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Saggi

## A member of the Accademia dei Pugni translates Frances Brooke's *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville*. From Giambattista Biffi's manuscripts

LIA GUERRA

*Università di Pavia*

**ABSTRACT.** The present essay intends to address an aspect of Biffi's anglomania as it appears from his partial translation from the original English language of the epistolary novel *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville* (1763), found among his manuscript papers. The name of Frances Brooke, the author of the novel, is not given with the title in the manuscript and was probably totally ignored by Biffi and by the Italian readership at large. The paper explores the reasons that might have led Biffi to start such an enterprise, the kind of appeal Brooke's novel could have to his curiosity, and also why he suddenly dropped the experiment and left the translation at a very early stage.

**Keywords.** Biffi, Great Britain, Translation, Epistolary Novel, Manuscripts.

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«Se il mondo letterato è stato francese nel principio di questo secolo, verso la metà è diventato affatto inglese» (C. Denina, *Lettere Brandeburghesi*)<sup>1</sup>.

In 1766 Pietro Verri commissioned Antonio Perego an oil picture meant to celebrate his group of friends of 'I Pugni', the Academy he had established in Milan in 1761: the table on the left of this *conversation piece* known as «L'accademia dei Pugni» has Cesare Beccaria and Alessandro Verri seated and intent on reading and writing respectively. Behind Alessandro, a hand on his shoulder, stands a less well known figure, that of Count Giovan Battista Biffi from Cremona (1736-1807). At the table on the right Luigi Lambertenghi and Pietro Verri are playing tric-trac. We have learnt to match this picture with the Lombard enlightenment since Franco Venturi used it for the cover of his *Settecento riformatore* I of 1969, and more recently we tend to associate it with the periodical «*Il Caffè*» in the Francioni-Romagnoli sec-

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<sup>1</sup> C. Denina, *Lettere brandeburghesi*, a cura di F. Cicoira, Centro Studi Piemontesi, Torino 1989. Letter from Dresda, October 23, 1782, quoted in A. Stauble, *Luci e ombre dell'anglofilia nella cultura italiana del tardo Settecento*, in G. Bardazzi et A. Grosrichard (éd.), *Denouement des lumieres et invention romantique*. Actes du Colloque (Genève, 24-25 novembre 2000). Librairie Droz, Genève 2003, pp. 277-298: the quotation is on p. 277.

ond edition of 1998<sup>2</sup>. Gianmarco Gaspari has revealed that the pattern of this picture owes much to the illustration by Hayman and Grignon in the facing title-page of the First Volume of the seven-volume Tonson and Draper edition of the «Spectator»<sup>3</sup>. That «Il Caffè» was conceived and developed following the pattern offered by English papers like the «Spectator», the «Guardian» and the «Idler» is acknowledged in the early pages of the Italian periodical and is confirmed by many common features. What is less well known is that Biffi, the man portrayed near Cesare Beccaria and Alessandro Verri in the picture, was the only one in the group who spoke the English language, who collected and translated English texts for his friends and for his own delight without the French mediation<sup>4</sup>, and who therefore was one of their direct links with the English culture.

The present essay intends to address another aspect of Biffi's anglomania: his partial translation of the anonymous epistolary novel *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville* (1763), found among his manuscript papers<sup>5</sup>. The novel had been translated into French in 1764 and received a favourable review by Voltaire. It is neither clear when Biffi undertook the translation, nor how and when he first came in touch with the text: the itineraries of translation are, generally speaking, rather complex for the period, for reasons that this paper will hopefully contribute to clarifying, even though a great deal still

<sup>2</sup> F. Venturi, *Settecento riformatore*, vol. I. *Da Muratori a Beccaria*, Einaudi, Torino 1969. G. Francioni, S. Romagnoli (a cura di), «*Il Caffè*» 1764-1766, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 1998 (prima ed. 1993).

<sup>3</sup> G. Gaspari, *Il secolo delle cose. Appunti su modelli e generi della divulgazione letteraria nel «Caffè»*, «Archivio storico lombardo», CXL, 2014, pp. 95-123, the comment on p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> I have dealt with Biffi's role as mediator between the two cultures for the benefit of the Milanese group around the Verris and Beccaria in L. Guerra, *Giambattista Biffi and His Role in the Dissemination of English Culture in Eighteenth-Century Lombardy*, «Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies», 33, 2010, 2, pp. 245-264.

<sup>5</sup> Information on Biffi can be found in F. Venturi, *Un amico di Beccaria e di Verri: profilo di Giambattista Biffi*, «Giornale storico della letteratura italiana», 134, 1957, pp. 37-76; Id., *Il viaggio a Genova di Giambattista Biffi nel 1774*, Noviero, Genova 1958; Id., *La letteratura italiana*, vol. 46/III. *Illuministi italiani. Riformatori lombardi, piemontesi e toscani*, Ricciardi, Milano-Napoli 1958, pp. 386-390; Id., *Settecento riformatore*, vol. I, cit., e vol. V/1; *L'Italia dei lumi (1764-1790). La rivoluzione di Corsica. Le grandi carestie degli anni sessanta. La Lombardia delle riforme*, Torino, Einaudi 1987; G. Dossena, entry in the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 10 (1968), pp. 378-380; Id., *Per il diario del Biffi*, in G.B. Biffi, *Diario (1777-1781)*, a cura di G. Dossena, Bompiani, Milano 1976; C. Cremonini, *Giambattista Biffi, un 'cosmopolita di provincia' nella Cremona del Settecento*, in G. Rumi, G. Mezzanotte, A. Cova (a cura di), *Cremona e il suo territorio*, Cariplo, Milano 1998, pp. 33-45. After the *Diario*, also Biffi's travel letters have been edited in G.B. Biffi, *Lettere itinerarie 1773, 1774, 1776, 1777*, a cura di E. Carriero, Pensa Multimedia, Lecce 2011. They include *Viaggio a Venezia (1773)*, *Viaggio di Genova (1774)*, *Viaggio in Piemonte e parte della Francia (1776)* and *Viaggio di Ferrara (1777)*.

needs to be done in terms of research<sup>6</sup>. He certainly had connections with people who moved English texts to and from Britain, among them Giuseppe Baretti until at least 1770, when contacts between the two ceased. But Biffi was also familiar with well furnished Milanese private libraries, like Count Karl Firmian's, even though more has to be ascertained as to the content of that library. The novel could have reached him also thanks to his activity in the Cremonese book market, where he became censor in 1769, and where his contacts with the man who was to become a very prominent publisher, Lorenzo Manini, were fairly strong<sup>7</sup>.

The name of Frances Brooke, the author of the novel, is not given with the title in the manuscript and was probably totally ignored by the Italian coeval readership<sup>8</sup>. Frances Brooke, née Moore (1724-1789) was fairly well known in London as a translator from French, as a poet and as an essayist. Under the pseudonym of Mary Singleton, Spinster, she even edited *The Old Maid*, a periodical that ran for 37 weeks, from 15 November 1755 to 4 July 1756, but she was also a novelist and a playwright, and had become part of a net of London literary people who circulated their manuscripts and discussed each other's work. Samuel Johnson, Samuel Richardson, Hannah More, and Anna Seward were people she was in touch with: she had been living in London since 1748 and Baretti entered Johnson's group in 1753, introduced by Charlotte Lennox who was then learning Italian from him. So the two might have easily met: she in fact happened to be in London and to try her hand at the literary world exactly at the time – «a small period of grace» – as Paula Backscheider defines it, for women writers, around mid century<sup>9</sup>. She first signed herself as Frances Brooke in 1756 when she married the Reverend John Brooke and published her first tragedy, *Virginia*, in a valuable edition that also included *Odes, Pastorals and Translations*. Both her periodical and her novels instead appeared without her name: in 1763 *The History of Lady*

<sup>6</sup> Stauble, *Luci e ombre*, cit., has contributed to shedding light on the matter of translating English poetry into Italian but for the novel more is needed.

<sup>7</sup> The activity of the bookseller Lorenzo Manini started at the beginning of the 1770s, first with two Milanese publishers, later by himself with Biffi's cooperation, which resulted in the publication of Francesco Algarotti's works between 1778 and 1784.

<sup>8</sup> A book recently published by Alessandra Mita Ferraro, *Il diritto e il rovescio. Giambattista Giovio (1748-1814) un europeo di provincia nel secolo dei Lumi*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2018, reveals however that another of Brooke's novels was translated into Italian but through the French mediation. Biffi and Giovio knew each other and corresponded: still it is amazing that they both felt interested enough in epistolary novels to translate them.

<sup>9</sup> P. Backscheider, *Introduction* to F. Brooke, *The Excursion*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington 1997, p. xL, note 11.

*Julia Mandeville*, a two-volume novel, was characteristically inscribed «By the translator of Lady Catesby's letters»<sup>10</sup>. *Lady Julia Mandeville* is an epistolary novel «after the fashion Brooke herself contributed to spread for French epistolary novels»<sup>11</sup>. At the time of its publication, it became immediately popular running to six editions by 1773, which testifies to a large commercial and critical success. In the same year 1763, at the end of the Seven Years' War, Brooke sailed for Canada in order to reach her husband who had been appointed chaplain to the Detachment of Quebec. On her return to London in 1768, Brooke produced more translations from the French, more novels and in 1773 she turned again to the theatre, purchased the King's Theatre (the Haymarket Opera House) with the help of her family, and jointly managed it with her friend, the famous tragic actress Mary Ann Yates until 1778. She was able to see her own production on stage only after 1781, thanks to Covent Garden's manager Thomas Harris, and became immediately popular<sup>12</sup>. Brooke's literary work has recently received attention mainly for her second epistolary novel, *Emily Montague* (1769), signed by her and providing interesting matter in relation to the birth of the Canadian novel.

The practice of anonymity in eighteenth century female periodicals and novels contributed to a development of women's writing. These two genres, in England as in Italy, quite typically addressed adjacent topics; but both had a lower reputation if compared to the nobler genres of tragedy or epic, and were rarely present on the shelves of 'serious' libraries and it is therefore difficult to trace their presence<sup>13</sup>. It is to be doubted that Biffi knew Brooke's name, or that she was a woman, or that he would have cared to find out. James Raven has

shown that about «80 per cent of British novels were published anonymously in the late eighteenth century, and the writers remained largely unknown to readers»<sup>14</sup>. As Mary Helen McMurrin has stressed, «eighteenth-century fiction translation relied at least in part on the concealment of origins; novels were especially mobile because they did not bear the stamp of the author or nation»<sup>15</sup>. According to her, this accounts for the mobility of the novel, also because of the 'murky' nature of this market. McMurrin suggests that such mobility and malleability justify the question of whether the novel actually rose – not only in prestige but in quantity as well – thanks to this indifference as to the origin of single texts or in spite of it. The novel, in short, might have consolidated itself as an independent genre because of this quality of being stranger to no country, in fact as a 'circulatory' phenomenon capable of linking languages and places, marginality allowing for greater freedom<sup>16</sup>.

Biffi published nothing in his lifetime, but wrote extensively. The amount and variety of the topics he addressed, as witnessed by the collection of manuscripts held by the State Library of Cremona, testify to his several interests and to the encyclopedic culture so typical of the educated eighteenth-century man. His manuscripts actually provide a concise catalogue of the eighteenth-century English culture which fascinated Italian readers (essays, poetry and the novel) – in fact a cross-section of English publications before the 1770s. Biffi's papers were collected in files brought together after his death by his friend, Abbot Antonio Dragoni. Two of them host English material and were given the following titles:

A) *Raccolta di Sentenze e memorie morali cavate dai classici greci, latini, italiani francesi, inglesi per sua istruzione dal conte G.B. Biffi cremonese* («Zibaldone Minor» as Giampaolo Dossena entitled it, covering the years 1761-1777<sup>17</sup>): it includes the first 36 whole numbers (and the beginning of the 37<sup>th</sup>) from Johnson's «Idler» and 24 fragments mainly from the «Spectator», later to be exploited by the Caffetisti.

B) *Miscellanee Astronomico-Politico-Critico-Storiche scritte in Milano negli anni 1764-65, ossia «Il Caffè» con in fine la Traduzione dall'Inglese della Storia di Lady*

<sup>10</sup> A very popular book translated from the French of Madame Riccoboni: *Letters from Juliet Lady Catesby, to her friend Lady Henrietta Campley*, published anonymously and claimed as translated from the English, Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, London 1760.

<sup>11</sup> E. Donkin, *Getting into the Act: women playwrights in London, 1776-1829*, Routledge, New York 1995, pp. 47-48.

<sup>12</sup> Biographical references can be gathered from *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* ("Frances Brooke" by Mary Jane Edwards); at <www-chawton.org> (by Rebecca Garwood; last consulted in March 2019) and in Introductions to her novels recently reprinted: *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville* edited by Enit Karafili Steiner, was published by Pickering and Chatto in 2013. Her works are available also at the Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive (ECPA), at Project Gutenberg and at Internet Archive.

<sup>13</sup> R. Turchi, *Primi sondaggi per un commento della "Toilette, o sia Raccolta galante di prose e versi toscani dedicata alle dame italiane"*, in S. Capecchi (a cura di), *Giornali del Settecento fra Granducato e legazioni*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 2008, pp. 125-136. A considerable amount of research is being done in Italy with a view to rescuing from oblivion and destruction a large number of eighteenth-century female periodicals.

<sup>14</sup> J. Raven, *The anonymous novel in Britain and Ireland, 1750-1830*, in R.J. Griffin (ed.), *The Faces of Anonymity: Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publication from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2003, pp. 141-166: the quotation is on p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> M.H. McMurrin, *The spread of novels. Translation and prose fiction in the eighteenth century*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2010, p. 50. McMurrin's focus is mainly on French-English translations.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> G. Dossena, *Introduzione*, in G. Biffi, *Diario (1777-1781)*, a cura di G. Dossena, Bompiani, Milano 1976, cit., pp. VII-XXXIII: XXIII.

*Giulia Mandeville fatta nel 1770* («Zibaldone Maior»): a cardboard volume of cm.17 x 26, comprising 109 numbered leaves – the numbers having been added in recent times<sup>18</sup>. It was probably bound by the same Dragoni<sup>19</sup>, who must also have added the apocryphal/invented titles for all but the two texts I am interested in here. The curious title, with that reference to the periodical «Il Caffè»<sup>20</sup>, was suggested perhaps by the multifarious content of the file.

My focus here is the section of folder B with the title *la Traduzione dall'Inglese della Storia di Lady Giulia Mandeville fatta nel 1770* on the title page, an announcement which gives the translation in a foregrounded position as regards the rest of the papers. However, such an emphasis is rather undermined by the shortness of the translated text, which occupies the final section of the folder – leaves 76 r to 95r. It is preceded by a preliminary leaf in Biffi's handwriting announcing «Storia di Lady Giulia Mandeville tradotta dall'inglese» but no date is added (which suggests that «*fatta nel 1770*» is a debatable addition). The translation is interrupted abruptly, leaves 96 to 109 being left blank.

Biffi, the member of an aristocratic family with large land properties in south Lombardy, a very good friend of the Verris (especially Alessandro) and Cesare Beccaria, had been educated in Milan (Collegio dei Nobili, 1746-1756) and in Parma (1756-1760). He had a very good knowledge of the English language and of contemporary English literature, which he was able to read without the help of a French translation. Back in Milan between 1760 and 1762, bound to a diplomatic career thanks to Count Firmian's support, Biffi was able to participate in the discussions prior to the publication of «Il Caffè» (June 1764 - May 1766), but was actually physically present in Milan only between the end of 1760 and the summer of 1762, and made only short visits to

Milan between 1764 and October 1766, when Beccaria and Alessandro Verri left for Paris, and in 1768. In fact, he contributed nothing to the periodical directly: by the time «Il Caffè» started publication, he had already left Milan, obliged by his family to go back to his home town, Cremona. Here, he covered public offices and started to carry on some kind of silent 'ghost' activity, bent on private readings, also of English texts when available, and – in a metaphorical way – on compiling his own ghost periodical – a personal enterprise along the same lines as the actual Milanese paper. The peculiar characteristic of this private *Caffè* is quite distinct: a clear mark of Biffi's personal attitude emerges first of all from the choice of English texts copied or translated; but above all from the strong sensibility he displays, together with his lively intelligence and unassuming attitude, as his correspondence with Beccaria testifies<sup>21</sup>. Biffi would consider the literary field as no more than a gentleman's elevating pastime, an activity that provided comfort for daily life, in the style of Latin *otium*, and that therefore did not imply publication – a fairly common attitude, but certainly not in the style of his Milanese friends, the *Caffetisti*<sup>22</sup>, particularly of Pietro Verri's. The 'militant' quality of the engagement of the friends of the *Accademia dei Pugni* suggested, in fact, an active participation in the current debates and political involvement: the enlightened intellectual should publish and exploit the printing press in all possible forms in order to spread the new ideas, confident in the strength of reason to be disseminated through his writings. But Biffi's name does not appear among the signatures of «Il Caffè». He stays in the background, a «Spectator». The only essay he sent Pietro Verri when the publication of the periodical had already started, was judged too risky for the censor<sup>23</sup>: it

<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of the content of folders A and B, see Guerra, *Giam-battista Biffi and His Role*, cit., *passim*.

<sup>19</sup> Folders A and B are marked AA.3.17 and AA.3.18 respectively in the Library of Cremona catalogue of manuscripts. The texts collected in the *Miscellanea* date back to different years so that the years suggested in the title on the cover of the folder are not valid for all texts, as for instance in the case of the translations we are dealing with here.

<sup>20</sup> The original edition of Volume One of the Milanese paper had this title, reproduced in: G. Francioni, S. Romagnoli (a cura di), «*Il Caffè*» 1764-1766, cit.: *Il CAFFÈ ossia BREVI E VARI DISCORSI distribuiti in fogli periodici*. Tomo primo: dal Giugno 1764 a tutto Maggio 1765. The edition in two volumes includes «tomo secondo dal giugno 1765 per un anno seguente». *BREVI E VARI DISCORSI* becomes in Dragoni's title *Miscellanea Astronomico-Politico-Critico-Storiche* while the years indicated are exactly the same. Dragoni collected autograph pages by Biffi, in Italian and English, with no indication of sources. Whole papers are copied or translated (or both) not in a mechanical sequence, but according to a selection that shows a degree of emphasis on peculiar themes (like women and feelings).

<sup>21</sup> All his friends testify to his qualities in the rich correspondence collected in *Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Cesare Beccaria*, voll. 4 e 5. *Carteggio*, a cura di C. Capra, R. Pasta, F. Pino Pongolini, Mediobanca, Milano 1994 («Parte I: 1758-1768») e 1996 («Parte II: 1769-1794») respectively.

<sup>22</sup> In his travel letters some aspects of Biffi's shy character emerge, namely his contemplative manner and his penchant for daydreaming that constantly led him to sadness and pain, to the point that he felt they were leading him to insanity: in letter XIII in *Viaggio in Piemonte (Lettere itinerarie*, cit., p. 249) he mentions feeling something similar to the *uneasiness* of the English. See the comments in G. Panizza, *Tra Arisi e Biffi: un percorso nella cultura a Cremona nel secolo dei Lumi*, in *Storia di Cremona*, vol. 7. *Il Settecento e l'età napoleonica*, a cura di C. Capra, Bolis, Azzano San Paolo (BG) 2009, pp. 233-244. His Milanese friends left a number of examples of the way in which this attitude of Biffi's weighed on their relationship. A private man, the solitary 'Spectator', eager to communicate among his friends only, he felt a closer connection was easier with Cesare Beccaria, himself sober and unambitious.

<sup>23</sup> The information comes indirectly from Pietro Verri's negative reply to Biffi in a letter of 30 October 1764, in G. Sommi Picenardi, *Lettere inedite di Pietro Verri*, «Rassegna nazionale», XXX, 1912, 185, p. 55.

dealt with forced monastic vows and frustrated feelings – topics familiar to Biffi's *Diario* and present in many of the English passages (copied or translated) in folder B.

It is in point of fact the English content of folder B that clarifies many of Biffi's choices, starting from his abortive contribution to «Il Caffè». Themes that appeal to his sensibility take shape in his approach to the 'woman question' that figures fairly frequently in his English manuscript notes. The woman question was in the agenda (and mainly in terms of female education) not only of «Il Caffè» but also of the «Gazzetta Veneta» (1760-1761), where Gasparo Gozzi advanced propositions similar to those endorsed by Biffi and his Caffetisti friends exploring important issues debated in English papers like «The Spectator» or «The Guardian»<sup>24</sup>. But it was first and foremost the topic of the woman victim of an abusive male-dominated society that especially appealed to him. This can easily be gathered from some pages in his journal that hint at unfortunate love affairs where he himself seems to be involved and whose failure was not so much the women's fault, but a consequence of external factors, conventions, social duties, as entries n.6 and n.40 – written in a broken English in order to escape prying eyes – testify<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> The «Spectator» showed considerable interest in the theme and Addison even provided – in no. 205 – a list of numbers of the paper where women were the subjects; Biffi copied out and translated no. 198 of the «Spectator» on the topic of two different categories of women, the salamander and the victim, where quite clearly Addison's sympathy goes to the latter, a victim to a sexist and male-dominated society. For more information, see Guerra, *Giambattista Biffi and His Role*, cit.

<sup>25</sup> Biffi, *Diario* [6], cit., pp. 8-9 (21 novembre [1777]): a passage in macaronic English where the story of a girl from his town («My dear little gear!») is hinted at, and her destiny of seduction is compared to that of Yarico's in the famous tale narrated by Steele in the pages of the «Spectator». The girl is said to have been betrayed by a local Inkle («A cremonese Thomas Inkle»), or a Joseph Leman (an echo of the servant in Clarissa's family who betrays her: see Richardson's *Clarissa*, 1748, first Italian translation 1783, French translation 1751). Biffi claims to have saved her from shame hiding her until she had the baby and afterwards taking her back home. He confesses to feeling «a strong affection for this handsome mead». The tale of Inkle and Yarico became famous over the eighteenth century and it must have struck Biffi's attention because I have found other hints of it in other manuscripts, as in CIV 36 (Cremona State Library), where the name is first dropped on page 8r in the course of a letter, and later resumed at page 14r in an unfinished text titled «L'ingratitude». The passage reads as follows: «Anche i ritratti del vizio possono indurci ad amare il buono e l'onesto. Così può essere utile il racconto, tratto da uno scritto inglese, della vicenda di Thomas Inckle. Un giovane mercante inglese, durante un viaggio in America, per sfuggire agli indiani si rifugia in una foresta dove viene aiutato e amato da una giovane indigena, Yarico. Dopo alcuni mesi giunge una nave e i due vengono soccorsi. L'avido Inckle, dimentico di quanto Yarico ha fatto per lui, per recuperare i soldi persi, la vende al mercato degli schiavi e, per il fatto che attende un figlio, spunta un prezzo più alto» (CIV 36 paper 8r-v). In entry [40] of Biffi's *Diario*, pp. 42-43 (25 luglio 1778) the news is reported in English of Miss Pallavicini's marriage with Count Scotti. Biffi regrets he is not the lucky guy because of his «cir-

cumstances» and «the strange manner of thinking of mi uncle, a empty, roughly man [...] She is a tall ioung woman all lovely and blooming; pretti if not handsome; she has declared that I only and no other... Poor think, my heart is torn in pieces at the consideration of motives of my denial. I who wold not maring the greatest princess on heart if I were not assured that she loved me above all the mens where I deserve it or not: I had met a woman suitable to that manner of thinking». He also regrets the «unhappy passion for a deceitful woman, ow many wrongs have brought to me», thus hinting at an unhappy love story mentioned in the *Diario* four times until he comes to believe she is a vicious and hellish figure, a true villain, and can therefore put a stop to his passion.

Frustrated love, the persecuted female victim of social prejudice, and the topic of free choice in love account for the interest aroused in Biffi's translation of Alexander Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* – in the same folder B immediately following «Spectator» n.198 – together with the motif of the convent-prison that was becoming a common literary *topos* in gothic novels. Fiction, as Ruth Perry has demonstrated, did make use of «the conditions of women's lives»<sup>26</sup> and Lady Montagu famously commented that Richardson's *Clarissa* reminded her of her own youth – her clandestine letters to her future husband<sup>27</sup>. Folder B includes twelve pages hosting the autograph prose translations of *Lettera d'Eloesa ad Abailardo* (leaves 70r to 75v) and about twenty pages with the *Storia di Ladi Giulia Mandeville* (leaves 76r to 95r). The authors' names are not given, but of course if Pope's was familiar to Biffi (the manuscripts include also a translation of *Universal Prayer*), Brooke's name was probably unknown.

Pope's translation of *Eloisa*, according to Michele Mari<sup>28</sup>, is fairly certainly based on a French version. If we follow Mari's chronological reconstruction, Biffi must have translated it after 1774, and therefore the translation of Brooke's novel, which in the manuscripts follows Pope's, must have been started (or copied) after that date, contradicting the date inscribed on the title page of the folder (1771). I am tempted to link the two translations because both are in Biffi's handwriting, and both employ the epistolary form in prose, a medium Biffi privileged in his writing activity and which, according to Mari, has contributed to transform Pope's epistolary

circumstances» and «the strange manner of thinking of mi uncle, a empty, roughly man [...] She is a tall ioung woman all lovely and blooming; pretti if not handsome; she has declared that I only and no other... Poor think, my heart is torn in pieces at the consideration of motives of my denial. I who wold not maring the greatest princess on heart if I were not assured that she loved me above all the mens where I deserve it or not: I had met a woman suitable to that manner of thinking». He also regrets the «unhappy passion for a deceitful woman, ow many wrongs have brought to me», thus hinting at an unhappy love story mentioned in the *Diario* four times until he comes to believe she is a vicious and hellish figure, a true villain, and can therefore put a stop to his passion.

<sup>26</sup> R. Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, AMS Press, New York 1980, ch. VI.

<sup>27</sup> In *Clarissa* she found herself. Its «first volume softend me by a near resemblance of my Maiden Days»: R. Halsband (ed.), *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, vol. 3. 1752-1762, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1967, p. 9 (Letter of March 1, 1752 to Lady Bute); indeed, as critics have noted, *Clarissa*'s early plot uncannily reproduces Lady Mary's courtship.

<sup>28</sup> M. Mari, *Riflessi della fortuna di Eloisa nelle traduzioni italiane del Settecento*, in Id., *Momenti della traduzione fra Settecento e Ottocento*, Istituto Propaganda Libreria, Milano 1994, pp. 7-45: Mari sketches the tradition of the 'Eloisa' translations in Europe over the century. In 1774 Biffi also translated the most Rousseauesque play by Diderot, *Le Fils Naturel*, 1757.

poem into a short epistolary novel. Besides, by connecting Pope and Brooke, Biffi was perhaps inadvertently connecting patterns that the novel was about to exploit. The first Italian version of Pope's poem was produced in 1717 by Antonio Conti, immediately following the publication of the original<sup>29</sup>, but was published only in 1760: between Conti's and Biffi's versions nothing else appeared in Italian. Conti's version had erased all the sensuality and the passion – besides changing the conclusion – that play such an important role in Biffi's version. The 1770s are also interesting years for Alessandro Verri's reflections on the writing of novels: in a letter to Pietro of 10 November 1770 he speaks about a project to educate the female readership meant to address Contessa Margherita Boccapaduli.

But why did Biffi use a French prose version of Pope's poem when he was perfectly able to translate directly from the original<sup>30</sup>? Mari's hypothesis is convincing – in my opinion – in so much as it can receive support by the translation from Brooke's novel. He believes that Biffi's interest in experimentation and his «espressionismo verbale» must have directed him to Cailleau's prose translation which allowed for more freedom of expression and chimed with the new sentimental epistolary narrative Biffi so much cherished. Mari adds: «il Biffi doveva inoltre trovare in quella stessa parafrasi, molto meglio che nell'originale, i caratteri di un 'romanzo'» and he probably was ready to «rivivere la vicenda di Eloisa appunto nei termini di un romanzo epistolare settecentesco» as suggested by «[le] numerose testimonianze di illustri contemporanei sulla sua personalità rousseauiana» (p. 28).

In particular, the addition in Pope's translation of many details pointing to a pre-Romantic taste for natural landscape in its horrid peculiarities, and their presence in the last part of Brooke's novel, are to be read as homage to the growing fascination for those English authors whose popularity was on the rise even in Italy.

Brooke's novel appears to have been translated directly from the English: the kinds of flaws listed in an Appendix at the end of this paper support this hypothesis. The manuscript is oddly clean, with very rare instances of erasures or corrections, or change of ink – almost a fair copy – in fact the opposite of the Eloisa manuscripts which appear as working papers. Therefore, no instances of doubts or uncertainties – as if this were a clean copy ready for the printing press. The final blank pages add to the mystery.

The story of Eloisa foreshadows the tragic plot of Brooke's novel of 1763, anticipating not only its gothic

conclusion, but a pattern bound to become paradigmatic for so much eighteenth-century fiction. In appropriating the legend attached to the famous couple of antiquity, Pope's Eloisa, dominated by a fatal passion, was able to entrust the eighteenth century with the topic of the conflict between passion and social conventions that also rules many English heroines of the rising novel, and which plays a leading role in Brooke's narrative, where both action and discussion revolve around this topic. Moreover, it introduced the peculiar atmosphere of solitude and melancholy that was to suit the subsequent heroes of sensibility.

The amount of Brooke's novel that Biffi managed to translate (the first 8 letters and the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup>, out of 82) is too limited an essay to provide important issues for comment. However, we can notice that the translation runs smoothly, as if the translator were set to do it all. Being the first part of a long novel, it provides the reader with the general issues that are being dealt with. The setting is England, the Castle of Belmont, of Shakespearean memory, in the Summer of 1762, the 'actors' a group of «anime belle» enjoying the natural beauty of the place and the artificial beauty of their guests' exquisite education and sensibility<sup>31</sup>. The pleasures of a country mansion run by intelligent and educated people are described from the very beginning in detail, together with the features of the castle, built after Inigo Jones' design. The first four letters and the seventh are written by the male protagonist, Henry Mandeville, to his privileged addressee, Cavalier George Mordaunt, who, we are informed in a reasonably concise summary in letter 4, accompanied Henry in his Grand Tour but missed that part of it in which Henry became the victim of his own excessive passion and fell desperately in love with the wife of his Roman guest, Countess Malispini. The sad experience of falling for the wrong woman is told with guilty tones: the stern reprisal of the Countess engenders a reaction of shame and pain, so that, like Milton's Satan, Henry felt «how awful goodness is, and saw /virtue in her own shape how lovely». Having tasted the «avvelenata [sua] tazza» of love, Henry believes that his present feelings for his cousin Julia is just friendship, only to realize a few days later how wrong he is.

Biffi's translated passages include also letters written by a very different character and probably one of the best portraits in the whole novel, Lady Anne Wilmot,

<sup>29</sup> This rules out any possible influence of French versions.

<sup>30</sup> He had done so with Pope's *Universal Prayer* which he also transcribed in his manuscripts in the original version.

<sup>31</sup> This sort of utopian place has many points of contact with Pietro Verri's «Le delizie della villa», addressed in Volume One of «Il Caffè», while the theme of the «Buona compagnia» (the title of another essay by Pietro Verri in Volume Two of «Il Caffè») came to be strictly connected with the idea of happiness produced by welling up in a company of friends.

whose life also provides an exemplary situation: she and Henry are the main narrators in the text (no letter is written by Julia). The widow of a disparaging rich landlord only interested in hunting<sup>32</sup> and eating, Lady Anne is a good friend of Lady Belmont's, although very different in character and attitudes. Her past experience as a wife – providing a tale within the tale of forced marriage and conjugal unhappiness – enables her to run the young people's lives from the outside as far as love is concerned. Such a role echoes the fictitious role Brooke had attributed to herself through the voice of the Spinster in her journal *The Old Maid*: there, choosing the stance of the observer (as in Addison's «Spectator»), programmatically experiencing by proxy, she had dealt with love and marriage through the experience of her fictional niece Julia, but without renouncing a strong feminist voice that came through in spite of the fragmentation linked with the format of the journal. The role of the «Spectator», detached but empathic, and just as fragmented (fragmentation in fact being the hallmark of Biffi's writing), also characterizes the Cremonese count, as can be gathered from an interesting letter, where he describes a dinner in Casa Litta in the company of people who had travelled to Paris and London and feels a «Spectator» living through the words of other actors<sup>33</sup>.

Biffi's interruption of the translation of the novel is probably also part of his habit of trying his hand (at genres, topics, feelings) without concluding in order to attune them to his own perception of reality. His *Diary* is another strong instance of both fragmentation and of the practice of addressing hot topics as if they regarded someone else, as a «Spectator» would do<sup>34</sup>.

What might have engaged Biffi's attention in this novel? The style of the writing, to start with, which was rather new, especially in Lady Anne Wilmot's letters, and challenging as well. Then the tone, which is probably a very interesting point, given the early date of the novel. Only Sarah Fielding a few years earlier (1760)

<sup>32</sup> Biffi himself had very bad feelings for his uncle Stefano who was a habitual hunter: in *Diario* [46], cit., pp. 49-50 (27 agosto 1778), he announced his death and noticed that his love for hunting and agriculture had made him a stingy and hard man, lacking all kinds of sensibility and, in fact, friendless.

<sup>33</sup> Lettera II. Milano, venerdì 20 settembre 1776 (*Viaggio in Piemonte, in Lettere itinerarie*, cit., p. 201).

<sup>34</sup> It should be mentioned that both Biffi and Brooke had a strong interest in the theatre. Many of the major authors who contributed essays to «Il Caffè» also had shared experiences connected to the theatrical world: comedy was, for the authors of the Italian periodical, a means to bring about a reformation of costumes (also after the example of the «Spectator», where Steele had played an important role). And to this goal they moved devices, aims and methods typical of the theatre into the frame of the periodical. Even the language employed in «Il Caffè» owes something to the world of the theatre.

had introduced gothic elements in her *Ophelia*, which, according to recent criticism, should be valued as a precursor to Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*. Brooke's novel emphasizes those gothic motives arranging them within a pattern which is also theatrical, the death of the two lovers being a strong quotation from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*<sup>35</sup>.

As he had done with the original «Spectator» for the benefit of his friends engaged in the revolutionary effort to produce a new periodical for Lombard enlightenment, Biffi was now busy with the form of the novel, that was to fascinate Alessandro Verri in the next decades.

A brief description of the few flaws – especially 'translation loans' – present in the Italian word-by-word translation allows to confirm first of all that Biffi moved directly from the English original, but also that his proficiency was rather high. In some passages, however, as the Appendix below testifies, he probably felt at a loss with the originality of the style, with the novelty of the content and of course with the lack of a tradition of sentimental epistolary novel in Italy.

#### APPENDIX

VOL. 1, letter 1, p. 1: Biffi translates a future where the English has a past tense: «nor did it ever excite in my bosom» becomes «né ciò potrà mai eccitare nel mio petto»; «[my father] taught me [...] that virtue [...] would command through life that heart-felt esteem [...] which [...] wealth alone could never procure» becomes: «[mio padre mi ha apreso che ] la virtù [...] dominerebbe per tutta la vita col mezzo di quella stima...», instead of a more obvious «destinata a ispirare». Apparently, he does not recognize the use of «would» as future in indirect speech. «the sweet, the young, the blooming Lady Julia, who is this instant stepping into her post chaise with lady Anne Wilmot» is misrepresented as «la dolce, la giovane, la florida lady Giulia, la quale adesso sta facendo un giro nel suo biroccio con lady Anna Wilmot», thus losing that «writing-on-the-spot» effect which is so typical a device of the epistolary form in narrative.

Letter 2, p. 2: «Lady Belmont, [...] with all the strength of reason and steadiness of mind generally confined to the best of our sex, has all the winning softness becoming the most amiable of her own; [...] she joins the graces of a court to the simplicity of a cottage; and, by an inexpressible ease and sweetness in her address

<sup>35</sup> The hint that parents can turn out to be the ruin of their beloved children also sounds as a quotation from Shakespeare's tragedy, while of course the name Julia reverberates from Shakespeare to Rousseau to the Old Maid's niece.

makes all who approach her happy; impartial in her politeness, at her genial board no invidious distinctions take place». The long description of lady Belmont misses a few points here, where Biffi first has: «Ledi Belmont, [...] con tutta la forza della ragione e stabilità di mente confina colle migliori teste del nostro sesso» instead of «con tutta la forza della ragione e stabilità di mente che normalmente si trovano solo presso le migliori del nostro sesso»; in the next phrase he misses the sharp contrast court/cottage by translating «congiunge le grazie di una corte alla semplicità della vita familiare» which, however, maintains some contrast; while the next is almost lost in translation «sweetness in her address» becomes «amorevolezza nel fare inchieste e udire ricorsi» where «dolcezza nel modo di parlare» would have been enough. «At her genial board» becomes «al geniale suo abordo» which could imply a sweet kind of approach, but misses the hint at the table where the lady entertains her guests independently of their social status.

p. 3. The term «romantic» appears in connection with «the gardens and park» that are defined «romantic beyond the wantonness of imagination». Here and in other instances the term is translated as «romanzesco». Also repeatedly Biffi translates «parents» with «parenti».

Letter 4, p. 5: Henry reports to his friend about his unhappy and impossible love for his guest, the Countess Malispini – a name Biffi adjusts in his translation in Malaspina. «You will not therefore wonder that the warmth and inexperience of youth, hourly exposed in so dangerous a situation, was unable to resist»: Biffi has «il calore e l'inesperienza della gioventù, così di buon'ora esposta» missing the implication of repetition that in the end wins over Henry. Biffi renounces translating a quotation from Milton *Paradise Lost* IV 830.

Letter 5 from Anne Wilmot to her lover Colonel Bellville, describing Henry. At the end of the letter, Anne mentions the present position of Henry's father colonel Mandeville, «meeting with some ill usage from a minister on account of a vote in parliament». Biffi has «avendo avuto un incontro cattivo con un ministro sul particolare di un voto in parlamento» which misses the meaning of «meeting with» as «suffering from».

Letter 6 from Anne Wilmot on the same topic: Biffi seems to have more difficulties with Anne's register in her letters to Colonel Bellville, and in the opening paragraph «[Henry] has scarce been himself since he parted with his father yesterday» becomes in the Italian version «a mala pena si è contenuto egli stesso di non partire ieri con suo padre» which entirely misses the meaning. «I know some few sons» immediately after, becomes «conosco ben pochi figli» which is exactly the opposite of the «conosco qualche altro figlio invece». The term

«cit» is introduced and frequently employed in the text to describe the Westbrooks: Biffi translates it as «cittadino» but perhaps the implication of merchant man is lost. Also below «city vivacity» in connection with the description of the daughter, is translated as «vivacità cittadina». According to the OED, *cit*, «short for CITIZEN *n.* 1c; usually applied, more or less contemptuously, to a townsman or 'cockney' as distinguished from a countryman, or to a tradesman or shopkeeper as distinguished from a gentleman»; Johnson has «A pert low townsman; a pragmatist trader». In describing the wife of Mr Westbrook for some reason Biffi has «donna di gran condizione» to translate «a woman of great erudition». What really seems to baffle him, however, is the style of Anne's letter: «she sung, for the creature sings, a tender Italian air» is flatly rendered as «essa canta, tutte le creature cantano», while the implied meaning was «she does also this».

Letter 7: At the end of the letter Anne admits that «It was with difficulty Lord Belmont forced us at night from this charming retirement», where Biffi has «non riuscì se non con difficoltà a sforzarsi ad abbandonare» whereas it is the guests that must be forced out.