



Enthymema XXXI 2022

‘Owing the Comforts of Life to Art’:
Elizabeth Helme’s Critical Reception and
the Practice of Writing

Carme Font Paz

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Abstract – In the context of the rise of the novel in eighteenth-century Britain, this article examines the understudied production of Elizabeth Helme (c. 1743-1814), who enjoyed a long and successful career as a translator, essayist, and writer of novels. Special attention will be paid to Helme’s reception in the English press and the translations of her novels into Spanish and French. It will further argue that Helme’s own practice as author, translator, and translated author configured a synergy of knowledge-building that allowed her to articulate her own style as a writer and posed a critical reflection about the art of writing in her non-fiction pieces, particularly in *The Fruits of Reflection* (1809) that remains largely unexplored. More generally, Helme’s eclectic approach is indicative of the ways in which eighteenth-century translation and writing practice can foster reflection on literary theory and criticism by confronting the author with the function of her own work.

Keywords – Eighteenth-century; Novel; Translation; Elizabeth Helme; Reception.

Font Paz, Carme. “Owing the Comforts of Life to Art: Elizabeth Helme’s Critical Reception and the Practice of Writing”. *Enthymema*, n. XXXI, 2022, pp. 101-113.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.54103/2037-2426/19003>

<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/enthymema>



[Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)
ISSN 2037-2426

'Owing the Comforts of Life to Art': Elizabeth Helme's Critical Reception and the Practice of Writing

Carme Font Paz

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

1. A Woman of Letters

Joachim Heinrich Campe (1746-1818), one of the major exponents of German *Aufklärung* who wrote highly popular history books for youths, was probably never aware of the fact that some of the English translations of his works were penned by another educationalist and successful writer like himself, who was nearly her exact contemporary. Elizabeth Helme (c. 1743-1814), the translator of three of Campe's books from the German original, *Cortez*, *Pizarro* and *Columbus as related by a father to his children*,¹ did not go down in literary history as a translator or as a writer herself of seven non-fiction books and ten novels, with two of them, *Louisa* (1787) and *The Farmer of Inglewood Forest* (1796) enjoying multiple reeditions. On close inspection, Helme's abundant production, as well as the translations of some of her works into French and Spanish, reveals originality and engagement with common concerns under the guise of didactic and sentimental fiction. From crusaders' history to botany or the slave trade, Helme's interests were wide-ranging and intent on educating the mind as well as the spirit beyond the constraints of moralistic fiction and Gothic excitement. Her activity as a translator of history and scientific texts, such as François le Vaillant's *Travels from the Cape of Good-Hope, into the Interior Parts of Africa* (1790), helped in turn shape her pool of knowledge that she later used in her novel writing (Martin 168).

This article argues that Helme's own practice as author, translator, and translated author configured a synergy of knowledge-building that allowed her to articulate her own style as a writer and posed a critical reflection about the art of writing, particularly in her non-fiction work that remains largely unexplored. By paying special attention to the reception of her fiction and her main collection of essays and prose fiction, namely *Fruits of Reflection* (1809) and *Instructive Rambles in London* (1798), we shall see how beyond the appearance of an instructional text "designed for the perusal of youth", her commentary about the act of reading and the theoretical underpinnings of novel writing as a 'new' genre strike the modern reader for their relevance today. These works reveal Helme's keen awareness of the practice of writing as a craft inflected for several layers of interpretations and intellectual inquiry, designed to appeal to a broad readership. As we shall see, Helme also took up writing as a source of income and commercial gain out of necessity. She showed a willingness to pursue popular non-fiction as a means to reach readers at large but also as a vindication that knowledge can effectively be communicated and assimilated through writing devoid of clutter and stylistic pedantry. As further evidence of Helme's popularity as a writer, working for major publishers at the time such as the Minerva press, this article will examine the translations of some of her own novels

¹ Campe, Joachim Heinrich. *Cortez; or, The Conquest of Mexico, as related by a father to his children*. London: Sampson Low, 1799; *Pizarro; or, the conquest of Peru, as related by a father to his children*. London: Sampson Low, 1799. *Columbus; or, The discovery of America, as related by a father to his children*. London: Sampson Low, 1811.

‘Owing the Comforts of Life to Art’
Carme Font Paz

into French and Spanish, particularly *Louisa or the Cottage on the Moor* and *St Clair*.² The *Critical Review* considered *Louisa* “much superior, both in its plan and conduct to the numerous productions of this class”.³ More generally, Helme’s eclectic approach is indicative of the ways in which eighteenth-century translation and writing practice can foster reflection on literary theory and criticism by confronting the author with the function of their own work, revealing a greater mastery of literary discourse than gendered narratives of literary history have assumed.

In this regard, the flourishing of the novel market in the mid and late eighteenth century can be understood as the result of new social, “epistemological and historiographic self-consciousness that characterise the modern period” (McKeon 253), furthering Ian Watt’s analysis of what was “new” in the novel as a literary form. If the novel as a form of literature emerges because of its “use of realism” in order to represent “all the varieties of human experience” then the way it presents this reality becomes more important than content itself (Watt 11). This had important connotations for feminist readings of early novels, which have emphasized the sheer numbers and variety of women’s contributions to this “new” genre. In an influential article by Cheryl Turner mapping out the variety of genres and subgenres around the novel, she traced “elements of [romanticised] autobiography incorporated into the evolving novel” adding to it the many “lives” and “genuine memoirs” that populate the circulating library catalogues, apart from the “histories, miscellanies, and authentic memoirs” (Turner 32). Other foundational texts of feminist recovery and criticism that placed the novel at the centre of their arguments concentrated on the purport of women’s agency and authority as creators in the long eighteenth century, showcasing the subcategories of novels that enjoyed an active presence of women authors, from sentimental fiction to the Gothic and the didactic novel (MacCarthy 1994); these works have also focused on the development of female identities in novel writing (Spencer 1986), women’s narrative voice (Lanser 1992) or chartered women’s active presence and influence in the commercial and literary marketplace (McDowell 1998). These approaches have evolved in the last thirty years various studies and research projects that explore particular women authors and illustrate their transnational dimension, with important findings that have expanded our understanding of women’s agency as literary creators operating within a general cultural climate of bias and misogyny.⁴ Jacqueline M. Labbe’s *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1750-1830* is significant in gathering a collection of case studies that inform the process of emergence and consolidation of women’s writing as an intellectual one, moving away from previous anthologies that emphasized the ‘feminine’ themes of writers. While these analyses may recover the actual novels, poems, letters, plays or essays written by women, more eclectic non-fiction genres have often been overlooked as they seem to lack a unity of purpose in meaning or a sustained discourse. Rita Felski (1989) and Sharon Harris (1996) argued for a change in the ways we read male-dominated aesthetic standards in order to modify our appreciation and understanding of women’s production in the past, even if that entails re-educating modern readers in what makes for “good” writing. In spite of these powerful calls for reading the wealth of women’s literary output in ways that go beyond standard forms and content of what fiction and non-fiction writing is and should be, other voices such

² See Peter Garside, James Raven, Rainer Schöweling (eds.). *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles, Vol. I 1770-1799*. London: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 407.

³ *Critical Review*, nr 63:308, April 1787.

⁴ One of the first comprehensive online projects on women’s writing in English and its reception was The Orlando Project, hosted by the University of Alberta in Canada: <https://www.artsmn.ualberta.ca/orlando/>; The Women Writers Project, currently hosted by Northeastern University and led by Julia Flanders, is pioneering in providing electronic text encoding of early modern women’s texts. <https://www.wwp.northeastern.edu/>

‘Owing the Comforts of Life to Art’
Carme Font Paz

as Susan Staves defend, precisely, a return to aesthetics: “It would be a shame to abandon the idea of aesthetic merit just at the moment when we have a real opportunity to demonstrate both women artists’ capacity to produce it and women critics’ capacity to discern it” (Staves 5). Staves points at the anti-elitist tendencies of feminisms but also at “lingering women reluctance to claim any authority, no matter how useful, well-earned, or justified” (Staves 5). It is also equally important that she points at the actual works of criticism that women writing prose fiction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries produced, which often escapes Feminist scholarship. According to James Raven, this literary diversity around the developing form of the novel as a genre contributed to an exploration of the act of writing as an activity “not simply reliant upon existing models but also inventive in developing new kinds of prose fiction ranging from the novel of letters and the sentimental novel to the Gothic romance and the historical epic” (Raven 16). For Mary Helen McMurrin, cultural mixing is endemic to the novel “as prose fiction had a long and varied history in translation” (2-3). She further argues that the novel as a genre could emerge because of the ways in which fiction integrated the practice of translation within a narrative discourse. Gillian Dow in her overview of translation and cross-channel exchanges in the long eighteenth century, identifies a gap in communication between literary and translation scholars to the detriment of women’s writing: “[...] despite the turn away from formalist approaches in the last 30 years, most scholars interested in the 18th-century novel are still not interested in translation in context, and most interested in 18th-century translation are not exclusively interested in the novel” (Dow 692). As a result of this, Dow argues, it is difficult for us to see how French and English novels may have developed in tandem, “as translation from each language was central to this development”. (692)

Elizabeth Helme conforms to these descriptions, as she began her writing career as a translator while she was writing novels and non-fiction works that combined didactic purpose with critical inquiry. Her fiction work, as we shall see, was translated into French and German almost simultaneously, apart from reaching readerships in other languages, such as Spanish or Polish, through French. But Helme was not the only one in cultivating a variety of genres including translation and essay writing on abstract themes. Clara Reeve (1729-1807), best known for her Gothic novel *The Old English Baron*, wrote a succinct and long-forgotten chronicle of the novel as a genre in her *Progress of Romance*: “In the following pages, I have endeavoured to trace the progress of this species of composition, through all its successive stages and variations [...] and to ascertain as many of the Authors, and the dates of them as I could get information of, to mark the distinguishing characters of the Romance and the Novel, to point at the boundaries of both” (Reeve VI). Reeve writes her essay in the form of a dialogue with three characters: Hortensius, Sophronia, and Euphrasia, thus illustrating the power of dialogue to sustain an argument in a novel. A similar approach took the novelist and schoolteacher Charlotte Palmer (1729-1807) with her novel *It is and It is not a Novel* and her short essay *Integrity and Content: an Allegory*, both published in 1792, quickly forgotten, and both intent on showing the limitations of representing “truth” in fiction. Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825), with a long and eventful career, wrote a short introductory essay for her extensive review of *British Novelists* (1810). In this preface, Barbauld discusses among her summaries of novels questions of commercialization and literary taste, copyright or truthfulness. What these and other women writers had in common was their professional practice as translators, teachers and writers of fiction, which in turn fostered an interest in reflecting upon the art of writing, reading, or the publishing business. Helme’s case is particularly interesting as her concern with writing as an art, as a professional skill and as an object of critical inquiry was not accessory to her fiction work, but configured her identity as an author while she sought to be financially and intellectually independent as a writer.

‘Owing the Comforts of Life to Art’
Carme Font Paz

2. Professional Success and The Review Press

Born in Durham as Elizabeth Horrobin, nothing is known about Helme’s origins, family connections or education. At seventeen she moved to London, met and married school master William Helme and began working with her husband as a headmistress at Brentford.⁵ While their family grew with five children, financial struggles accompanied them throughout their lives, as is evidenced by the abundant correspondence with the Royal Literary Fund regarding her application for or a subsidy.⁶ She received some funding from the Fund beginning in March 1801 up to 1809, as shown in two receipts by Elizabeth Helme from the RLF.⁷ However, subsequent applications and pleas for financial help by her daughters and husband were not successful, in particular those by her daughters Elizabeth Sommerville in 1806 and 1810 – rejected on account of having already received financial assistance for them from her mother – and much later Louisa Dalton in 1847.⁸ Elizabeth Sommerville was herself a writer of novels and children’s literature, with popular titles such as *James Manners*, *Little John*, and *Their Dog Bluff* in 1801. In 1810 William Helme and another of her daughters, Anne Radzimirski, married to a Ukrainian soldier, as well as Lucy Peacock, a writer and editor friend of the Helme family, applied several times from 1810 to 1822 and got funding.⁹ In one of these applications, he identifies his wife as the author of “some 19 novels, children's books, translations and histories”, although he would claim that he had co-authored or finished some of the works published under her name, probably in an attempt to make his case as a professional writer appear more solid.¹⁰

In spite of this documentary evidence, very little transpires from Elizabeth Helme or the circumstances of her literary career, other than her struggle with financial stability and the health issues that came as a result of that. Her success as a professional writer was not meagre, though, judging by the two “new” editions of her first novel *Louisa; or the Cottage on the Moor* in 1787¹¹ and its multiple reprints in the first half of the nineteenth century, apart from the exposure which she gained as a result of the translations of her novels,¹² her own translation work and her teaching. The *London Evening Post* from 26 April 1787 announced that “The publisher of *Louisa, or the Cottage on the Moor*, Two Volumes, begs leave respectfully to inform those who have been disappointed that he has, in order to expedite the New Edition,

⁵ For biographical information on Helme, see The Women’s Print History Project, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Director: Michelle Levy. <https://womensprinthistory-project.com/person/197>. See also Blagdon, Francis. ‘Mrs. E. Helme’. *Flowers of Literature for 1805, or Characteristic Sketches of Human Nature and Modern Manners*. J.G. Barnard, London, 1806. pp. 37-38; and Blain, Virginia, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. pp. 509-10.

⁶ Archives of the Royal Literary Fund, held in the British Library, Loan 96 RLF 1/97.

⁷ Receipt signed by Elizabeth Helme (30 Mar 1801) Loan 96 RLF 1/97/1; Receipt, signed Elizabeth Helme (2 Mar 1809) Loan 96 RLF 1/97/5. Helme received in Mar 1801 (£10), 20 Oct 1803 (£10), 19 Jan 1805 (5 guineas), 5 Feb 1809 (£5).

⁸ Loan 96 RLF 1/97/7.

⁹ Loan 96 RLF 1/295. Peacock: Loan 96 RLF 1/97/6.

¹⁰ See William Helme's letter to the RLF, 28 January 1815, case 295.

¹¹ Helme, Elizabeth. *Louisa; or the Cottage on the Moor, etc. (a new edition corrected, with additions)*. Dublin: printed by Brett Smith, for Messrs. Moncrieffe, 1787; Helme, Elizabeth. *Louisa; or, the Cottage on the Moor, etc.* London: G. Kearsley, 1787. Data from ESTC (N18988) and Peter Garside’s *The English Novel 1770-1829*. OUP, 2000. 1787:38.

¹² Garside accounts for an early translation in France in 1787 and another one in German in 1789. *Louise, ou la chaumière dans les marais*. London and Paris: Buisson, 1787; *Luise oder die Bauerhütter im Marschlande*. Leipzig: Wienbrack, 1789.

‘Owing the Comforts of Life to Art’
Carme Font Paz

distributed it to four different printing houses, who have engaged to complete it by Monday next, when a large impression will be ready to supply the increasing demand for this favourite Production” (Garside 407). Such a popular demand would account for the multiple printing sites of *Louisa* to maximize access to an avid readership that would absorb this edition “considerably improved and divided into chapters” (Garside 407). While her nine other novels enjoyed a similar enthusiastic reception, reviews and criticism were keener on stressing the sensational nature of the plot than on appraising literary merit. Helme’s second novel, *Clara and Emmeline: or the Maternal Benediction* (1788) also benefitted from simultaneous translations into French and German.¹³ Its maternity theme, though, fuelled gendered-biased reviews at home, as Jennie Batchelor notes: “Helme’s self-objectification certainly played into the hands of critics who wished to talk about her character rather than about her work at the same time that it helped to mitigate reviewers’ dismissive responses to the various kinds of popular fiction Helme wrote (Batchelor 171). Andrew Beckett writing for *The Monthly Review* considered that “as a moral production, it may be placed foremost in the list of novels. The incidents, however, are trite and common; a few of the sentiments are strained and affected [...] For an account of the pretty novel of *Louisa*, by the same writer, see review for May 1787, p. 449” (TMR 1788: Vol 80, 531). If *Louisa* was a ‘pretty’ novel, Helme’s equally popular novel *The Farmer of Inglenwood Forest* (1796), printed by the Minerva Press in four volumes, did not pose any moral harm on readers, either, as *The Critical Review* cared to remark: “The incidents on which this story is founded are improbable; but that is no objection with the generality of those readers, for whose entertainment these productions are intended; and it may be read by any person without a fear of exciting evil passions, or inculcating any pernicious principles whatever” (CR qt. in Forster 380). Novels printed with large print runs were suspicious of poor literary quality, even if they could still educate the public in fine morals, as with Helme’s case. Antonia Forster identifies in late eighteenth-century reviews from the literary press a subtext of “contempt” for the reading public with reviews that frequently make a distinction between different kinds of novel-readers and divide them into groups, such as “readers of sentiment or taste”, “those who devour books of this kind”, or comparisons between reading and an easy digestion of printed matter (380). For Betty Schellenberg, these differences and categories reveal the consolidation of the novel as a genre in spite of the gender bias (29). This dynamics of acknowledging commercial success and debasing literary quality can also be seen in the critical reception of Helme’s work, with further scathing comments in each one of her new novels. *The Monthly Review* was of the opinion that with her *Albert; or the Wilds of Strathnavern* (1799) “she must not flatter herself with any expectation of figuring among the foremost of our literary countrywomen” (Garside 785), a dismissive comment that did not prevent Helme in future years from further publication in well-known printed houses and reaching a large and international readership. In fact, these reviews did not seem to chime with the continuous commercial success of Helme’s work at home and abroad, with translations of *Albert* into French and into Spanish. The French translation identifies *Mistriss Helme* as the author of *Louisa*, *La Chaumière* and, interestingly enough, *Des Promenades Instructives* [*Instructive Rambles in London*, 1798], published only one year before *Albert* and translated by a “citoyen Lefebvre”. This points at the fact that French readers appreciated both Helme’s “sensational” novels and her prose fiction, which she had just begun to publish.¹⁴ But the review press of the time did not even register the full impact of Helme’s productions into other languages, as for example the Spanish

¹³ *Clare et Emmeline, ou la Bénédiction maternelle*. London and Paris: Kearsley et Lagrange, 1788. Two editions on the same year, translated by Joseph Gaspard Dubois Fontanelle and François Soulès, respectively; *Clara und Emmeline, oder der mütterliche Segen*. Leipzig: Weidmann, 1789.

¹⁴ *Albert ou le désert de Strathnavern*. Paris: Guilleminet, 1800. *Alberto, o el Desierto de Strathnavern*. Madrid: Imprenta de la calle de la Greda, 1807.

‘Owing the Comforts of Life to Art’
Carme Font Paz

versions. *Louisa*, translated as *Luisa o La cabaña en el valle*, underwent two editions into Spanish in 1797 and 1803 by the same translator and publisher, Francisco de Tójar in Salamanca, both translated not directly from the original English, but from the French edition, even though the title page mentions that it was “written in English by Miss...” (Helme 1797: tp).¹⁵ The Spanish 1797 edition includes a prefatory ‘conversation’ between the translator, a Frenchman signing with the initials D.G.A.J.C.F. and the bookseller-publisher. The translator offers his work to the bookseller for printing and pitches the fine nature of the novel and her author. The translator seeks to situate Helme in a tradition of British novel writing without mentioning her, since none of the English, French and Spanish editions of her novel are signed with her name. He considers that *Luisa* is a novel “written in two small volumes in 1787 with the delicacy accustomed by English women of letters: it is candid, decent, and displays purity of customs, the garments with which she recounts some events thought to be true”.¹⁶ The bookseller replies that “nowadays English novels are fashionable, and we have the *Clarisa*, the *Amelia*, and the *Carolina*” (Helme 1797: VIII),¹⁷ referring to Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, which in fact did not see the light in Spanish translation until 1794,¹⁸ by subscription, translated by the Spanish lawyer José Marcos Gutiérrez from the French *Clarisse* (García Garrosa 2019: 590). The *Amelia* refers to Henry Fielding’s *Amelia* (1751), which saw the light by subscription in November 1795 (Deacon 337) and was then published in five volumes in 1796 in Madrid by “Imprenta de la viuda de Ibarra” and translated by an unidentified D.R.A.D.Q., again with initials to conceal the French origin of the Spanish translator. *Carolina* may refer to the anonymous *Caroline de Montmorenci* (1794) or *Caroline Merton* (1794) both written by “a lady” and disparaged in dismissive reviews in the English press (Garside 602).¹⁹ In the conversation that the Spanish translator transcribed as part of his preface to *Louisa*, he assures the bookseller that the novel received “repeated praise” in the English press “and was better ranked than other modern romances of higher repute and enjoyed two editions within days” (Helme 1797: IX-X), but the bookseller hesitates about the quality of the translator, saying that “the original work might be good. But I mistrust the style of the translation. It does not make sense to me that a French speaks or writes in our language” (Helme 1797: X).²⁰ The bookseller instructs the translator to leave him the manuscript so that he can consult some “men of letters” about the quality of the translation. The transcription of this conversation might well have been a ploy that served as a promotional pitch about the importance of Helme’s work and the alleged quality of the translation to justify that it was not directly translated from the English original, as it was

¹⁵ “Escrita en inglés por Miss...”

¹⁶ *Trad.* Es una novela en dos tomitos, del año 1787, escrita por una inglesa con toda la delicadeza que acostumbran las literatas de su sexo. Candidez, decencia, y pureza de costumbres, son prendas con que supo contar unos hechos que se creen verdaderos [...]

¹⁷ “*Lib.* En el día se está por las Novelas Inglesas; han salido la Clarisa, la Amelia, la Carolina” (Helme 1797: VIII).

¹⁸ Richardson, Samuel (1794-1796), *Clara Harlowe. Novela traducida del inglés al francés por Mr. Le Tourneur, siguiendo en todo la edición original revista por su autor Richardson, y del francés al castellano por Don Joseph Marcos Gutiérrez*, vols. I and II, Madrid, Benito Cano, 1794; vol. III, Madrid, Fermín Villalpando, 1794; vols. IV, V and VI, Madrid, Fermín Villalpando, 1795; vols. VII and VIII, Madrid, Viuda de García, 1795; vol. IX, Madrid, Viuda de García, 1796; vol. X, Madrid, Antonio Cruzado, 1796; vol. XI, Madrid, Viuda e Hijo de Marín, 1796 (García Garrosa 2019:607).

¹⁹ See a *Historia de Amelia Booth escrita en inglés por el famoso Fielding*, D.R.A.D.Q. (trans.). Madrid: Imprenta de la viuda de Ibarra, 1796.

²⁰ “*Trad.* Los papeles públicos lo anunciaron con repetidos elogios, prefiriéndola a quantos Romances modernos han tenido mayor reputación; y como tal se hicieron en pocos días dos ediciones” (Helme 1797: IX-X). “*Lib.* Puede ser bueno el original; pero, Señor mío, es mucho lo que desconfío del estilo de traducción. A mí no me encaxa que un francés hable o escriba en nuestro idioma” (Helme 1797: X).

‘Owing the Comforts of Life to Art’ Carme Font Paz

mostly the case with English works reaching the Spanish bookshelves in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. *Luisa*'s second edition of 1803, though, also printed by Francisco de Tójar in Salamanca and by the same translator, did not include the preface with the conversation between the bookseller and the translator, suggesting that this second edition would not require an explanatory note about the author.

The original preface of Helme's first edition in English, however, was not included in either the Spanish or in the French translations of *Louisa*. In fact, although Helme's name did not feature in the title page or in the preface, her authorial voice was clear in presenting *Louisa* as a novel for demanding readers. Contrary to what the reviews said, Helme did not fashion her work as mere sensational entertainment: "At the first view, it may appear very simple, yet an intelligent reader will readily admit the necessity of it" (Helme 1787: VI). Helme adopts a firm authorial position in comparing the act of reading a new "composition" with an individual, man or woman, entering the beauty of language to acquire knowledge or a new understanding of life. "More might be said on the subject, but if we believe the asseverations of some eminent publishers, essay writing is totally out of beauty and regularity of architecture was not the work of a day?" (1787: VII).

3. *Fruits of Reflection*

Helme's defense of an aesthetics of writing, regardless of genre, is not aloof of the fact that, as a woman, she might be judged harsher: "Men of might, be merciful! Let not the torrent of your disapprobation sweep away my humble dwelling nor expose with a too harsh severity, the imperfections of my fabric to eyes less discerning than your own" (1787: VI). Helme's clever double bind, that of placing herself as a woman of letters while appealing to reviewers and critics for a fair treatment that would not negatively condition the opinion of readers is unusual in invoking the act and practice of writing as an art that requires the utmost responsibility. It does so as a writer but also as a critic, since readers will be affected by both of them upon entering the untrodden territory of the imagination: she argues that novels or prose compositions that are based on true events or have the ring of truth equally affect the mind and the spirit of the reader. Helme neither dismisses sensibility nor makes it her main selling point: "If my heroine merit one tear of sensibility, I am amply satisfied" (1787: IX). For her, exploring the expressive and aesthetic possibilities of the flourishing genre of the novel was an educational and intellectual endeavor: "It remains now only to say that as natural fiction, judiciously blended with diversity, is the most agreeable characteristic of Novel writing, which boasts of outlines founded in truth; and can point to living examples of suffering virtue (in the end) meeting their due reward" (1787: X). With this passing reference to Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, Helme places herself in a tradition of writers who observe the world and can transform it into fictional matter for the benefit of their readers. This was also Helme's view in her *Fruits of Reflection, or Moral Remembrances on various subjects designed for the perusal of youth* (1809), which includes a preface signed by herself. It is dedicated to Sophia Finch and her sister Miss Charlotte Finch, royal governess to the children of King George III and Queen Charlotte, and friend of the writer Elizabeth Carter. In spite of its explicit didactic purpose and a title that targets at a young audience, Helme's tone and choice of subjects gravitate towards an essay written for a wider audience, certainly adult and interested in miscellaneous reflections about living. Again, Helme's interest in critical thinking and writing practice, even literary theory, finds home in *Fruits of Reflection*, particularly in the second volume. At the peak of Romantic poetry in England, she defends a holistic view of nature that is neither mysterious nor materialistic: "Poets when desirous of elevating the mind to great and sublime subjects, usually choose rocks and deserts for their scenery, as the priest of Apollo composing hymns

'Owing the Comforts of Life to Art'
Carme Font Paz

to that Deity in an aged forest" (Helme 1809: vol. 2, 7). Far from considering it pedantic, she suggests that "lighter studies" and thinking in general can benefit from contact with nature, and reminds the reader that a man of true genius should "behold nothing in the universe but the works of the Almighty" (Helme 1809: vol.2, 7). There is much for a true artist of nature to contemplate which is neither sublime nor entrenched in a material classification of nature as if it were a "cabinet of curiosities" (Helme 1809: vol. 2, 8). She goes on to share her own reflections during her travels, when she invariably feels the contrast between the material and the spiritual dimensions: "I compared what I had seen with what I actually saw, and reflected with wonder how man can have the presumptuous folly to imagine that he can improve the works of his Creator" (Helme 1809: vol. 2, 8). For her, contemplating one particle leads one's thoughts to a consideration of the whole. The word "contemplation", which she uses abundantly in her writing, denotes both a religious 'nothingness' and a near Romantic appreciation of the beauty of creation. But far from a narrow-minded view of life as obedience to God and his precepts, Helme celebrates art as a necessary impulse to create many of the "comforts of life" as it seeks and usually finds meaning. Art is a method and an approach to understanding, since Helme's ramblings help her compare her previous knowledge with what she now knows. Writing connects her with space and time and triggers a direct experience that, as O'Loughlin has suggested, "produces a powerful effect in literary technique" (5). Travelling entails exposure to the unknown, and the conscientious writer-artist can only transmit his or her observations not from an "objective" reality but from a subjective view of what reality is, one which is devoid of any metaphysical connotation and, at the same time, respectful of the mystery of creation. This mystery is also to be found in "lesser" expressions of nature, which trigger awe: "The works of nature, as arranged by their Heavenly Architect are indeed beautifully sublime, and raise the reflective mind far beyond the views of cultivated nature; but the hand of God is equally discernible in the rich and fertile corn field, the well planted orchard, or the productive kitchen garden", that is, in the domestic and everyday space of nature. Respect for the present implies knowing and honoring one's past not just as an intellectual pursuit but as a public duty. Here, Helme echoes a recurrent subject of French romances in which characters discuss the importance of studying history:²¹ "History is the means of our acquaintance with a much greater and more remote part of the human race, than would be possible without it" (Helme 1809: vol. 2, 14). History is the greatest teacher, since it "makes other men's experience our own, to profit from it, and learn wisdom from their misfortunes [...] and no one can be a useful member of society who is indifferent to the public good" (Helme 1809: vol. 2, 15). Writing is for Helme a vehicle for transmitting the knowledge about the past which concerns not only nations and kings, but the lives of individuals in communities. The novel and the essay that is the result of conscious observation are forms of art that allow for this expression of microhistory and the inner life of the human soul. Reading is also presented by Helme as an art because "by reading we become acquainted with the affairs, actions and thoughts both of the living and the dead [...] We transfer ourselves, as it were, the knowledge and improvement of the most learned men, and the wisest and best of mankind" (Helme 1809: vol. 1, 127). Deep reading is a responsible act of good citizenship for Helme, and as important as the writing that goes into it. But knowledge can be imparted also through "amusement", and "momentarily adding to our intellectual treasure" (Helme 1809: vol. 1, 126). Her method of approaching writing as an artistic exercise in observation is also made explicit in Helme's own

²¹ For a recent account and paratextual analysis of French romances in English translation, and in particular Madeleine-Angélique de Gomez *Les Journées amusantes* and the notion of history, see Severine Genieys-Kirk "The Branding of Female Authorship in Enlightenment Europe: a Paratextual Study of *Les Journées amusantes* (1722-1731) by Madeleine-Angélique de Gomez", in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, forthcoming in 2023. The article discusses the popularity of Eliza Haywood's English translation of *Les Journées amusantes*, which Helme was likely to have read.

‘Owing the Comforts of Life to Art’ Carme Font Paz

preface to her *Instructive Rambles in London*, where she informs the reader that in her choice of historical sketches on casual episodes of life in London, she has “selected such as I thought might interest young minds sufficiently [...] as thus in seeking the shadow, *amusement*, frequently [I] find the reality, *knowledge*”. (Helme 1809: VII). For Helme, this epistemic reality is to be found in the practice of reading, thinking, and of translating insofar as it involves deep reading and immersion into the reality of another author. Creative writing is then an art that combines aesthetics, observation, and personal integrity.

4. A Mother of the Novel

While the success of her writings and professional practice would not suggest financial difficulties, her popularity did not guarantee a place for her in literary history – a reality that points at the instability and fleeting nature of much of women’s production in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.²² In the preface to *St. Clair of the Isles, or The Outlaws of Barra*, published in London by Thomas Norton Longman in 1803, signed in the title page by Elizabeth Helme and with an introduction dedicated to the marchioness of Abercorn, Helme appeals to her successful and long career: “In a period of sixteen years I have to thank the public for the partiality with which they have received twenty eight volumes of original works and twenty four of translations and abridgements, and now peculiarly feel the value of that favour as it has procured me the honour of addressing your Ladyship” (Helme 1803: IV). Indeed, her *St. Clair* travelled far and for long, with two translations into Polish in 1827 and 1829 that do not appear signed with her name. The title page of the first Polish edition *Saint-Clair Czyli Wygnancy na Wyspie Barra. Romans Historyczny* translated directly from the English by a Tom Czwarty, was published in Warsaw in four volumes and included some illustrations.²³

Helme’s contribution to the literary scene has been insufficiently registered by contemporary scholarship as it resembles that of so many other women in the last decades in the eighteenth century who translated and wrote sentimental novels for profit. Helme was not only a novelist but also a literary theorist of a particular kind, interested as she was in the very nature of fiction writing and its possibilities for artistic expression regardless of any didactic purpose. Much of her findings and reflections on the craft and purpose of writing came as a result of being a translator and a translated author herself. This practice gave Helme an insider perspective of the translated discourse that she could apply in her novels and, most originally, in her prose fiction. The timing and context for this were appropriate, as the rise of vernacular languages as literary languages for communicating science and knowledge had been expanding over the past decades. “A growing awareness of the complexities of translation, and attempts at theorising translation, can be noted” (Oz-Salzberger 387). Translations and translators helped shape a more professionalized book industry, with a “Republic of Letters” that was transforming itself into a less elitist and more intersectional space for the exchange and reflection about art and the public function of writing. In this way, translators and publishers became members “of a new social stratum of literati, belonging to a growing species of cultural

²² On the invisibility of the individual woman writer due to a huge critical mass of popular and commercial women’s writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, see Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820*, Berkeley: California University Press, 1998.

²³ Helme, Elizabeth; Tom Czwarty (trans.) *Saint-Clair Czyli Wygnancy na Wyspie Barra. Romans Historyczny*. Warsaw: N. Glücksberg, 1827. Second edition in 1829, printed also by N. Glücksberg but translated by Katarzyna Zochowska. The author of this article would like to thank Dr Jacek Partyka and the staff at the reading room from the Jagiellonian library in Krakow for their help.

‘Owing the Comforts of Life to Art’
Carme Font Paz

mediators” (Oz-Salzberger 388). By dint of the fact that her novels appeared in different languages, Helme saw herself not merely as a mediator, but as a thinker and creator of fiction who reached a wide national and international audience that was keen on learning from her. Her commercial success was a mark of literary merit on account of her ability to communicate with her readers and instruct them with writings that entertained as much as they conveyed truth about the world and the meaning of life. Far from seeing herself as a writer who wrote for money, she felt vindicated as an intellectual of a popular kind, one that spoke to the minds of her readers with her art and a new tradition of novel writing.

5. References

- Archives of the Royal Literary Fund, held in the British Library, Loan 96 RLF 1/97.
- Barbauld, Anna Laetitia. *An Essay on the Origin and Progress of Novel Writing*. London, F. C. & J. Rivington, 1810.
- Batchelor, Jennie. *Women’s Work: Labour, Gender, Authorship, 1750-1830*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014.
- Blagdon, Francis. ‘Mrs. E. Helme’. *Flowers of Literature for 1805, or Characteristic Sketches of Human Nature and Modern Manners*. London, J.G. Barnard, 1806. 37-38.
- Blain, Virginia, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*. Yale University Press, 1990. 509-10.
- Deacon, Philip. “La historia de la traducción española de *Amelia* de Henry Fielding”, in Lafarga, Francisco (ed.) *La Traducción en España (1750-1830): Lengua, Literatura, Cultura*. Lleida, Edicions de la Universitat de Lleida, 1999. pp. 335-344.
- Dow, Gillian. “Translation, Cross-Channel Exchanges and the Novel in the Long Eighteenth Century”. *Literature Compass*. Vol 11:11(2014), pp. 691-702.
- Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics. Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Forster, Antonia. “Reviewing the Novel”, in Downie, James Alan (ed.) *The Eighteenth-Century Novel*. London, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 372-387.
- Gallagher, Catherine. *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820*. California University Press, 1998.
- García Garrosa, María Jesús. “Los lectores españoles de Samuel Richardson: un estudio de la suscripción a *Clara Harlowe* (1794-1796)”. *Cuadernos de Ilustración y Romanticismo*, n°25 (2019): 587-608.
- Garside, Peter. James Raven, Rainer Schöweling (eds.). *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*, Vol. I 1770-1799. London, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 407.
- Genieys-Kirk, Séverine. “The Branding of Female Authorship in Enlightenment Europe: a Paratextual Study of *Les Journées amusantes* (1722-1731) by Madeleine-Angélique de Gomez”, in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Oxford Academic, forthcoming in 2023.
- Harris, Sharon. *American Women Writers to 1800*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

‘Owing the Comforts of Life to Art’
Carme Font Paz

- Helme, Elizabeth. *Louisa; or, the Cottage on the Moor: In Two Volumes*. London, George Kearsley, 1787.
- . *Luisa o La Cabaña en el Valle*. Salamanca: Francisco de Tójar, 1797.
- . *Clara and Emmeline; or, the Maternal Benediction*. London: George Kearsley, 1788.
- . *St Clair of the Isles*. London: Thomas Norton Longman, 1803.
- . *The Fruits of Reflection, or Moral Remembrances on Various Subjects, Designed for the Perusal of Youth*. Vols. I & II. Brentford: printed by and for Norbury, 1809.
- . *Saint-Clair Czyl Wygnancy na Wyspie Barra. Romans Historyczny*. Tom Czwarty (trans.) Warsaw: N. Glücksberg, 1827.
- Labbe, Jacqueline M. *The History of British Women's Writing, 1750-1830*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Lanser, Susan. *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Cornell University Press, 1992.
- MacCarthy, Bridget. *The Female Pen: Women Writers and Novelists, 1621-1818*. Cork University Press, 1994.
- Martin, Alison E. “Outward Bound: Women Translators and Scientific Travel Writing 1780-1800”, *Annals of Science*, Vol. 73:2 (2016), pp. 157-69.
- McDowell, Paula. *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678-1730*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
- McKeon, Michael. “Watt’s *Rise of the Novel* within the Tradition of the Rise of the Novel”, *Eighteenth-century Fiction*, Vol. 12:2-3 (2000), pp. 253-76.
- McMurrin, Mary Helen. “The Spread of Novels: Translation and Prose Fiction in the Eighteenth Century”. Princeton University Press, 2009, 2-3.
- O’Loughlin, Katrina. *Women, Writing, and Travel in the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Oz-Salzberger, Fania. “The Enlightenment in Translation: Regional and European Aspects”, *European Review of History*, Vol. 13:3 (2006), pp. 385-409.
- Palmer, Charlotte. *Integrity and Content, an Allegory*. London, Printed by Hixon and Griffiths, 1792.
- . *It is and It is not a Novel*. London: Printed for Hookham and Carpenter, 1792.
- Raven, James. “Historical Introduction: The Novel Comes of Age”, in Garside, Peter. James Raven, Rainer Schöweling (eds.) *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*, Vol. I 1770-1799. Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 15-121.
- Reeve, Clara. *The Progress of Romance*, vol. 1. London: Printed for the Author, 1785.
- Schellenberg, Betty. *The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Simon, Sherry. *Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*. Routledge, 1996.
- Spencer, Dale. *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers before Jane Austen*. Pandora Press, 1986.

‘Owing the Comforts of Life to Art’
Carme Font Paz

Staves, Susan. *A Literary History of Women’s Writing in Britain 1660-1789*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

The Monthly Review or Literary Journal (TMR), Volume 80. London, Printed for R. Griffiths, 1788.

Turner, Cheryl. *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century*. Routledge, 1992.

Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. Pimlico, 2000 [1957].