

Revolution and Exploration: the English Translations of Rousseau and Humboldt by Helen Maria Williams (1759-1827)

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Abstract

British author Helen Maria Williams (1759-1827) was a well-known figure in the eighteenth century literary circles, whose work was praised by Elizabeth Montagu, Samuel Johnson, Dorothy and William Wordsworth, Mary Wollstonecraft, Hester Piozzi or Alexander von Humboldt. In her early poems *Edwin and Eltruda* (1782), *An Ode to the Peace* (1783) and *Peru* (1784), Williams starts to reveal her political tendencies by appealing to strong empathic feelings as a key to social and political transformation. As a result of her interest in politics, she travelled to France in 1790 and published her most acclaimed work *Letters from France* (1790). However, the rest of her production has received little critical attention by modern scholars, who have overlooked her involvement in translation. Williams' only extant novel, *Julia* (1790) is in fact a creative translation of Rousseau's *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), in which Williams includes poems that evidence her interest in revolutionary politics. Four years later, she translated Bernardin de Saint Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*, while she was imprisoned in Paris. While translating novels was regarded as a respectable exercise for women writers, Williams challenges gender assumptions by translating *Researches* (1814) and the seven volumes of *Personal Narrative* (1814-1829), which had been produced by one of the most influential eighteenth century scientists, Alexander von Humboldt. This article interrogates how Williams makes use of translation to access areas of knowledge traditionally restricted to men, such as philosophy, politics and science. For this purpose, I will focus on her translations of the work of two leading intellectual figures of the eighteenth century, Rousseau and Von Humboldt.

Keywords

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Helen Maria Williams (1761-1827), mostly known for her chronicles of the French Revolution, *Letters from France* (1790-1796), was a British poet, novelist, translator and essayist. Although comparatively overlooked when compared to her chronicles, her translations made her a well-known literary figure in Britain at the end of the Eighteenth Century. According to David Sigler, «Her translation of Bernardin's novella was, during her lifetime, her most popular and well-regarded work. It was the most successful of some twenty translations of *Paul et Virginie*» (575). Here I have focused on two other translations, the novel *Julia* (1790), adapted from Rousseau's *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), and her nineteenth century translations of the works of the scientist and explorer Alexander Von Humboldt. Adding to the aforementioned texts, Williams also translated the gothic tale *The City of Leper of Aoste* (1817) by Xavier de Maistre and some poems that she included in *Poems on Various Subjects* (1823). After having travelled to France in 1790

and motivated by her belief in the revolutionary cause, Williams settled in Paris in 1792 where she spent the rest of her life -she even obtained the French citizenship in 1817-. Since her arrival in France she started to work on her chronicles of the French Revolution, which were read both in England and France:

The English newspapers came regularly to the committee of public safety, in which passages from my letters were frequently transcribed, and the work mentioned as mine; and those papers were translated into French for the members of the committee [...] (1795; 173-74).

Williams became, to use Vivien Jones' words, «one of the major recorders and mediators of the French Revolution for a British public» (179). Williams was aware of her role as a mediator and, as a result, she used translation as another tool to strengthen her position as an intellectual before her readership. What is compelling of her method, is that her translations are connected with the main topics of her own works. In *Julia*, she writes about the French Revolution and the American War of Independence that she had publicly supported in her poem *An American Tale*, published in *Poems* (1786). She had also published *A Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating Slave Trade* (1788) and «Williams' name on the title page ensured that *Paul and Virginia* would be read [...] as a sustained meditation upon chattel slavery» (Sigler 582). In *Julia* and *Paul and Virginia* alike Williams included poems of her own making scattered in the narrative which make her own voice explicit within the translation. In the case of her translations of Von Humboldt, Williams does not tackle political matters straightaway. Even so, the themes of her previous productions are nonetheless identifiable. Scientific exploration was a subject that interested her to the extent that she dedicated her poem *The Morai. An Ode* (1788) to Captain Cook. Similarly, her poetical work *Peru* (1784) -later rewritten as *Peruvian Tales* (1823)- evidences her enthusiasm for South America and her interest in its native population. This text deals with political issues inasmuch as it «stands on its own as an eloquent and original voice in the late-eighteenth-century conversation about liberty, revolution and competing civilizations» (Feldman 25). This enthusiasm will be kept alive in her chronicles of the French revolution. In *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France*, published in 1795, Williams introduces a strong criticism of the Spanish colonization of the Americas. She writes that Peru «since the period of the sanguinary Spanish conquests, has groaned beneath the yoke of the most abject slavery» (243).

***Julia*, a Novel Interspersed with Some Poetical Pieces (1790)**

Following the eighteenth century practice of translation as adaptation, Williams conceives translation as an exercise of individual authorship. As explained by Mary Helen McMurrin this practice dates back to the Renaissance (88). Translators were frequently not faithful to the model, and «No eighteenth-century reader could be assured that it truly reflected the original» (McMurrin 87). *Julia* was published shortly before Williams' first visit to France and soon after the Storming of the Bastille, which ushered in the beginning of the French Revolution. Despite the fact that Williams does not mention at any point that her model is Rousseau's text, it is evident -not only for the title- that it was a reworking of *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Mirella Agorni argues that in the eighteenth-century translations «allowed them [women writers] to produce new, creative thinking, generating original translating practices» (“Marginal(ized) Perspective”

818). Likewise, they made possible for them to find: «creative ways to subvert the original, by inserting their literary, personal or political opinions (some of which went against the grain of prevailing ideologies)» (Agorni, *Translating Italy* 45-46). This is precisely what Williams procures in her version of *Julia*, where she subverts the roles of Rousseau's love triangle. In the original, Julie has a sexual relationship outside marriage. In Williams' case, it is Julia's cousin's (Charlotte) husband who tries to seduce another woman, Julia. Here, Julia and Charlotte live independently and take care of Charlotte's son. By contrast, in Rousseau's novel Julie's husband is widowed and gets in charge of the family. Eleanor Ty's feminist reading of the novel considers «Williams' *Julia*, which appears to be a somewhat innocuous sentimental novel, can be read as a strong statement against patriarchy, and an effort to escape conventional roles designed by society for women» (73). In the same light, despite considering that Ty's argument is pushed too far, Natasha Duquette writes that *Julia* presents proto-feminist themes, «such as the importance of women's friendship across socioeconomic divides» (xiv), which according to her even influenced Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798). Sentimental novels traditionally ended in marriage. Williams' work is unusual since Julia never marries and not a single happy marriage is portrayed in the novel. For its part, in Rousseau's text, Julie and Wolmar represent the rousseauian ideal of marriage. Williams had already reversed gender roles in *Peru* in «assigning men to the nurturing domestic sphere, which affords them a satisfaction and joy unrelated to acts of control and oppression» (Feldman 32).

As indicated by the title, Williams includes her own poems in the text. In the 1780s decade, she had attained a good reputation as a sensibility poet, and as she indicates in the preface to *Julia*: «I have been encouraged, by the indulgence which my former poems have met with, to intersperse some poetical pieces in these volumes» (iv). Taking into account that this is her first work in prose, Williams may be willing to attract her readership by offering them her distinctive poems. «The Bastille: A vision» stands out among the rest since it constitutes Williams' first production that deals with the French Revolution, which would become the central theme of her corpus after 1790. Deborah Kennedy suggests that although *Julia* «did not deal directly with the politics of the day, yet it still reflects her commitment to progressive change» (46), while Duquette argues that the novel forms «a trenchant political critique» (xi). Vivien Jones considers that this poem constitutes the author's only reference to politics in the whole novel: «History, in the form of a poem celebrating the fall of the Bastille, briefly disturbs the otherwise impeccably private world of Helen Maria Williams' sentimental novel *Julia*» (178). Williams had already wrote about political matters in her poems, but the fact that the French Revolution was sparking a strong controversy in Britain is something to be taken into consideration. As scholars such as Devoney Looser have pointed out, political writing was restricted to men and the exercise of public power (27). Possibly with the intention of avoiding hostilities and a negative reception of her work, Williams introduces her political opinion in a sensibility novel. «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» (Agorni, *Translating Italy* 17). Williams specifies that her novel has a moral intention: «The purpose of these pages is to trace the danger arising from the uncontrolled indulgence of strong affections» (iii). Later, in her chronicles of the French Revolution and in other texts such as *A Tour in Switzerland*, she decides to deal with political issues explicitly, but as a result of this she had to face strong

disapproval, and, as indicated by Duckling it resulted in the downfall of her good reputation.

In her early chronicles, Williams tends to adopt a critical position concerning her native country, but in «The Bastille» whose poetical voice is an English prisoner, Britain represents liberty:

Britain [...]
Thy blissful vales shall see;
Why did I leave thy hallow'd shore.
Distinguish'd land, where all are free?

The poetical voice becomes prophetic since the novel is set in 1776. The prisoner has visions which anticipate the Storming of the Bastille:

Did ever earth a scene display
More glorious to the eye of day,
Than millions with according mind,
Who claim the rights of human kind?

As Duquette has noted: «Williams' use of prophetic imagery to critique tyranny and call for social justice does suggest strong links between dissenting church community, sublime verse, and the desire for social change» (xix). It has to be taken into consideration that Williams had received a presbyterian dissenting education. The dissenting community in Britain was favourable to the French Revolution since it «raised hopes of change in Britain, change that could include an improvement in their own position» (Radcliffe 67). On another note, the prophetic vision serves Williams to distance herself from the political circumstances while she introduces her position regarding the events. In the first volume of *Letters*, she described the revolution as: «the triumph of human kind; it was man asserting the noblest privileges of his nature» (14). The choice of words clearly echoes the lines of the poems she had published just a few months earlier.

In the poem, the representation of the Bastille is reminiscent of gothic literature:

Bastille! within thy hideous pile,
which stains of blood defile. [...]
He sees an awful form appear!
Who drags his step to deeper cells;
Where stranger wilder horror dwells.

Williams makes use of this language in what I consider an attempt to emphasize the horrors of the prison and thus justify the need for a revolution in France. The gothic elements mask her political claims. In her first chronicle, published only two months later, her description of the Bastille evokes the previous lines: «We are just returned from Versailles, where I could not help fancying I saw in the back ground of that magnificent abode of a despot, the gloomy dungeons of the Bastille» (83). Here, Williams' political opinion slips through the traveller's gaze.

Narrative of a Journey Through the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent (1814-1827)

Although Williams would abandon the viewpoint of a tourist in her subsequent chronicles, she was always fascinated by travel literature as she indicates in the preface of the first volume of *Personal Narrative*: «The narratives of travellers, and, above all, the description of those remote countries of the globe [...] have always had a particular attraction for my mind» (v). This ‘attraction’ to travelogues does not prevent her to be critical towards those explorers who limit their accounts to the «cold research of the understanding» (viii). She disapproves of those who separate their feelings from their studies or opinions. Williams uses von Humboldt’s description as means to describe what she considers a successful author when it comes to the communication of intellectual knowledge:

Mr. Humboldt has in this work displayed, more than in any other he has yet published, his peculiar manner of contemplating nature in all her overwhelming greatness. The appropriate character of his writings is the faculty he possesses of rising the mind to general ideas, without neglecting individual facts; and while he appears only to address himself to our reason, he has the secret of awakening the imagination, and of being understood by the heart. (ix)

Williams includes in her description of the scientist some elements which make him a paradigmatic Romantic traveller. He perceives the greatness of nature without forgetting each particular detail. In order to communicate his findings, he combines both reason and imagination and in this way the information reaches the reader more efficiently. Humboldt is endowed here with the characteristic qualities of the Romantic genius.

Williams’ interest in travel literature becomes particularly evident in the publication of her own travelogue *A Tour in Switzerland* (1798). This work was written after she travelled to Switzerland escaping political persecution in France during the times of the ‘Terror’. This gives the text a political aspect that makes her *Tour* very original when compared to other travel narratives of the time. Williams’ main objective in this work, as its subtitle indicates: «a view of the present state of the governments and manners of those cantons: with comparative sketches of the present state of Paris», is to discuss the political situation in both France and Switzerland. Through her writing, Williams aims to change the reader’s perspective of Switzerland while convincing them of the revolutionary principles. However, Williams does not limit herself to politics here as she also includes a Romantic description of alpine landscapes. Possibly due to the heterogenous nature of her work, her political arguments passed unnoticed in hers and our time. Jacqueline Leblanc writes that: «Williams’ ‘emotional ecstasies’ [...] often strike readers as lacking serious critical perspective» (Leblanc 26). However, as I have already mentioned, Williams defends in *Personal Narrative* that emotions do not invalidate the author’s accuracy. What is more, feelings make the writer’s argument stronger since they appeal more directly to the readership. Williams could be implicitly validating her own abilities as an intellectual writer. Additionally, she mentions in the preface her connections to respectable intellectual figures of her time. Williams and Humboldt were good friends and, as explained by Williams, he himself supervised the translation with her, suggesting a close working relationship. She also mentions the dissenting minister Andrew Kippis, Williams’ mentor, who was also Godwin’s tutor at Hoxton (St Clair 14).

Once inside the text, it offers the reader a detailed description of landscapes:

The black mountains of Graciosa appeared like perpendicular walls of five or six hundred feet. Their shadows, thrown over the surface of the ocean, gave a gloomy aspect to the scenery. Rocks of basalt, emerged from the bosom of the water, wore the resemblance of the ruins of some vast edifice. (Vol I: 93)

Although Allison E. Martin focuses on Thomasina's Ross translation (1825), she writes that Williams' text «presents the anglophone reader with an image of Humboldt viewed through Williams' lens and recast to speak in her language - the language of Romantic sensibility» (Martin, 2011: 40). This is exemplified for instance in the previous passage. This dark landscape retains resemblances with the terrible nature of Williams' *Tour*, where the choice of words is similar:

Here we were once more among rocks, torrents, and cliffs loaded with woods, presenting not only parts of the mountain scenery [...] but from the great depth of the valley closed in by surrounding mountains, casting a kind of gloomy light over the wild landscape (Vol I, 334).

The words 'scenery' and 'gloomy' appear in both passages. The two descriptions highlight the greatness of natural elements and the shadows they cast. I agree with Martin in that Williams makes her own language noticeable in the translation. Williams does not merely act as an invisible hand that is restricted to translate a text from one language to another, but she makes her own contribution perceptible.

Conclusion

Williams' translation of *Personal Narrative* was more successful, according to Martin, than the following one by Ross (39). Besides, Deborah Kennedy maintains that Charles Darwin, the greatest scientist of the nineteenth century, read Williams' translation (186). This would be another piece of evidence pointing at Williams being an active figure in the articulation of ideas and debates that seek intellectual engagement with an audience at large. In a society that questioned if women should obtain scientific training, or if their access to science should be restrained when compared to men -an example of this are the scientific texts specifically for ladies such as Algarotti's *Newton's Philosophy Explain'd For the Use of the Ladies* (1739)-, her translations allow Williams to work with the most well-known scientist of her time, to use Kennedy's words: «Humboldt came to be regarded as the most famous man in Europe after Napoleon» (184). In this way, she gained first hand access to intellectual knowledge which would have been otherwise less attainable to her. For its part, the translation of Rousseau becomes her medium to express her political opinions without risking her reputation. Jones considers that «The Bastille: A Vision» “anticipates the pervasive transgression of gendered ideological and generic boundaries which characterizes her [Williams'] later writings”. Since she overstepped the dividing line that established political writing a male terrain, Williams would later be harshly criticized in Britain after *Letters Writing in France* (1789). However, *Julia* was published at the beginning of her career and this granted her respectability as a writer. Among the favourable reception that she received, the review by Mary Wollstonecraft stands out as later on they would both become advocates for French revolutionary ideas in Britain. The novel was well received in its time as «early reviewers accepted Williams's framing of her narrative as a cautionary tale and praised Julia for its

pedagogical rhetoric, realistic characterization, and poetic style. All of the reviewers were charmed by what they perceived as the narrator's refreshing innocence» (Duquette xiii). This positive reception would later guarantee a wider circulation of her political ideas. Being a woman, society denied her a space in politics on account of her gender and she chose to use writing as her tool to commit herself with the revolutionary cause. Likewise, she used translation to participate in the circulation of political and scientific knowledge between Britain and the continent.

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