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Decadent Culturemes Translating Bernard Shaw's *Widowers' Houses* into Italian

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Abstract

This article discusses my recent Italian translation (2022) of George Bernard Shaw's first play, *Widowers' Houses* (1892), mainly by considering the concept of the cultureme. Culturemes, which are semantic units that exemplify and serve as paradigms of certain cultures, have been employed in translation studies in recent years to see how, and even if, culture-specific concepts can be translated. Culturemes are here seen in the light of the transculturality of decadent poetics, and hence interpreted as possible facilitators in the translation into Italian of *Widowers' Houses*, a play written in the decadent period, and developing many features of decadent poetics, whose author utilised key transcultural concepts of the period. Viewing Shaw's text from the perspective of such decadent culturemes as the slums, Cockney English and other decadent sociolects, and the decadent hero, together with the New Woman, not only substantiate the idea of Shaw as a decadent artist, but also suggest possible translation practices and processes for decadent literature.

Keywords: Cultureme, Decadence, George Bernard Shaw, Translation, *Widowers' Houses*

Since the 1990s, Bernard Shaw's popularity in Italy has waned, both in academia, with fewer and fewer courses, if any, taught on his work, and on the stage. Throughout the period, Italian theatres have not been that keen on staging Shaw's texts, which are perceived as formally and thematically obsolete. The inadequacy and outdatedness of the few existing translations of Shaw's works have been identified as another reason for such a negative fluctuation in the author's reception in Italy (Boselli 2011, 97-99; Bertinetti 2022, 33).

It came as no surprise, therefore, when in 2021 one of the major Italian publishing houses, Bompiani, renowned for its dissemination of world literature through high-quality editions, commissioned new translations of Shaw's most important plays. The ensuing volume, published in the autumn of 2022, is part of the prestigious series "Classici della letteratura europea",

edited by Nuccio Ordine (1958-2023) as one of his last tasks. The volume devoted to Shaw includes translations of thirteen plays: the three *Plays Unpleasant* (*Widowers' Houses* (1892), *The Philanderer* (1893), and *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1893)), the three *Plays Pleasant* (*Arms and the Man* (1894), *Candida* (1895), and *The Man of Destiny* (1896)), the *Three Plays for Puritans* (*The Devil's Disciple* (1896), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898), and *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (1899)), *Man and Superman* (1901), *John Bull's Other Island* (1904), *Pygmalion* (1912), and *Saint Joan* (1923). The volume's general editor is leading Victorianist Francesco Marroni, and each play has been edited and translated by a specialist of English and Irish studies. Targeted at an educated, though not necessarily academic, audience, the Bompiani edition includes Marroni's general Introduction, along with introductions and notes to each text, for which substantial bibliographies are also provided. The whole project lays unprecedented emphasis on historical and cultural contextualization by examining Shaw's Italian reception, his transcultural success, and connections to contemporary literature and drama. These are the criteria that have guided my translation and edition of Shaw's *Widowers' Houses* (1892), which will be taken here as an example of translating decadent literature.

Except for a few studies focusing on *Caesar and Cleopatra* (see Adams 1971, 1975; Gordon 1988; Bizzotto 2023), Shaw has seldom been classified as a decadent author. However, Sos Eltis has recently discussed his engagement with “the tropes and techniques of decadent theatre”, with which, she recognizes, he was “thoroughly versed” as fundamentally parodic (2020, 209-12). Nevertheless, *Widowers' Houses*, which premiered on 9 December 1892 in London, was Shaw's first attempt at drama and was clearly influenced by contemporary themes and poetics. It develops the notion of decadence in terms of ideas, themes, language, and style. Acknowledging the pervasiveness of the decadent episteme in the play is hence a fundamental step in discussing the strategies and choices adopted in the Bompiani translation. The focus in this essay will be specifically on decadent culturemes, that is, the semantic units which exemplify and serve as paradigms of the decadent era, in light of the more or less common perception of decadence in British and Italian cultures.

The term “cultureme”, coined by Raymond Cattell in 1949, began to enjoy greater dissemination in the late 1980s, thanks to its application to translation studies (Lungu-Badea 2009, 15-78; Nicolae 2015, 215),¹ and it has been variously defined ever since. Among the many definitions, a notable one, which accounts for its original meaning and implications, has been developed by Daniel Coman and Corina Selejan. They describe a cultureme as

the smallest unit carrying cultural (and culture-specific) information, a concept developed analogically to, for example, the phoneme, the morpheme or the lexeme. However, in contradistinction to these, the cultureme is not a linguistic concept, but one related to extralinguistic, social and cultural contexts, denoting a social phenomenon that is specific to a certain culture which, however, emerges as such only by comparison to another culture which lacks that phenomenon. (2019, 303)

In the third millennium, other definitions have been elaborated in relation to translation practices (Pamies 2017, 100-11; Alic 2020, 81). Grounding her conceptualization on former studies, Liliana Alic has explained that

¹ Lungu-Badea provides a detailed background of the theories on culturemes, from the origins to the first decade of the third millennium. Interesting reflections on the notion of cultureme are also advanced in Luque Nadal 2009, esp. 95-96.

The concept of cultureme is a transdisciplinary one, being used in literature, in cultural studies, in the theory of translation and in foreign language acquisition. If we compare the numerous definitions given to that concept, we find something in common, whether it defines the concept as ‘the minimal, indivisible unit of culture: rituals, values and stereotypes’ (Jaskot and Ganoshenko, 2019) or as ‘cultural facts and cultural interferences’ (Motoc: 2017) in the field of cultural studies, or as ‘atoms of culture’ (Moles, 1967, in G. Lungu Badea, 2009), or as ‘cultural references or cultural markers’ (Pamies: 2017), we find differences and similarities in point of approach and methodology. (Alic 2011, 81)

Admittedly, Alic appropriates Georgiana Lungu-Badea’s notion of the centrality of culturemes in translation studies, where they represent “the minimal unit of culture, the smallest unit of cultural reference or cultural information [...] to be transferred from one language to another through the process of translation” (Lungu-Badea 2009 qtd. in *ibidem*). Other valid ideas on culturemes as applied to translation come from Antonio Pamies, who views them as “extra-linguistic cultural symbols, which behave like metaphorical models, motivating figurative expressions in language (lexical or phraseological)” (2017, 101). Pamies explains that while cultural keywords are often untranslatable due to their being “culturally loaded”, the same principle does not apply to culturemes, which “[i]n spite of their dependence on local culture” can be “shared by several languages, since the limits of linguistic communities do not necessarily match the cultural ones” (103).

The argument in favour of the translatability of culturemes becomes even more persuasive and suggestive when applied to decadent culturemes. Translation practices suggest that when culturemes pertain to decadent culture they can most of the time be translated or are, at least, less difficult to translate than when pertaining to other epistemes. The reason for this may lie in the nature of decadence itself – here identified with the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, which in Italian is called “Decadentismo” – now widely accepted as a transnational and cosmopolitan phenomenon. Decadence studies have progressively concentrated on zones of intersection between cultures, finding in *The Decadent Republic of Letters* – to quote the title of an esteemed book by Matthew Potolsky – a common set of conventions and references. As regards decadent literature in particular, Stefano Evangelista has maintained that

cosmopolitanism took shape not as an abstract ideal but as something that informed the actual, living practices of authors and readers as they experimented with new ways of relating local and global identities in a world that they experienced as increasingly interconnected. (2021a, 3)

The interconnectedness of “local and global identities” described by Evangelista not only defines decadence as “a ‘transnational’ culture” (2021b, 809) in which what is site-specific becomes shared simultaneously across different places, but this idea also supports the notion that culturemes themselves may have become transcultural categories at the end of the nineteenth century. They belonged to a considerable degree to trans-European or trans-Atlantic decadent poetics, and this condition of pervasiveness and circulation should facilitate their translatability from source to target languages.

Such considerations on culturemes will be here applied to the analysis of the latest Italian translation of *Widowers’ Houses*. The main culturemes related to the decadent episteme in the play will be selected and passages from the source and the target texts will be juxtaposed in the light of cultural continuities, differences, and imbrications. A fundamental assumption is that, although certain culturemes are common to the two cultures due to the transnational nature of decadence, single words related to these culturemes and the semantic fields to which they belong are not. I will address specific issues in relation to language in various case studies, which will follow a brief history of the Italian translations of the play.

Previous Italian translations of *Widowers' Houses* evince a limited knowledge of the source language, culture, and history – a fact that presupposes a limited awareness of some specificities of the decadent age. The first translation, by Antonio Agresti (1866-1927), was published in 1924 by Mondadori as part of the three *Plays Unpleasant*. At the time, Agresti was Shaw's agent in Italy, a role he played from 1906 to 1926 and which afforded him the privilege of direct contact with the playwright. Nevertheless, Shaw's scant knowledge of the Italian language did not help his translator, whose translation endeavours are in fact characterized by misinterpretations and mistakes. One example is the literal translation of the idiomatic "a false position" (Shaw 2022b, 80) as "una posizione falsa" (Shaw 1928, 47), which makes little sense in Italian and is far from describing a predicament in which people must act against their principles. "Una situazione imbarazzante" (Shaw 2022b, 81) (an embarrassing situation) seems to be the best solution here due to its semantic correspondence to the expression in the source text and the adjective-noun collocation that makes the expression almost idiomatic in Italian.

Paola Ojetti's translation, again for Mondadori, appeared in 1956 and was reprinted in 1984. Faithful to a certain extent to the source text, Ojetti's work became canonical despite some imprecisions, particularly in Shaw's "Preface, Mainly About Myself". A telling mistake in the "Preface" is the misunderstanding of the word "capital" in the periphrasis "capital of the world" (2022a, 12). Ojetti translates it as "il capitale": a masculine noun in Italian when related to the economic field and to Marxist doctrines. As a matter of fact, however, the word refers to London as the British capital, so that the Italian translation should have been "la capitale", as the feminine form of the noun (13). This is in fact a crucial point and could only be interpreted correctly by mastering the historical and cultural episteme in which the play was composed, with the awareness that London was a major cultureme encompassing a myriad of other culturemes in late-Victorian literature. Though far from impeccable, Ojetti's translation has evident qualities. For instance, it manages to convey Shaw's argumentative tone while also proving rather effective for theatrical performance. With some stage adaptations by Luigi Lunari, Ojetti's text was in fact chosen for the play's production at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan in 1975-76 and the following season. A comparison with subsequent translations – Maurizio Sarti's *Le case del vedovo* (1966), often betraying the influence of Agresti's version, and Leonardo Bragaglia's *Le case del vedovo* (1974, reprinted in 1984), specifically meant for the stage (Bragaglia was an actor and director) – only confirm the quality of Ojetti's text.²

The first detail one notices in all these works is that the title is invariably mistranslated as *Le case del vedovo* (literally, *The Widower's Houses*). The word "vedovo" (widower) instead of "vedovi" (widowers) is the sole option in all past Italian texts and this posits at least two issues. Not only does it signal grammatical imprecision, but also ignorance of Shaw's implications, since the title in fact rewrites the Gospel According to Mark (14,38-40), where Jesus warns against the scribes, whose hypocrisy and greed are the ruin of poor widows:

38 In His teaching Jesus also said, 'Watch out for the scribes. They like to walk around in long robes, to receive greetings in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the chief seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. 40 They defraud widows of their houses, and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will receive greater condemnation'.³

² For further details on the history of the Italian translations of *Widowers' Houses*, see Boselli 2011, 101-02; Shaw 2022b, 61-62.

³ The episode is also told in Luke 20,45-47.

Shaw mentions this Biblical reference in the “Preface” to *Plays Unpleasant* (2022a, 18). Yet he does not explain that Mark’s verse 40 is paraphrased for ironic purposes: the substitution of the female (“widows”) with the male (“widowers”) introduces one of the main characters in the play: the slum landlord Sartorius, but also his slum-rent collector Lickcheese, another widower-father apparently. Far from being a destitute victim of society, Sartorius shares a scribe’s holier-than-thou attitude in his exploitation of the London poor through which he perpetrates the evils of the Victorian economic and class systems.

By failing to convey the complex intertextuality of the original title, all previous Italian translations prevent a fuller perception of the play’s antiphrastic and sarcastic subtexts, which allude to a decaying world. Considering that in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) Shaw ponders how, in periods of epistemological transition, the Scriptures can no longer be taken as paradigmatic for moral conduct (1891, 62), the title of his first comedy, with its semantic subversion of the Biblical verses, depicts from the beginning the late-Victorian era as a time of decadence, governed by individualism and moral relativism. It is thus vital to preserve such ideological semantics starting from the peritext and translate the title as *Le case dei vedovi*.

As Shaw’s first and somewhat tentative dramatic work, *Widowers’ Houses* was certainly more influenced by contemporary literary models from the aesthetic and decadent period than his subsequent plays: a detail that should be borne in mind when setting out to translate it. Most conspicuously, the text intersects with the Wildean genre of the aesthetic comedy of manners in multiple ways, so that Wilde himself recognized similarities between *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), and *Widowers’ Houses* in an 1893 letter to Shaw (Wilde 1962, 339). Though ultimately tragicomic, Shaw’s play presents the witty tones, high-society setting, and shallow, often preposterous sophistication of Wildean drama, and these features should be prioritized in the translation process. Like Wilde’s comedies, *Widowers’ Houses* stages the efforts of some individuals to become part of *la crème de la crème* or, in any case, to improve one’s social position. The characters’ actions to reach status and affluence emerge as grotesque, vulgar, and unscrupulous, as is typical of a declining society, whose members are portrayed as symbols and caricatures of degradation and lack of morality (Shaw 2019, 85-87). In other words, the characters in *Widowers’ Houses* may be taken as embodiments of the constitutive culturemes of the transnational poetics of decadence, which is shared by source and target texts, though sometimes pertaining more to the former than the latter. This raises specific questions that will be addressed for each case study here examined. The culturemes taken as case studies are the slums, Cockney English and other decadent sociolects, the decadent hero, and the New Woman. They may encompass less perspicuous culturemes, also considered in the discussion that follows.

Two culturemes in the play are notably connected with the character of Lickcheese, the slum-rent collector who represents the most dramatic social aspects of his times. A proletarian climbing his way out of poverty, he initially denounces the consequences of savage capitalism on the lower classes, but then an unexpected turn of events transforms him into a tragicomic self-made man, coarsely refined, who has introjected the worst capitalist strategies and mannerisms. He is most directly associated with the cultureme of the slums – one of the most recognizable symbols of *fin de siècle* London. Several lines in *Widowers’ Houses* are devoted to the awful living conditions in the imaginary London rookery of Robbin’s Row, with dire descriptions of both the exploited and the exploiters, whose degradation is presented as a consequence of capitalist malpractices with which all social classes collude.

The late-Victorian slum cultureme is very culture-specific. The Italian language has no corresponding term for “slum” (the word always appears in the singular in *Widowers’ Houses*)

or “slums”, but rather offers a variety of options: *baraccopoli* (a neighbourhood of shacks), *quartieri poveri/quartieri popolari* (poor/popular neighbourhoods), and *tuguri* (small and squalid dwellings). Unlike the English lexeme, however, these tend to designate suburban, or in any case not metropolitan, areas or types of dwellings. There was a metropolitan housing problem across Europe at the *fin de siècle* and indeed Italy faced analogous issues than Britain, although they are not so well-known outside Italian culture.⁴ It is therefore within Italian history, and urban history in particular, that the corresponding cultureme for “slums” can be found. This is the Italian lexeme *bassifondi*, a slightly old-fashioned word defining the poor, squalid, and often criminal neighbourhoods of historical city centres, consisting of close-knit habitations, with little or no sanitary facilities, where people used to live in poverty and promiscuity. This meaning of *bassifondi* was in use in Italy throughout the 1970s and even beyond, although it originated at the *fin de siècle*. The term is a compound of the noun *fondi*, i.e., “seabeds”, and the adjective *bassi*, i.e., “shallow”, but also “low”, and originally indicated “shallow seabeds”, though in the early 1870s the word began to define the lowest social strata.⁵ It soon came to include the dilapidated neighbourhoods where the urban proletariat lived, and even their houses.⁶ *Bassifondi* thus appears as the word coming closest to *slum*, especially for historical reasons.

Another cultureme associated with Lickcheese is Cockney English. Cockney, which will famously become a central cultureme in *Pygmalion* (1913), is not yet the object of any reforming action in *Widowers' Houses* but indicates urban social decadence. In the play, Shaw draws attention to contemporary sociolects, which he employs to express his characters' foibles as reflections of an overarching epistemic corruption. It is possible to view Cockney as the most conspicuous of these linguistic variants, which include Sartorius' economic and bureaucratic language, finally aiming at defrauding his tenants, or also Blanche's sudden changes of register depending on her moods, which turn her into the decadent type of the hysterical woman, an embodiment of human degeneration. Even within such a composite linguistic patchwork, however, Lickcheese's English is the variety most patently associated with the notion of decadence, particularly meant as a deviation from the norms of social propriety at various levels. This is an idea that pertains to the interpretation of decadence at the *fin de siècle* and finds original formulations in Max Nordau's *Degeneration*, for example when the author draws a distinction between the “sane genius” and the “gifted degenerate”:

It is this which enables the well-informed to distinguish at the first glance between the sane genius, and the highly, or even the most highly, gifted degenerate. Take from the former the special capacity through which he becomes a genius, and there still remains a capable, often conspicuously intelligent, clever, moral, and judicious man, who will hold his ground with propriety in our social mechanism. Let the same be tried in the case of a degenerate, and there remains only a criminal or madman, for whom healthy humanity can find no use. (1913, 23)⁷

Naturally enough, translating such a crucial aspect of the text as Cockney – a sociolect and minority language, but principally a dialect – poses serious challenges, especially when Italian

⁴ Two *fin de siècle* classics denounced the dramatic housing conditions in the centres of Florence and Naples respectively: Jarro's *Firenze sotterranea. Appunti, Ricordi, Descrizioni, Bozzetti* (1881) and Matilde Serao's *Il ventre di Napoli* (1884). On the topic, see also Zucconi 2022.

⁵ See “bassofondo” in Battaglia 1961.

⁶ See “bassofondo” in Cortelazzo and Zolli 1999.

⁷ Astute present-day considerations on the connection between decadence and social impropriety are made in Sheehan 2013, 60-62, 82-83, and 121; Sachs 2019, 256-57.

is the target language. Not only is Italian famous for its great linguistic diversity (see Boula de Mareüil *et al.*, 2021) – a fact that makes it difficult to privilege one dialect over another when translating into the language – but none of these varieties possesses the connotations and implications of Cockney. Italian dialects are, in fact, characterized as peripheral and regional, rather than metropolitan. That is why in the translation of Lickcheese's speeches phonetic non-normativity, which would necessarily suggest regionality, has been avoided, whereas grammatical non-normativity has been privileged over non-standard pronunciation, since it can more easily sound pan-Italian. It can, moreover, suggest lack of education. A typical line Shaw gives to Lickcheese is the following:

LICKCHEESE. I' bin gittin on a little since I saw you last. (Shaw 2022b, 160)

In this case, the apostrophe signals the ungrammatical absence of the auxiliary verb, while the verb “bin gittin” indicates non-standard pronunciation through spelling, but also grammar imprecision. So many deviations from the linguistic norm in three words are difficult to maintain in Italian due to the strong regional connotation they would assume. That is why the pan-Italian ungrammatical form of the double dative – “vi pare [...] a voi” – has been added and so has the informal, and slightly rude, interrogative interjection “eh?”, used for question tags in colloquial situations all over the country:

LICKCHEESE. Ho fatto un sacco di strada da quando ci siamo visti l'ultima volta, non vi pare anche a voi, eh? (161)

In another example from the source text, the “h” in “have” has been dropped to suggest silent pronunciation: one of the most distinguishing Cockney traits:

LICKCHEESE [...] You and me is too much of a pair for me to take anything you say in bad part, Sartorius. Ave a cigar? (160)

Again, the choice in the target language has been that of moving closer to standard forms, although efforts have been made to keep the imagery and idioms of the original. Lickcheese's Cockney has been rendered through the informal retort “siamo troppo della stessa pasta”, which literally means “to be (made) of the same dough” and semantically corresponds to the English idiom “to be cut from the same cloth”. Not only does the sentence bring to the fore the word “pasta”, possibly the most recognizable Italian cultureme, indicating the most popular food in the country, especially among the labouring classes, but the sentence “siamo troppo dellastessa pasta” is also elliptical, hence ungrammatical, because the past participle *fatti* (i.e., made) is missing. The correct form should be in fact: *siamo fatti troppo della stessa pasta*. On account of these considerations, Lickcheese's line in Italian sounds too informal to be addressed to a socially superior person, exactly as happens in the source text. The statement is accompanied by another informal, even rude, offer (“Sigaro?”), which is also elliptical, for it does not include any verb or introductory form of politeness:

LICKCHEESE [...] Sartorius, noi due siamo troppo della stessa pasta perché me la prenda per ogni minima cosa che mi dite. Sigaro? (161)

In another passage from the source text, the words “secretary”, “literary”, and “persuade” are mispronounced, while “help” is considered a countable noun:

LICKCHEESE. [...] You remember Mr Cokane? he does a little business for me now as a friend, and gives me a help with my correspondence: sekketerry we call it. Ive no literary style, and thats the truth; so Mr Cokane kindly puts it into my letters and draft prospect uses and advertisements and the like. Dont you, Cokane? Of course you do: why shouldnt you? He's been helping me to persuade his old friend, Dr Trench, about the matter we were speaking of. (172)

In this case as well, the Italian translation has brought the non-standard aspects of language to a grammatical level, even with the addition of some lexical adjustments:

LICKCHEESE. [...] Vi ricordate del signor Cokane? Adesso mi sbriga qualche faccenda, da amico, e mi dà una mano con la corrispondenza. Un segretario, così diciamo noi. Non ho fatto le scuole alte io, sono sincero, e così il signor Cokane condisce le mie lettere con un po' di stile e mi butta giù prospetti e inserzioni e quelle robe là. Giusto Cokane? E perché no? Mi sta aiutando a convincere il suo vecchio amico, il dottor Trench, a fare quella roba là che abbiamo detto. (173)

As anticipated, the pleonastic forms as *quelle robe là* (literally, “those things there”) and *quella roba là* (literally, “that thing/stuff there”) are incorrect, but also informal. Besides, more emphasis than in the source text has been put on hyperonyms rather than hyponyms to underline the character's incapacity to master specific vocabulary – a fact evidencing his alienation from the highest strata of society. All in all, the lack of sophistication and culture in Lickcheese's lines is not lost, although the Italian text is less geographically charged.

According to Linda Dowling's classic argument, in British culture (though not only) decadence of language, expressed either by an excess or a defect of sophistication, was a form of social degeneration. Dowling contends that decadent literary language reproduced the model of dead languages – Latin in particular – often based on over-sophisticated texts, complex in syntax and reliant on artifice and preciosity. On the other hand, literary language at the *fin de siècle* was also based on contemporary idiomatic speech, for example by imitating such popular forms as music-hall songs, so that the decadent literary model was a peculiar “Oxford-cum-Cockney” language (1986, 230-38). In Lickcheese the two tendencies co-exist, for the uncouthness of his Cockney speech is associated with attempts at embellishing his sentences with figurative language, in unintentional parodies of aesthetic prose. Lickcheese's use of vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical forms that deviate from the norm, either for an excess or a lack of sophistication, implicates his inability to respect personal, social, and political boundaries. In Victorian terms, his linguistic non-normativity reflects decadence, as already explained. An even more eloquent example of this is offered by the following lines, in which Lickcheese's moral degradation transpires from the high register of his competent, though fraudulent, use of legalese (as in: “compensated to the tune of double the present valuation, with the cost of the improvements thrown in”), but also from colloquial expressions (“to put it short”, “Now's your time”) and figurative speech taken from the street (“to play old Harry”, “that cock wont fight any longer”):

LICKCHEESE. [...] Theres no doubt that the Vestries has legal powers to play old Harry with slum properties [...]. That didnt matter in the good old times, because the Vestries used to be us ourselves. Nobody ever knew a word about the election; and we used to get ten of us into a room and elect one another, and do what we liked. Well, that cock wont fight any longer; and, to put it short, the game is up for men in the position of you and Mr Sartorius. My advice to you is, take the present chance of getting out of it. Spend a little money on the block at the Cribbs Market end: enough to make it look like a model dwelling, you know; and let the other block to me on fair terms for a depot of the North Thames Iced Mutton Company. [...] youll be compensated to the tune of double the present valuation, with the cost of the improvements thrown in. [...]. (Shaw 2022b, 176)

The passage has been translated very literally as far as vocabulary and register are concerned, while special effort has been paid to find corresponding Italian idioms. Accordingly, “to play old Harry” has been translated as “fare un pandemonio”, since both phrases describe chaotic situations in which the devil (“old Harry” and “demonio”) has had a part. Similarly, “that cock wont fight any longer” has been translated with “non siamo più i galli nel pollaio”, in which the allusion to cock fighting gets lost, and yet the basic semantic field (“galli” is the Italian for “roosters”) and the general meaning of losing one’s supremacy (“essere/fare il gallo nel pollaio” means to be the leader in a situation) are both kept:

LICKCHEESE. [...] Il Consiglio Parrocchiale – non c’è dubbio – ha il potere legale di fare un pandemonio con quelle baracche dei bassifondi [...]. Questo non ci faceva paura finché il Consiglio eravamo noi. Nessuno sapeva un’acca delle elezioni e noi ci chiudevamo in dieci in una stanza e ci votavamo tra di noi e facevamo come ci pareva. Beh, adesso non siamo più i galli nel pollaio e, per farla breve, per persone come voi e il signor Sartorius ora la partita è finita. Il mio consiglio è di prendere al balzo quest’occasione per tirarvene fuori del tutto. Spendete un po’ di soldi per quell’isolato in fondo a Cribbs Market, quanto basta per dargli l’aria di area residenziale coi focchi – non so se mi spiego – e affittatemi l’altro isolato a me come magazzino per la Compagnia del Montone Congelato del Tamigi Settentrionale. [...] venite risarciti per qualcosa come il doppio del valore attuale, inclusi i costi dei restauri [...]. (177)

The decadence of language in *Widowers’ Houses* is also articulated through the cultureme of Francophilia in the character of Cokane. A stereotypical decadent male subject, and at the same time a parody of the type, Cokane is a pedantic, *soi-disant* man of the world who prides himself on belonging to high society, from which he is in fact excluded. His idiolect characterizes him as a decadent figure: the linguistic tendency towards French is evident in his middle name, suggestive of some obscure Norman origins, though this suggestion is overshadowed by the nickname “Billy” (which he abhors), and the unedifying last name, whose pronunciation alludes to typical decadent addictions. Most notable is however the way that Cokane intersperses his speech with French vocabulary, for example, “négligé” [sic], “en règle”, “cherchez la femme”, “dégagé”, or the sentence “Je n’envoie pas la nécessité”, all of which he utilizes for sophistication’s sake out of context, while talking about trivial topics with his best friend Henry Trench. In a meta- and pragma-linguistic moment, Trench even retorts “[s]hut up [...]. Or at least speak some language you understand” (Shaw 2022b, 178). Such a penchant for French, even in its parodic undertones, is a cultureme shared by European decadence at large, and presents no great challenge in translation praxis. It is, in fact, one of those exemplary cases of transcultural culturemes most representative of cosmopolitan decadence, with its tendency of multilingualism. In both British and Italian cultures, French was, and partly still is, the stereotypical language of decadence and hyper-refinement, of the poses and mannerisms of aesthetes, dandies, and *poètes maudits*. These considerations are one more reason to leave those French words untranslated in the Italian text. Furthermore, the French lexis employed by Shaw for his character is quite intelligible to Italian readers and audiences, possibly even more than to English speakers, and this is a good reason not to translate it from the original text.

The decadence of society surfaces in the play through personal and familial relations as well. This phenomenon centres on the character of Sartorius, whose socio-economic mobility is correlated to the exploitation of all the people he encounters on his life path, including his own daughter, whose marriage is another one of his well-plotted schemes. Yet Blanche is no victim; she is in many ways an embodiment of the New Woman (see Powell 1998) – a *fin de siècle* cultureme, more pertinent to Britain than Italy, though identifiable in both cultures. Stubborn and independent, not gender-conforming in Victorian terms, Blanche is aggressive

and strong, both physically and psychologically. She symbolizes Shaw's idea of a superwoman born in a decadent era to re-build the future of humanity, according to evident Nietzschean paradigms. More to the point, she is an embodiment of Shaw's "life force", which he recognizes in all those who constantly aim at improving themselves (Lawrence 1972, 139-46).

Blanche's name, like Cokane's, appears antiphrastic. "Blanche" – another item in the pervasive French vocabulary of *Widowers' Houses* – alludes to the refinement associated with French culture at the *fin de siècle*, though ironically so, for the character cannot be associated with any candour or whiteness of the soul and has little of the *naïveté* one would expect from a young woman of her class and affluence. The common Latin roots of Italian and French, moreover, allow for an even fuller understanding of both the literal meaning and the connotation of the word "Blanche" in the target text, rather than in English. Hence, whereas the New Woman culture exemplified by the character is less direct and recognizable in Italian, the antiphrastic nature of Blanche's name may strike a stronger chord there, even within a culture in which the New Woman type was, and still is, less popular than in the Victorian *fin de siècle*.

Blanche most clearly comes out as a New Woman in the last act, when she catches Trench alone in the drawing room and wins him over with her seductive strategies. Her supremacy in terms of vitality, wit, and cunning is patent in the long monologue she delivers to her fiancé, part of which is here reported:

BLANCHE. [...] [*She sits down, and softens her tone a little as she affects to pity him*]. Well, let me tell you that you cut a poor figure, a very, very poor figure, Harry. [...]. And you, too, a gentleman! so highly connected! with such distinguished relations! so particular as to where your money comes from! I wonder at you. I really wonder at you. I should have thought that if your fine family gave you nothing else, it might at least have given you some sense of personal dignity. Perhaps you think you look dignified at present: eh? [*No reply*]. Well, I can assure you that you don't: you look most ridiculous – as foolish as a man could look – you don't know what to say; and you don't know what to do. But after all, I really don't see what any one could say in defence of such conduct. [*He looks straight in front of him, and purses up his lips as if whistling. This annoys her; and she becomes affectedly polite*]. I am afraid I am in your way, Dr Trench. [*She rises*]. I shall not intrude on you any longer. You seem so perfectly at home that I need make no apology for leaving you to yourself. [*She makes a feint of going to the door; but he does not budge; and she returns and comes behind his chair*]. Harry. [*He does not turn. She comes a step nearer*]. Harry: I want you to answer me a question. [*Earnestly, stooping over him*] Look me in the face. [*No reply*]. Do you hear? [*Seizing his cheeks and twisting his head round*] Look-me-in-the-face. [*He shuts his eyes tight and grins. She suddenly kneels down beside him with her breast against his shoulder*]. Harry: what were you doing with my photograph just now, when you thought you were alone? [*He opens his eyes: they are full of delight. She flings her arms around him, and crushes him in an ecstatic embrace as she adds, with furious tenderness*] How dare you touch anything belonging to me? (Shaw 2022b, 184, 186)

The New Woman culture emerges through Blanche's physical, sexual, and social boldness, which distances her from normative Victorian femininity while assimilating her to a model of rampant masculinity, muscular and resourceful. She is gender-hegemonic in the couple, as reflected throughout the passage, and most evidently in such details as her use of the imperative mode "Look me in the face". This appears even more domineering when she articulates single words – "Look-me-in-the-face" – as if dealing with a child. In the previous lines, Blanche is rude and intimidating ("Harry: I want you to answer me a question") and offensive and emasculating ("you look most ridiculous – as foolish as a man could look – you don't know what to say; and you don't know what to do"). All these statements reverse contemporary gender roles, consequently suggesting the decay of established beliefs and institutions. Average theatregoers would recognize the effects of moral decadence in such female behaviour.

Given the relative rarity of the New Woman cultureme in Italian culture, the choice in the target text has been that of expressing it as directly as possible, thus espousing Lawrence Venuti's idea on the validity of foreignizing in cases of cultural differences (2008, 15-16). Keeping this approach in mind, the Italian translation is the following:

BLANCHE. [...] [*Si siede e ammorbida un po' i toni, mentre finge di compatirlo*]. Beh, lasciami dire che fai una figura meschina, una figura molto, molto meschina, Harry. [...]. E, anche tu, un gentiluomo! con amicizie ai piani alti! con parenti così importanti! così intransigente sulla provenienza dei suoi soldi! Mi meraviglio di te. Davvero, mi meraviglio di te. Visto che la tua buona famiglia non ti ha dato nulla, pensavo che avrebbe potuto darti almeno un po' di dignità personale. Credi forse di mostrare un po' di dignità in questo momento, eh? [*Nessuna risposta*]. Beh, ti assicuro di no. Hai un aspetto che va ben oltre il ridicolo: sembri più stupido di quanto sia umanamente possibile. Non sai che rispondere e non sai che fare. Ma, dopo tutto, non vedo proprio che si potrebbe rispondere per giustificare un comportamento come il tuo. [*Trench guarda dritto davanti a sé e stringe le labbra come per fischiare. Blanche appare irritata, poi si fa gentile ma in maniera affettata*]. Mi dispiace sbarrarvi la strada, dottor Trench. [*Si alza*]. Non vi disturberò più. Sembrate così a vostro agio che non mi devo scusare se vi lascio da solo. [*Fa per andare verso la porta, ma lui non si muove. Lei torna indietro e si ferma dietro alla sedia di lui*]. Harry. [*Trench non si gira. Blanche si avvicina ancora un passo*]. Harry: voglio che tu mi risponda a una domanda. [*Chinandosi seria su di lui*] Guardami in faccia. [*Nessuna risposta*]. Mi senti? [*Afferrandogli le guance e voltandogli il viso*]. Guar-da-mi-in-fac-cia. [*Trench serra gli occhi e fa una smorfia. D'un tratto lei gli si inginocchia accanto, toccandogli la spalla con il seno*]. Harry, che stavi facendo con la mia foto, appena un attimo fa, quando pensavi di essere solo? [*Trench apre gli occhi. Ha uno sguardo pienamente appagato. Lei lo circonda con le braccia, stringendolo in un abbraccio estatico, mentre aggiunge, con rabbia mista a tenerezza*]. Come osi toccare quello che è mio? (Shaw 2022b, 185, 187)

The translation is quite literal, according to Venuti's approach, even though some peculiarities of the Italian language manage to emphasize the implications of the New Woman cultureme. The reference is to the sentence "Look-me-in-the-face", in which single words are emphasized and which has been translated as "Guar-da-mi-in-fac-cia". Since the Italian language is very poor in monosyllabic lexis, it has been necessary to divide polysyllabic words into syllables. Syllable division is one of the earliest competencies taught to schoolchildren in Italy, so that the line sounds even more forceful than the original in its patronizing, imperious tones and lays further emphasis on Blanche as a New Woman, who presents herself as a teacher of basic education to the male subject. By doing so, the lesser relevance of the New Woman cultureme in Italian culture is compensated by the connotations that such a pedagogic activity as syllable division brings with it.

This final case study, like the ones previously analysed, shows how decadent culturemes can provide interesting and unusual perspectives to approach the translation of decadent texts. There is little doubt that the act of identifying and studying decadent culturemes not only pertains to the field of cultural studies but extends to the osmotic exchanges between disciplines and that such exchanges include translation studies. Even when the presence of certain decadent culturemes finds oblique and very partial correspondences in the target culture – as happens with Cockney in *Widowers' Houses* – the application of culturemes to translation practice may disclose original procedures and solutions for works belonging to decadence, a period in which themes, tropes, symbols, and imagery were shared transnationally. Applying culturemes to decadent literature helps to throw new light at oblique angles on both source and target texts, thus pointing at diverse ways to face translation issues.

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