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French Influence on English Culture in the Second Part of the Seventeenth Century. Aphra Behn as a Creative Translator and a Mediator Between the Two Cultures

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ABSTRACT: This article applies the concept of horizontal and vertical cultural transfers to the process of cultural exchange between France and England in the Restoration period (1660-1688). It focuses on Aphra Behn as a mediator between French and English cultures by analysing how she negotiated the «cultural», gender and creative elements in her translations from the French.

Keywords: English Restoration period, Aphra Behn, cultural transfer, translation, cultural mediation.

RESUMEN: En este artículo se aplica el concepto de las transferencias horizontales y verticales al proceso de intercambio cultural entre Francia e Inglaterra durante el período de la Restauración inglesa, centrándose específicamente en la figura de la escritora Aphra Behn como mediadora entre ambas culturas a través del tratamiento de los elementos creativos, culturales y de género que la misma realizaba en sus traducciones del francés.

Palabras clave: Aphra Behn, transferencia cultural, traducción, período de la Restauración inglesa, mediación cultural.

Analyzing the process of cultural exchange, it is reasonable to distinguish between horizontal and vertical cultural transfers. Horizontal cultural transfer implies spatial diffusion and occurs among people of the same social group. Vertical cultural transfer transgresses social borders (Roeck, 2007). In the present article I shall discuss the problem of cultural transfer, which is inseparable from the problem of cultural translation.

In the second half of the seventeenth century we can find an obvious example of horizontal cultural transfer between France and England at the time of the Restoration (1660-1688). It is generally acknowledged that there was a profound influence of the French culture on the English Restoration culture due to the fact that the English king Charles II and his court had been refugees in France for nearly 20 years, having adopted French tastes and French manners. Moreover, «the ascendancy of France was to be the dominant characteristic of late seventeenth-century Europe; [...] it can be said that up to the 1680's France was the sole great power in Europe» (Jones, 1978: 95). So, there are at least two reasons for the «francophilizing» of the Restoration culture: the personal acquaintance of English aristocracy with French culture during the Revolution and the Republic (the 1650s), and the political influence of France on English affairs in the Restoration period.

Such clear-cut explanation, however, operates only on the surface. A closer examination of the historical and artistic circumstances in that period shows that there was a time difference (a lag) between the outcomes of the French influence on English art and literature, and the outcomes of the French political influence. My concern is primarily with literature, but I will start by examining architecture and decorative art in the first place.

French trends in English architecture did not reveal themselves before 1675. Italian High Renaissance models (epitomized, to a large extent, in the works of the famous Inigo Jones) gave way to French (and also Dutch) motives. Whinney and Millar (1957: 204) consider that «it is not possible to trace this evolution in a neat progression of buildings, nor to find precise historical reasons for changes of style. [...] Strong baroque elements appear in architecture and decoration about 1680. In the latter they are, no doubt, due to the arrival of Antonio Verrio».[1] However, it is impossible to believe that this painter could modify Christopher Wren's concept of exterior design, even though at least three great French pieces of architecture left their mark on English architecture: Versailles (1661-1674), the Invalides (the 1670s), and the east front of the Louvre (begun in 1668). While both French and Dutch, as well as Roman styles, are used during the same years and often in the same buildings, «the result is an architecture which is neither Italian, French nor Dutch baroque, but a [...] mixture of the three combined with elements borrowed from none, which are peculiarly English» (Whinney and Millar, 1957: 204).

French elements in the period between 1675 and 1690 are present in the works of Robert Hooke: the façade of Bedlam Hospital in Moorfields (1676), Lord Conway's house at Ragby, and Montagu House in Bloomsbury (the first

1. Italian by origin, enrolled in the Royal Academy in Paris.

and the last did not survive). In 1683 Christopher Wren started the construction of Winchester palace, which was never finished. Its plan is linked with Le Vau's Versailles showing Charles' II dependence on France in the late period of his reign.

An excellent example of cultural transfer is Windsor castle (particularly its reconstruction in the 1680s when a number of new elements were introduced), revealing that Charles II occasionally showed an interest in the Arts. Architecturally, as Whinney and Millar (1957: 209) point out, «the most novel feature of the castle was perhaps the entrance to the new royal apartments». There were two vestibules, the ceiling of the first one supported by two rows of Ionic columns, the walls behind them being decorated by niches which contained «ancient busts»; the second one adorned with casts of antiques, behind which rose the grand staircase. This was a stone staircase in three flights with an ironwork balustrade, which stood within a painted hall and was surmounted by a painted dome. Whinney and Millar (1957: 210) calls it «the first grand painted staircase, executed in England, and its impact on the visitor, emerging from the relatively low, columned vestibule, must have been tremendous». The King's staircase, different in form, was probably modeled on the new Escalier des Ambassadeurs at Versailles, finished in 1679. To the beauty of this palace much was added by the ornament of Grinling Gibbons, one of the best decorators of that time. I will return to Windsor later.

If the appearance of French elements in English architecture is connected with the building of Versailles and the eastern façade of the Louvre, the French influence in the applied arts, for instance, in furniture, grew after 1685 (the cancellation of the Edict of Nantes), when French masters came as refugees to England. As for painting, it was much more touched with the Dutch influence (exemplified by the works of Sir Peter Lely, Dutch by origin, and Kneller): in fact, there was a strong opposition to French elements in painting in England, as well as to the French masters, who were invited by pro-French royal mistresses.

To sum up, there is a disparity between the political and historical aspects of the French influence on English art and the process of cultural transfer linked with the construction of Versailles and, to some degree, with the cancellation of the Edict of Nantes, during the Restoration period. In literature the picture is somewhat other.

The strong influence of French literature on the English one is explicit from the second quarter of the century and is revealed in the numerous translations of pseudo-heroic romances: *L'Astrée* by Honore d'Urfe; the works of Gomberville; *Grand Cyrus* and *Clelie* by Madeleine de Scudery. These long fantastical romances, which epitomized French aristocratic culture, influenced English prose fiction widely. Even the most original English romances, like *Partenissa* and *Aretina* by Sir George Mackenzie, were written using French romances as a pattern.

As Germaine de Stael (in Lefevere, 1992: 18) said, «if translations of poetry enrich literature, translations of plays could exert an even greater influence, for the theater is truly literature's executive power». Several important French plays had been translated into English before the Restoration: Corneille's *Cid* was presented before Charles I as early as 1637; and *Andromede* by the same author was translated in 1650. The Restoration gave a new impulse to French drama in English. Four pieces by Corneille were translated in the first decade of the Restoration (the 1660s): *Horace* and *Pompée* (1663), *Heraclius* (1664) and *Nicomede* (1671), the first two «made English» by the important woman writer of the seventeenth century, Katherine Philips. In the 1670s Racine's plays were translated into English, *Andromaque* by John Crowne in 1675, and *Berenice* (in the English version *Titus and Berenice*) by the famous playwright Thomas Otway in 1677. There were also many adaptations of Molière's comedies, and their influence is revealed even in such specifically English plays as *The Country Wife* (1675) and *The Plain Dealer* (1677) by William Wycherly.

French philosophical works were also translated into English in the second part of the seventeenth century, like Pascal's *Provinciales* (1657) and Montaigne's *Essais*, the latter translated by the poet Charles Cotton in 1685. In prose, the most prominent piece of translation is Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, carried out by Thomas Urquhart in 1653. Thomas Urquhart also proposed in his *Logopandecteison* (1653) a universal language, already showing the cosmopolitan approach – a characteristic feature of the future Restoration period.

If the popularity of the long prose romances before the Restoration gave impulse to the Baroque in English literature, the widespread circulation of Corneille's and Racine's plays led to a formation of English Classicism (or Neoclassicism). However, English Classicism in literature differed significantly from the French one. For one thing, English writers did not limit themselves so strictly to the unities (of time, place and action), and defended tragicomedy as a genre specifically English, on the whole not being so rigid as its French equivalent.

English Classicism in literature, thus, is the result of cultural transfer and the reception of the French culture in England. After 1675, though, the opposition to French literary models and the growth of the national spirit occurred (Van Hoof, 1991: 135-136), and English writers tried to make their works better than French (or even ancient) models. It is interesting to notice, on the other hand, that in architecture the French trends became more and more influential in the same period. The process of «francophilizing» English culture was not at all synchronic in literature and in the rest of the Arts.

When discussing the problem of cultural transfer, it is impossible to ignore its agents, the mediators between cultures. Aphra Behn (1640-1689), the most important woman writer in seventeenth-century England, who as a translator did

a great deal to introduce new French books into the English realm, constituted a prominent example of such mediation. As such, she had a marginal position in the English male-dominated literary world of her time as a woman, a woman writer, an English spy in Flanders and Holland, and a woman who visited Surinam in the early 1660s. But this very subordinate position made Behn an excellent mediator between cultures: English and South American Indian (see her novel *Oroonoko*), English and Dutch (revealed in her plays and the novel *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister*), and also English and French. There is no reliable evidence that Behn visited France at all, but she might be personally acquainted with another mediator between English and French cultures, Saint-Evremond, a friend of the famous Ninon de Lenclos and the admirer of Hortense Mancini, cardinal Mazarini's niece, Charles' II mistress. Behn dedicated the story «History of the Nun» to her (Todd, 2000: 393-394).

Aphra Behn both accepted and rejected the idea of the central culture, which is generally considered the native culture (English culture in Behn's case). In her «Essay on Translated Prose» (1688), being a translator's preface to *A Discovery of New Worlds* (Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*, 1686), she makes an important statement: «And I do not say this so much, to condemn the French, as to praise our own Mother-tongue, for what we think a Deformity, they may think a Perfection, as the Negroes of Guinney think us as ugly, as we think them» (Behn, 1688: n.p.). Here, Behn acknowledges the relativity of one's own conceptions about different cultures, the importance of every culture, whether English or French or African. This ability to view another culture from its own perspective makes Behn almost a modern figure in translation.

When discussing Behn's activity as a translator from a cultural point of view, I will draw my attention to three aspects: the «cultural», gender and creativity. As a basis for this discussion I will focus on the following Behn's translations from the French: *A Discovery of New Worlds* and *The History of Oracles* (both 1688) from Fontenelle, *La Montre, or the Lover's Watch* (1686) from Bonnecorse, and *Reflections on Morality, or Seneca Unmask'd* (1685), an adaptation of La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes*. As Trofimova (2004) established, the source of Behn's *History of Oracles* was the first French edition published without the name of the author. As it is stated on the last page of the book, it was registered in the «Communauté des Libraire & Imprimeurs» of Paris on the 31st August 1686 and the contract between Fontenelle and his publisher was concluded on the 10th December 1686. The proof that Behn did use this edition may be found in page 50: «Car il souffrit non seulement que les Filles d'Asie luy en elevassent & luy celebrassent des Jeux sacrez»[2] (Fontenelle, 1686 *b*: 50). Aphra Behn was

2. Not «Filles d'Asie», but «Villes d'Asie», as appeared in the Errata: «p.50. l.11 filles,/Villes».

not aware of the apparent absurdity of the phrase and translated it literally: «For he suffered not only Asian Maids to raise Altars to him, and celebrate holy games in his honour» (Behn, 1993: 192). Nor did the critics and editors of her works recognize it. As for Aphra Behn's *A Discovery of New Worlds*, Trofimova (2004) found out that she used the 1686 edition of *Entretiens sur la pluralité des Mondes* published in Amsterdam. It appeared without the name of the author, but on the title page it was stated that it was «Par l'Autheur des Dialogues des morts» – another famous work by Fontenelle. At the very beginning of the «Translator's Preface» Behn mentions that the author «is the same that writ, The Dialogues of the Dead» (Behn, 1688: n.p.). On the other hand, in the Parisian edition of the same year there is a map of the solar system which would have been reproduced in the English translation, had that edition been used. In the 1687 edition there are other variations in the body of the text and the sixth night is added. As for Bonnecorse's *La Montre*, Behn used the 1671 edition, whereas in the case of La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims*, as Bernard Dhuicq (1994: 175-176) established, she translated from the 1675 fourth edition.

Regarding the «cultural» aspect in Behn's translations, I draw attention to the inclusion of English realities instead of French ones in some of these works. Here Behn tries to fulfil the translator's task of providing a balance between the «universe of discourse» (the whole complex of concepts, ideologies, persons and objects belonging to a particular culture) acceptable to the author of the original, and that other «universe of discourse» which is acceptable and familiar to the translator and her audience (Lefevere, 1992: 35). In *The History of Oracles* Behn (1993: 243) substitutes «Contes de la Fontaine» with Chaucer's «Tales». The fact is that at that very time the new edition of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1687) had just appeared, and Behn most probably knew about this publication and included it in her translation of *Histoire des Oracles* to make the latter up-to-date. In her translation of *Entretiens* Behn (1993: 147) introduces the English journal *Philosophical Transactions* in replacement for the French *Journal des Sçavants*. This substitution also shows Behn's awareness of the science of her time.

The gender aspect – belonging not to the horizontal, but to the vertical cultural transfer – is probably one of the least studied, though very important in Behn's translations. The early translateresses understood that the transmission of significant literary texts was an essential, not an accessory, cultural task. Translation as an activity inferior to «creative» literary work was considered «female», so women translators were not considered such a threat to literature as women writers were. As such, there were several women translators in Renaissance England, among them Queen Elizabeth I and Mary Sidney, countess of Pembroke. In the seventeenth century women such as the aforementioned Katherine Philips and Aphra Behn translated a greater variety of texts than had

been done previously, though predominantly from contemporary European languages (Simon, 1996: 52; Baker, 1998: 340).

Behn shows her awareness of gender in her «Essay on Translated Prose», where she declared that *Entretiens* drew her attention because of the figure of the marquise, a woman who discussed philosophical and scientific matters: «The Author's introducing a Woman as one of the Speakers in these five Discourses were further Motives for me to undertake this little work: for I thought an English Woman might adventure to translate everything a French Woman may be supposed to have spoken» (Behn, 1993: 72). In the translation text of *Entretiens* we can find an important insertion which proves the fact that Behn, as well as Fontenelle himself, addressed the work to women with a didactic purpose (she wanted them to study sciences): «To encourage the fair Sex (*who lose so much time at their Toylets in a less charming Study*) [my emphasis on Behn's addition] by an Example of a Lady who had no supernatural Characters, and who never goes beyond the Bounds of a Person, who has no Tincture of Learning» (Behn, 1993: 88). In this passage, Behn criticizes women for their love of dressing (remarks bordering on misogyny appear in many of Behn's works), and at the same time she stresses the importance of studying for women.

There is another important hint in the body of Behn's translation which shows that Behn was deeply concerned with women's position in the English society of her time. Twice is the phrase «Men and Women» included in the text: the first one to replace «des Hommes» in the French original (Behn, 1993: 121, 137). By doing this, Aphra Behn stresses the point that a woman is as much a human being as a man, posing herself as a real predecessor of feminism.

The creative aspect in Behn's translations is linked both to the «cultural» and gender aspects. An interesting account of creativity in translation can be found in the introduction to the translation of *The Iliad*, carried out by Anne Dacier and published in 1699:

> [Certain people] think translation is not creative. That is surely an immense mistake. [...] A good translator is like a sculptor who tries to recreate the work of a painter, or like a painter, who tries to recreate the work of a sculptor [...] Good translations keep the spirit without moving away from the letter. They are free and noble imitations, that turn the familiar into something new. (in Lefevere, 1992: 13)

This is exactly what Behn does in her free translation of Bonnecorse's *La Montre*, a fact admitted by the authors of the commendatory verses, Charles Cotton and Nahum Tate. Aphra Behn translates *La Montre* rather freely using both prose and verse, especially in the first part of the work, where she makes extensive additions of her own, thus transforming a nice, but rather dry Bonnecorse piece, into a much more interesting work. Not only does the text

contain many fine examples of Behn's poetry, but it also presents a rather interesting female character (Iris); while a number of important insertions reveal Behn's position on diverse matters (Dhuicq, 1990: 84). For instance, she changes the tone of «Twelve O'Clock», when the heroine Iris advises her lover Damon to go to the temple. The original extract is very rigid, proposing the lover to prefer Iris to all things, but to prefer God to Iris. In Behn's version, though, it finishes with the ambiguous words «and only heaven must rival me» (Behn, 1905: 219). Behn also refers less to God's power and His presence in people's souls, and more to the beauties in the church and other earthly things. This substitution confirms her rather skeptical attitude to religion.

Behn radically changes the meaning of the passage on love and glory in «One O'Clock. Impossibility to Sleep». While in Bonnecorse's original love is not an enemy to glory, Behn disagrees with the French author and insists that «love will still interrupt your glory, however you may think to divert him either by writing or fighting» (Behn, 1905: 252); though she finishes the passage in accordance with Bonnecorse: «when one has a worthy object of one's flame, glory accompanies love too» (Behn, 1905: 254). Nevertheless, Behn insists on the superiority of peaceful life to military activities. Yet, what has passed unnoticed to scholars, even to the editor of the *Complete Works*, Janet Todd, is Behn's insertion in Bonnecorse's text of several of La Rochefoucauld's maxims. These are maxims on love which Behn had translated earlier in her *Reflections on Morality* (Trofimova, 2004: 105-106).

Both gender and creative aspects of Behn's translation can be found in the transformation of the main heroine, Iris. Her character differs from that in Bonnecorse's work, showing traits that could have belonged to Behn herself, as for instance, the following portrait not appearing in Bonnecorse:

> You will find me sitting alone in my cabinet (for I am one that do not love to go to bed early) and will find me very uneasy and pensive, pleased with none of those things that so well entertain others. I shun all conversation, as far as civility will allow, and find no satisfaction like being alone, where my soul may, without interruption, converse with Damon. I sigh, and sometimes you will see my cheeks wet with tears, that insensibly glide down at a thousand thoughts that present themselves soft and afflicting. (Behn, 1905: 252)

Iris meditates on writing, on the meaning of the words (Behn, 1905: 214-215). She criticizes hypocrisy and *coquettes*, and this sharp criticism adds a lot to Behn's translation (Behn, 1905: 220-221, 226-227). At the end of the «Looking-Glass» it is said that Iris does not like to spend her time dressing, and prefers doing other things. She knows «how to gain conquest with [her] pen, more absolutely, than all the industrious Fair, who trust to Dress and Equipage» (Behn, 1697: 23). Undoubtedly, these words may be applied to Behn herself, the

first professional woman writer in England, and they also coincide with the criticism of women's habits of dressing that she had expressed in *A Discovery of New Worlds*.

«Cultural» and creative aspects in Behn's translation of *La Montre* appear in the last pages of the first part of the work. In *The Lover's Watch*, we can find one of Behn's finest examples regarding the insertion of English realities into the French text: a reflection upon Windsor, incidentally one of the finest results of cultural transfer in the 1680s.

> I am satisfied you pass your time well now at Windsor, for you adore that place; and it is not, indeed, without great Reason; for it is most certainly now rendered the most glorious palace in the Christian world. And had our late gracious sovereign, of blessed memory, had no other miracles and wonders of his life and reign to have immortalised his Fame (of which there shall remain a thousand to posterity) this noble structure alone, this building (almost divine) would have eternised the great name of glorious Charles II till the world moulder again to its old confusion, its first chaos. And the paintings of the famous Vario [Verrio], and noble carvings of the inimitable Gibon [Gibbons], shall never die, but remain to tell succeeding ages, that all arts and learning were not confined to ancient Rome and Greece, but that England, too, could boast its mightiest Share. Nor is the inside of this magnificent Structure, immortalised with so many eternal images of the illustrious Charles and Catharine, more to be admired than the wondrous Prospects without. The stupendous height, on which the famous pile is built, renders the fields, and flowery meads below, the woods, the thickets, and the winding streams, the most delightful object that ever nature produced. Beyond all these, and far below, in an inviting vale, the venerable college, an old, but noble building, raises itself, in the midst of all the beauties of nature, high-grown trees, fruitful plains, purling rivulets, and spacious gardens, adorned with all variety of sweets, that can delight the senses. (Behn, 1905: 265)

Behn shows a very good understanding of the artistic value of Windsor, both intuitively and intellectually; especially the latter when she mentions Verrio and Gibbons, two very important agents in the process of cultural transfer in the Arts.

Another example of «cultural» and creative translation can be found in Behn's *Reflections on Morality*. There, Behn rearranges maxims, changing some and adding her own ones. She inserts her own examples taken from the English realities of her time in the last maxim «Of Death»:

> Cato and Brutus chose an Illustrous Death, and dy'd bravely. So did El. [Lord Essex] – nay, I have seen a Lackey dance upon the Scaffold, which he ascended to be broken on a Wheel, and Vratz dy'd as well as L. – R. [Lord Russell] herein you may see tho the quality and motives be different, yet that they may produce the same effects. (Behn, 1993: 68-69)

Behn's allusions are to contemporary criminals who were executed just before the publication of her translation, doing what she had done in *The History of Oracles* – she tries to write *Reflections* into the modern English realities.

All the three aspects of Behn's translations – «cultural», gender and creative – are very important in studying the process of cultural transfer between France and England in the Restoration period. Aphra Behn had a balanced vision of this process: she admitted the value of the other culture, but defended her own from too strong a foreign influence. To prove it, I will present the last quotation from Behn's «Essay on Translated Prose»:

> It is Modish to Ape the French in every thing: Therefore, we not only naturalize their Words, but Words they steal from other Languages. I wish in this and several other things, we had a little more of the Italian and Spanish Humour, and did not chop and change our Language, as we do our Cloths, at the Pleasure of every French Taylor. (Behn, 1688: n.p.)

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