categories it established. The Sublime, a paradoxical delight conveyed by objects evoking ideas of pain and danger, is coded as masculine, whereas the more reassuring Beautiful is feminine. Dark, rough, craggy sublime objects are masculine, whereas weak, smooth, bright, beautiful objects are feminine. The two categories were expanded in the 1780s by William Gilpin's theories of the Picturesque, which was a subdivision of the feminized Beautiful distinguishing itself mainly by a peculiar stress on irregularity. As Gilpin himself put it, "*roughness* forms the most essential point of difference between the *beautiful*, and the *picturesque"* (1794: 6).

Bohls has traced the history of the appropriation of these aesthetic dis-

---

claims that current criticism has 'nationalized' the novel: "Traits of the British culture – empiricism, Protestant individualism, moral seriousness, and a fondness for eccentric characters – are promoted from secondary characteristics of novels which happened to have been written in England to primary radicals of the novel's generic identity" (cf. Warner 1996).

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

courses by eighteenth-century women. She argues that the language of aesthetics created a subject position whose definition was based upon the denial of the particular and usually involved a notion of 'otherness' embodied by specific groups of people: "women, the labouring classes, and non-Europeans" (1995: 67). This logic of exclusion therefore functioned on the basis of the criteria of class, gender, and nation. Behind it, Bohls identifies Addison's masculine category of the "Man of Polite Imagination", combining three of the main tenets of eighteenth-century aesthetics: the generic perceiver, disinterested contemplation and the autonomy of the aesthetic field from any kind of practical concern.[11]

According to Gilpin, the Picturesque tourist appropriates the landscape by viewing it and then recreates it in his descriptions, modelled on the principles of painting. "The first source of amusement to the picturesque traveller, is the *pursuit* of his object" (1794: 48): Gilpin compares landscape viewing to hunting, in a language which is replete with gendered metaphors of power:

> And shall we suppose it a greater pleasure to the sportsman to pursue a trivial animal, than it is to the man of taste to pursue the beauties of nature? to follow her through all her recesses? to obtain a sudden glance, as she flits past him in some airy shape? to trace her through the mazes of her cover? to wind after her along the vale? or along the reaches of the river (ibid: 49).

An asymmetrical relationship existed between the viewing-position of the subject of the Picturesque and *his* object, that is feminine nature or the feminized objects observed. Furthermore, the framework provided by art created the necessary detachment between the two by severing the bonds between the landscape and the people using and inhabiting it. As Andrews points out, the Picturesque is pervaded by an anti-utilitarian logic, which constructs human activity and its traces as unaesthetic (1989: 49).[12]

---

[11] Bohls bases this argument upon Samuel Monk's claim that the British aesthetic tradition facilitated the advent of Kantian notions of the autonomy of the subject. However, this thesis has been contested by Ashfield and Bolla (1996), who have argued that Monk's reading is applicable only to 'parts of the British tradition'. A careful analysis of the literature on the sublime would demonstrate that the aesthetic and the ethical realms were not so distinct as criticism implies. Although a full-depth examination of eighteenth-century writing on aesthetics is beyond the scope of my work, it must be pointed out that, of a total of fifty extracts from essays on the sublime reproduced by Ashfield and de Bolla, only three are authored by women. Bohls' argument that an examination of the eighteenth-century debate on aesthetics must take into account women's interventions published in the forms of travel writing and novels, rather than in the usual genres of essays writing, appears particularly significant in this respect.

[12] Gilpin observes human figures in a peculiarly abstract way: "In the human figure we contemplate neither *exactness of form*; nor *expression*, any farther than it is shewn in *action*: we merely consider general shapes, dresses, groups and occupation;" (1794: 44). On this subject see also Ann Bermingham (1986).

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

Bohls draws attention to the ambiguous position of women *vis-à-vis* the theories of the Picturesque. Middle-class women in particular were excluded from aesthetic discourses because of their gender, but at the same time they were allowed access to the privileged domain of taste by virtue of their social class. They could therefore exploit the inconsistent discursive texture of the Picturesque. The close connection between femininity and delicacy of taste which was produced by the culture of sensibility helped them to legitimize their appropriation of aesthetic discourses.

Female participation in the field of aesthetics determined substantial changes in some of its main assumptions, especially concerning disinterestedness. First of all, by adopting the culturally accepted language of the emotions, women reduced the distance between the position of the viewer and that of the objects of her gaze. Furthermore, their ambiguous position as female aesthetic subjects allowed them to reject the point of view of the universalized perceiver, in favour of that characterizing the 'particular' perceiver who could no longer deny the existence of the material world. Gilroy argues that women's 'valorization of the detail' called traditional aesthetic categories into question (2000: 5). Furthermore, aesthetic values were given a new, ethical dimension. The principal result of women's reassessment of aesthetics was the creation of a new subject position for women, who were enabled to enter the discourses of art or landscape in a position of authority, albeit a marginal one. This new subjectivity no longer defined itself in terms of autonomy: rather, it established an ethical relationship with its surroundings.

1.4 The Female Gothic: The Italy of Ann Radcliffe

By the end of the eighteenth century, women writers were no longer limiting themselves to traditional feminine types of writing such as the autobiography, the diary, and the letter. Instead they now began to take a chance with genres totally unrelated to the domestic field, such as poetry, travel writing, literary criticism and journalism (Brandt 2000; Folger Collective 1995). Even the novel offered women the opportunity to experiment with subject matters which were not confined to the depiction of family life: the historical novel and, above all, the Gothic novel which flourished in the last decades of the century, were dominated by women writers.[13]

In the previous section, it was pointed out that critics interested in tracing the rise of British national identity have not taken the Gothic novel into consideration, on the basis of its apparently escapist nature. Admittedly, the Gothic

[13] Publishers such as William Lane were ready to capitalize on the association between women authors and sensational writing: publishing ventures such as the Minerva Press played a fundamental role in the definition of the so-called female Gothic (cf Blakey 1939).

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

setting is deliberately distinct from contemporary Britain: it is usually a foreign country in a remote age. Yet this distinction is not so clear-cut as it may appear at first sight. I will argue that the Italy, Spain or France represented by these novels did not merely provide an exotic setting for non-realistic love romances. Whether it is read as a conservative genre, displaying a nostalgic view of ancient economic and social practices, or as a subversive form of writing, opposing a pre-capitalistic, patriarchal form of power, it appears difficult to relegate the Gothic to the realm of mere fantasy.

Feminist critics are not alone in arguing that the preference for an exotic setting and a bygone age is used to cover a critique which is in fact directed against contemporary British society. Gamer calls attention to the extreme ideological flexibility of the Gothic that seems capable of accommodating a "multitude of divergent and often conflicting political roles" (2000: 45-6). Carson points out, for example, that denunciation of foreign forms of tyranny often covers a condemnation of the British judicial or penal systems. Hence the Gothic novel is involved in politics at least as much as the novel of manners, as Carson points out:

> In its critique of Continental despotism and in the redirection of that critique toward Britain, Gothic novelists are pursuing rather than departing from the socio-political aims of eighteenth-century 'realistic' fiction (1996: 261-2).

Even the Gothic novelists' unconvincing historical settings appear to signify that their principal aim was not to reconstruct a realistic version of the past, but simply to build up a fiction which could be set against that of the classical past. A new interest in the ancient British heritage, which has been described as an 'antiquarian movement', began to emerge in the 1780s (Gamer: 2000). Laying special emphasis on the local and regional aspects of this phenomenon, Keane defines it as 'little Englandism', and sees its effort at constructing an essential 'English' identity as a response to Britain's imperial expansion in the 1770s (2000: 24-6). The second half of the eighteenth century saw the publication of Bishop Richard Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), together with works designed to construct an artificial sense of the British past, such as the notorious 'translations' of Ossian by James MacPherson. The Gothic revival exemplifies a parochial sense of Britishness, which stood in opposition to contemporary European images of cosmopolitan culture, based on widespread classical learning. Hence the dominion of classical learning on eighteenth-century literature was countered by a new interest in works which were considered typically 'English', by authors such as Chaucer, Spencer, Shakespeare and Milton.

The Gothic novel, however, focuses on the hardships of the chivalric past. In Ann Radcliffe's, as in other female novels, the Gothic past is synonymous with repressive patriarchal institutions, which are strenuously fought by a heroine

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

drenched in the anti-hierarchical sentimental ideology based on the democracy of the heart. Thus the female Gothic records the clash between two opposite discourses, pitting a feudal society dominated by instinctive passions and material interests against a distinctive modern individual who defines herself in moral terms. Women are the victims of the violence of a ruling class which does not acknowledge the claims of the individual, represented in fiction through traditional love plots.

Representation of power-relations in terms of gender and the distinctively feminine subjectivity of the modern individual are not traits peculiar to the Gothic novel alone. It has already been argued that a wide range of eighteenth-century discourses, including in particular conduct literature and the sentimental novel, contributed to the construction of a remarkably feminized notion of identity. However, what is arguably new in the Gothic novel is that feminine, or feminized, subjectivity is linked to nature and can be mapped geographically. Landscape descriptions appear to reflect the inner world and the intimate thoughts of Gothic heroines and heroes. Furthermore, moral distinctions are defined in aesthetic terms: characters who can appreciate the landscape are good, whereas those who cannot are bad. A new 'aesthetic of sensibility' seems to be the main contribution of the Gothic to the shaping of a modern form of self in the late eighteenth century.

Radcliffe's last novel *The Italian* (1797), which was one of her most successful works, provides a particularly useful example of the processes described: in this text narratives of the self are significantly intertwined with discourses which contribute to the construction of a new national awareness. In this novel Radcliffe exploits the traditional plot of sentimental romances: the orphan Ellena is not accepted by the aristocratic family of Vivaldi, her beloved. The powerful Marchesa di Vivaldi contrives a series of sinister expedients to separate the young lovers with the help of the corrupt monk Schedoni. In the end the aristocratic origins of the heroine are discovered and love can lawfully triumph.

The two young protagonists of the story, Ellena and Vivaldi, are the only two characters endowed with a fully developed subjectivity. Not only are their intimate thoughts and emotions minutely described throughout the novel, but also their growth into sensible adulthood plays a fundamental role in the plot. This is especially true of the male character, who undergoes a process of feminization in order to become a man of feeling. At the beginning of the story he is described as a young man with 'a principled mind', who however had inherited some of the passionate character of his mother. The influence of the virtuous Ellena, already endowed with a refined sensibility, spurs his growth into adulthood.

The Italian is a modern *bildungsroman* in which the characters' relationships to property are constitutive elements of their development into adult individuals: identity is meant as self-possession. Keane argues that the evolutionary plot of the romance gradually transforms the protagonists into "ideal citizens of public-minded private spheres" (2000: 19). This process is mapped

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

geographically and produced by discourses of aesthetics in which the image of woman is a central rhetorical device, as we have seen in the previous section. The birth of a new subjectivity explicitly coded as (feminized) male is represented in a powerful scene, in which the two lovers admire the landscape. It has already been noted that the language of aesthetics produces a well-defined subject position, which is made concrete (and even redefined as we have seen) by the women and men who actively employ it. Radcliffe appears to reverse the process. In her fictional world it is not women and men who consummate aesthetic discourse, but aesthetic discourse itself shapes their identities by providing them with gendered subjectivities. The aesthetics of sensibility provides Ellena with a feminine subjectivity which is defined through the category of the Burkean Beautiful, as appears clearly when Ellena addresses the following words to Vivaldi:

> 'Mark too,' said Ellena, 'how sweetly the banks and undulating plains repose at the feet of the mountains; what an image of beauty and elegance they oppose to the awful grandeur that overlooks and guards them! Observe, too, how many a delightful valley, opening from the lake, spreads its rice and corn fields, shaded with groves of the almond, far among the winding hills; how gaily vineyards and olives alternately chequer the acclivities; and how gracefully the lofty palms bend over the higher cliffs.' (Radcliffe 1992: 158-9).

Vivaldi, employing the same kind of aesthetic discourse, is endowed with a masculine subjectivity which finds expression through the opposite category of the Burkean Sublime. In the same passage, Vivaldi describes to Ellena the landscape of Abruzzo:

> 'See,' said Vivaldi, 'where Monte-Corno stands like a ruffian, huge, scared, threatening, and horrid! and in the south, where the sullen mountain of San Nicolo shoots up, barren and rocky! From thence, mark how other overtopping ridges of the mighty Appennine darken the horizon far along the east, and circle to approach the Velino in the north!' (ibid: 158).

The growth of Ellena into adulthood is not represented in terms of gendered sensibility, as in the case of Vivaldi. Already endowed with cultivated feminine taste, she is portrayed as lacking political experience, that is experience of the complex power relations shaping her world. When she realizes that the despotic society of her time (represented by Vivaldi's aristocratic family and its religious supporters) considers her a social climber, ready to sully the name of an ancient family in assertion of her own interests, she reacts by constructing a notion of dignity based on the idea of the nobility of the soul.[14] Her justified pride stands

[14] This appears clearly in a monologue which takes place at the beginning of the novel, in

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

in painful opposition to her deepest feelings; Ellena eventually gives up her scruples and decides to follow the reasons of her heart. A complex plot will subsequently also save her dignity, and she will be allowed to marry Vivaldi on equal terms (of rank, fortune and sensibility) at the end of the story. In spite of being mitigated by the conventional happy ending, the political lesson imparted to Ellena is stark and clear. The price paid by the new individual to enter the social order is that of relinquishing her own liberty.

The Italian is usually considered Radcliffe's most explicitly political novel: its publication in 1797 places it firmly in the heated years of the British reaction against the French Revolution. According to C. Johnson, in this work 'national and religious difference' play the role usually occupied by historical difference in most of the novels of the female Gothic tradition: it functions "both to establish a safely removed context in which to represent civil disorder without coming too close to home and to give a shape to anxieties that are felt precisely because civil disorder already is close to home". At the same time, however, the novel's political import is "described in such a way as to reverse the distancing effects of setting and to make this 'Italian' tale decidedly English and contemporary" (1995: 124, 125).

The political content of the novel has already been examined in the discussion about the developing subjectivity of the female protagonist: the strident contrast between the ideology of the *ancien régime*, placing a special emphasis on rank and money, and the new ideology of sensibility which stresses the social virtue of self-sacrifice has already emerged. Far from being an escapist genre, Radcliffe's Gothic clearly demonstrates its involvement with the ideological struggles of its revolutionary age.

The function of Italy as a peculiar source of imagery is less clear, and even critics who have traced a parallel between Radcliffe's exploitation of cultural difference and her political intentions, such as C. Johnson, have not addressed this issue. One of the few exceptions is Chard's preface to Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest*, which explores the complex interplay between the Gothic and travel writing. However, her conclusion is not new, as she maintains that the Gothic derives "an equation between the foreign and the forbidden" from travel accounts, and that this is especially evident in the depiction of excess which characterizes any Gothic image of southern, semi-feudal Catholic Europe. Italy is virtually interchangeable with any other southern European country according to Chard, who even claims that when a Gothic novel is set in the north of Europe, southern European traits of character are simply transferred (1986: xiii-xiv). Keane (2000) arrives at a similar conclusion, in her sophisticated analysis of the role played by Catholic images in the formation of modern subjectivity.

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

---

which Ellena says: "Never would I submit to enter a family averse to receive me: they shall learn, at least, that I inherit nobility of soul." (ibid [1797], 1992: 26).

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

The new conceptualization of the self produced by the complex discursive mode defined as 'confessional' by Foucault (1986) is in Keane's view a case of the appropriation of Catholic confessional rituals to construct a specifically Protestant, liberal identity – which is part of the cultural revolution centred on femininity. In Keane's account, Italy appears to be equated with Catholic practices, (English) aesthetic notions and the conscious use of an unterritorialized past which is associated with the tradition of the romance. Yet it seems possible to argue that Radcliffe went beyond this, and did not use the image of Italy merely as a rather anonymous source of exotic atmosphere, particularly in *The Italian.* On the contrary, I will argue that this image is somehow more specifically 'Italian'. Furthermore, it is one of the (many) constitutive elements in the complex interplay of cultural exchange, appropriation and transmission (or, in a single word, translation) that lay at the basis of the private and public processes of identity formation in eighteenth-century Britain.

Criticism tends to emphasize the unreal nature of the settings of Radcliffe's novels. Her geographical knowledge is far from accurate, and the historical framework often unsound. *The Italian* is no exception. For example, the description of the practices of the Inquisition is not consistent with the mid-eighteenth-century setting of the novel, a period in which religious persecution had almost completely disappeared. On the other hand, scholars such as Tompkins (1928, 1980) and McIntyre (1920) have argued in favour of Radcliffe's interest in realistic treatment of landscape by demonstrating her familiarity with travel texts such as Grosley's *New Observations on Italy and its Inhabitants* (1769) and Piozzi's *Observations and Reflections on a Journey through France, Italy and Germany* (1789). Furthermore, her historical sources are exemplified by her own citation of Francesco Guicciardini's *History of Italy* in *The Italian*.[15]

The Italian distinguishes itself from the other novels of Radcliffe because of its peculiarly modern setting. The story is framed within a short travel narrative, which describes an event experienced by a group of English travellers in Italy. During their visit to one of the churches in the area of Naples, the travellers notice a mysterious individual lurking in the gloom of the ill-lit aisles. The curiosity of the Englishmen is satisfied by a friar who tells them that the strange man is a murderer, who is living under the charity and protection of the Church. The astonishment of the travellers is realistically described by Radcliffe, who demonstrates in this way her familiarity with travel accounts of the period, in which Catholic protection of criminals was one of the most popular subjects.[16]

[15] Austin Park Goddard translated Guicciardini in the years 1753-6 (Marshall 1934: 208).

[16] See the following dialogue in *The Italian*: "'This is astonishing!' said the Englishman; 'of what avail are your laws, if the most atrocious criminal may thus find shelter from them? But how does he contrive to exist here! He is, at least, in danger of being starved? 'Pardon me,' replied the friar; 'there are always people willing to assist those, who cannot assist themselves; and as the criminal may not leave the church in search of food, they bring it to him here'" (Radcliffe ibid: 2).

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

In spite of his declared disgust, one of the travellers is intrigued by the idea of the murderer, and the following dialogue takes place when the Italian friend who is accompanying the group of foreigners asks him to observe a dark wooden confessional:

> 'You observe it?' said the Italian.
> 'I do,' replied the Englishman; 'it is the same, which the assassin has passed into; and I think it one of the most gloomy spots I ever beheld; the view of it is enough to strike a criminal with despair!'
> 'We, in Italy, are not so apt to despair,' replied the Italian smilingly (Radcliffe 1992: 3).

Cultural difference is a destabilizing experience which goes beyond narrow chauvinism. The deep fascination of the tourist and the reassuring attitude of his Italian friend appear to open the way to a fictional exchange which values cultural difference, rather than seeing it merely in a negative light. The curiosity of the foreigner prompts his Italian friend to lend him a volume narrating the events of *The Italian*.

This frame could play a fundamental role in the reception of the novel. By disguising the story as a traveller's tale, Radcliffe established a firm connection with travel writing, a genre which was extremely popular in this historical period. She could therefore expect her readers to be familiar with this type of text, and to identify with the English traveller, in a similar sympathetic, 'cooperative' atmosphere. Furthermore, both the connection with contemporary travel writing and the fact that the events narrated are set in 1764 provide *The Italian* with an unmistakably realistic flavour, setting it apart from previous eighteenth-century Gothic novels.

Radcliffe's Italy pervades not only the landscape and the exotic atmosphere of her novel, but also her characters, particularly the evil ones. However, characters like Schedoni in *The Italian* and Montoni in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* emerge not from eighteenth-century travel accounts or from historical narratives but rather from the distinctively English literary tradition of the Machiavellian villain in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre. Milbank (1993) argues that Radcliffe's frequent use of specifically English sources aligns her with the Gothic revival in the construction of a cultural genealogy consciously rivalling traditional classical education. The epigraphs and quotations in Radcliffe's novels, mainly taken from poets such as Shakespeare and Milton, appear to confirm this argument. Considerations about her target audience may have played a decisive influence on Radcliffe's decision to favour a specifically British literary tradition, especially considering that women were probably the largest part of her readership to benefit from this.

Images of Italy and new notions of Britishness, then, are combined in a very complex way in this novel. This is particularly apparent in its conclusion,

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

which has often been read as a flat, conventional happy ending. The last chapter of *The Italian* describes Ellena and Vivaldi's wedding day, in an almost carnivalesque atmosphere of festivity. The peculiar mixture of fiction and realism which characterizes Radcliffe's representation of Italy affords a setting for her original social utopia. In the years of the Terror, Radcliffe depicts different social classes harmoniously partaking of the joy of the new, enlightened upper-middle-class couple:

> Vivaldi and Ellena had wished that all the tenants of the domain should partake of it, and share the abundant happiness which themselves possessed; so that the grounds, which were extensive enough to accommodate each rank, were relinquished to a general gaiety (ibid: 413).

This imagined community is based on another harmonious combination, which is alluded to in the same passage, namely that between the two cultures of Italy and England. Radcliffe appears to cast her escapist mask definitively aside when she describes the garden of Ellena and Vivaldi as a mixture of two specific styles or traditions that could be identified as 'Italian' and 'English' in this historical period. The redefinition of aesthetic discourses provides the language used to describe this ideal combination:

> The style of the gardens, where lawns and groves, and woods varied the undulating surface, was that of England, and the present day, rather than of Italy; except 'Where a long alley peeping on the main,' exhibited such gigantic loftiness of shade, and grandeur of perspective, as characterize the Italian taste (ibid: 412).

The hybrid garden is metonymical of Ellena's and Vivaldi's proprietal status, and also of their successful development into self-possessed individuals. Private and public (or national) identities are therefore constructed upon a logic of exchange which is meant not only as a commercial notion, but also as a translational concept, a concept that stands for those complex dynamics of differentiation, assimilation and refraction that lay at the basis of both identity and cultural formation.

At the end of the eighteenth century women writers had extended their repertoire far beyond the discursive limits of the domestic novel. Their writing was no longer limited to representation of familiar, homely subjects, but covered the depiction of national and cultural otherness which characterizes the Gothic novel, for example. The culture of sensibility provided them with a new cultural authority which allowed them to enter the discourses of both literature and politics. Empowered by the discourses of aesthetics, women were enabled to participate in the construction of modern notions of identity, whether personal, in the form of gendered subjectivity, or national. To the many factors

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.

identified by critics as characterizing eighteenth-century women's writing, I would add an instrumental use of the image of Italy in the female Gothic of the end of the century, an Italy which, in Ann Radcliffe for example, is associated with and at the same time significantly opposed to representations of a classical past.[17] The origins of this theme and its particular association with women are still to be traced.

[17] In her study of the activity of the *Minerva Press*, Dorothy Blakey (1939) lists the texts published in the period 1790-1820. The majority of the Gothic novels printed in this period were written by women, and many of them have a distinctive Italian setting. Here are just a few examples, which do not include the novels exploiting a pseudo-Italian setting by including Italianate names (such as Rosina, Rosella etc.) in their title pages. [Anon], *Foscari. A Venetian Tale: Founded on Facts* (1791); Miss Street, *The Recluse of the Appenines* (1792); [Anon], *The Wanderer of the Alps, or Alphonso* (1796); [A. M. Mackenzie], *The Neapolitan, or Test of Integrity by Ellen of Exeter* (1797);[Mrs. Meeke], *The Sicilian: A Novel* (1799), [Anon.] *The Cavern of Strozzi: A Venetian Tale* (1801); Mary Charlton. *The Pirates of Naples: A Novel* (1801); [Anon.], *Isabel, or the Orphan of Valdarno* (1802); [Frances, Sophia], *Angelo Guicciardini, or the Bandit of the Alps* (1809); Hannah Cowley, *The Italian Marauders* (1810).

Copyright © 2002. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Agorni, Mirella. Translating Italy for the Eighteenth Century : British Women, Translation and Travel Writing (1739-1797), Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=1666896.
Created from umichigan on 2020-07-23 14:40:05.