

Tyler, Margaret

Kate Aughterson, University of Brighton, UK

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Translation; Authorship; Women readers; Romance

Abstract

Margaret Tyler's translation of the Spanish Romance by Diego Ortúñez de Calahorra, *The Mirrour of Princely Deedes and Knighthood* (1578) is the first secular, published translation by a woman writer in English. Although little is known about Tyler's biography, her dedication and preface defend the work of women writers as both aesthetically valuable and equal to men's translations. The choice of genre (that of romance) was arguably both a gendered and political choice at the very moment when prose romances—in both translation and the mother tongue—were becoming popular reading.

Introduction

Margaret Tyler's translation of the Spanish Romance by Diego Ortúñez de Calahorra, *The Mirrour of Princely Deedes and Knighthood* was published by Thomas East in 1578. East had printed a translation of *Orlando Furioso* in 1575 and went on to publish highly popular texts, including John Lyly's *Euphues* in 1580, Malory's *Morte D'arthur* in 1582, subsequent extended translations and editions of the *Mirror* (not translated by Tyler), second and third editions of Tyler's original in 1580 and 1599, travel, theological and medical books and the works of William Byrd and other Elizabethan court musicians (McKerrow 1968, 96-97). Tyler's work was thus effectively sold within a robust and thriving market for the emergent English cultural Renaissance. Translation itself was the prime mode by which the knowledge from European and classical texts and traditions were enriching the emergence of a new distinctive English culture in the sixteenth century (Barker and Hosington 2013).

Tyler's own words make up a mere five pages of a total volume of 154 pages. Nevertheless, in her dedication to Lord Thomas Howard (aged seventeen at the time of publication, son of the executed Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk) and in her preface "To the Reader," Tyler embeds her practice and writerly philosophy both within the nascent English renaissance of letters and culture and within a newly emergent articulation of the rights of women to be writers and culture-makers. She claims her translation from the Spanish to the English had been commenced some while before this publication, "the rather to reacquaint myself with mine olde reading" (fol. A2r), and possibly at the behest of the Norfolks as well as old friends ("upon hope to please them I first undertook this labour," fol. A2r). Her translation retains "the speeches short and sweet" of the original (fol. A3r) whilst acknowledging the cultural conundrum for any translator, since "seldome is the tale carried cleane from an other's mouth" (fol. A3r). Recent work on the balance between fidelity and creativity in her translation has suggested that subtle variations in wording and focus simultaneously play down some of the male violence and enhance female agency in the romance plot (Munoz 2015; Roberts 2017).

Biography

The sole sources of information about Tyler's life are her dedication and preface, which reveal that she was "of staide age" (fol. A4v) in 1578; had been a "servant" of the Duke and Duchess of Norfolk (Thomas Howard's parents) in the 1560s, and possibly even earlier, since his mother died in 1564 and his father was beheaded for treason in 1572 (Graves 2004); that she was knowledgeable enough to read in and translate from Spanish; and that she had friends who encouraged her in the enterprise. Schleiner (2004) hypothesizes that she was related (perhaps by marriage) to a John Tyler also employed as a scribe by the Norfolks.

Work

Tyler's work exemplifies a number of distinct skill sets: knowledge of Spanish and an eloquence in translating it; the ability to successfully find a publisher for the work; the location of her own work within an emergent notion of what translation into English means in terms of cultural identity; and a robust exposition of the value and autonomy of the woman writer. The form and content demonstrate Tyler's sure grasp of Renaissance rhetoric and logic, as well as her subtle turning of that rhetoric to develop a distinctive argument about writing and cultural production by women. Her preface stands as the first explicit articulation of a proto-feminist defence of women's published speech and writing in English by a woman (Schleiner 1992 and 2004; Ferguson 1985; Aughterson 2017; Uman 2007).

The dedication to Lord Thomas Howard utilizes conventional topoi of dedications to published work in the period; praise for the dedicatee's social skills and perceptions, a claimed personal connection, and a bid for some kind of protection against any potential critics of either the work itself or the act of publication. As with many women translators who published religious work in the period, Tyler claims that the publication itself has been forced on her ("not made choice off," fol. A2r) "by the earnestnesse of my friends" and "consideration of my insufficiencie" (fol. A2r). The modesty topos is a frequent trope in women's prefaces of the early modern period (Pender 2012), but can also appear in writings by elite men in the earlier Elizabethan period, when publication could still be seen as un-gentlemanly.

The preface "to the Reader" is more explicitly radical and enables Tyler to engage directly with and address the readers of her work—just as, for example, [Aemelia Lanyer](#) was to do with her *Salve Deus Rex Judeorum* (1611) and John Heminges and Henry Condell with Shakespeare's *Complete Works* (1623). Such prefaces enabled women writers to frame their creative work with caveats that might protect their modesty and reputation but equally gave space for self-authorisation and a paratextual insertion of a feminised focalisation (Eckerle, 2007).

Tyler displays a sophisticated awareness of the conventions of the preface as well. It is carefully constructed in five parts, beginning with a description of the story and its place in Renaissance literary reception theory. The second part defends the work of a woman writer and the third part Tyler's choice of original text. The fourth part develops an innovative argument about women readers as active cultural agents, identified through male writers dedicating their works to women, whilst the final part acts as a summary conclusion. The clarity of the classical structure of her argument allows her to articulate a logical rhetorical defence of women translators using traditional humanist oratory in which she assembles evidence to prove her points, incorporates

potential objections and refutes them, and is able to wittily reverse the evidence often arrayed against women translators.

Her opening sentence directly to the reader situates her practice firmly within the English Renaissance commonplace about literary theory: “done into English for thy profit and delight” (fol. A3r). She aligns her own purposes in translating and publishing with those of the original author (“the author’s purpose appeareth to be this, to animate thereby and set on fire the lustie courages of young gentleman to the advancement of their line...the varietie and continuall shift of fresh matter very delightfull, in the speches short and sweet, wise in sentence and wary in the provision of contrary accidents,” fol. A3r). The neo-classical, Horatian emphasis on literature that should delight and educate was newly propounded in print in English in the 1570s and 1580s—a literary theory for the self-conscious Elizabethan cultural moment—appearing slightly later in Philip Sidney’s *The Defence of Poesie* (1595, although circulating in manuscript in the 1570s), George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590), and Ben Jonson’s translations of Horace in the 1600s. Tyler thus stands at the beginning of this influential stream of English literary theory, and its focus on reception (that is, the impact on the reader) as well as form (“the grace thereof rather in the reporter’s device than in the truth,” fol. A3r).

Tyler directly tackles the issue of the gendering of writing in her second section, by setting forth five reasons in defence of women as translators and of their “labour.” The first is an indirect critique of separate spheres of work and action for men and women: invoking the conventional social courtesy extended to women as the weaker sex, but juxtaposed with an assertion that her “matter” may be seen as “more manlike than becometh my sexe” (fol. A3r). The binary opposition (manlike martial stories versus the translator’s femaleness) is trebly deconstructed: first, she argues that women are involved in wars, even where they do not fight directly; second, that both women and men learn virtue from such stories; and third, that some women (such as the Amazons) have fought, as does the heroine of this very romance. The second defence of women writers is in her direct denial of the “manliness of the matter,” because “the benefit in equal part apperteineth” (fol. A3v): in her view genres are not gendered. The third defence rests is her exempla of women warriors, historical and fictional (the Amazons and Claridiana, fol. A3v): conventional tropes of the *querelle des femmes* where women’s value or virtue could be claimed by citation of great historical, mythical, or fictional exempla. The fourth defence lies in her conventional disclaimer about female translators – such a role is one of neutral and invisible transmission (“the invention, disposition, trimming, and what else in this is story is wholly another mans, my part therein but the translation,” fol. A3v). The final defence lies obliquely in her comment that society permits “a gentlewoman...[to] honestly...employ her travaile” (fol. A3v) in translation.

Tyler’s oration then moves onto the third part of her argument, defending the choice of material (“the question now ariseth not of my choice but my material,” fol. A3v). Interestingly, Tyler articulates two topoi of women’s publishing only to reject them: she might, she says, have argued that she was asked “by others...my taskmasters and oveseers lest I should be idle” (fol. A3v); or that she “yielded” because “dayly new devices are published in songs, sonnets, enterludes, and other discourses...without reproach” (fol. A4r); but instead she says that neither pressure nor fashion are themselves sufficient justifications for publishing. She writes:

I will not make that my defence which cannot help mee and doth hinder other men. But my defence is by example of the best, amongst which many have dedicated their labours, some stories, some of war, some phisick, some lawe, some as concerning government, some divine matters, unto divers ladies and gentlewomen. And if men may and do bestow such of their travailles upon gentlewomen, then may we women read such of their works as they dedicate unto us; and if we may read them, why not farther wade in them to the serch of a truth? And then much more why not deale by translation in such arguments, especially this kinde of exercise, being a matter of more heede than of deep invention or exquisite learning. (fol. A4r)

Tyler argues that women writers are equal to the best of men and should not use arguments which apologise for or displace, their “labour.” This segues into her fourth section, where her defence of women writers is based on the notion of reception, the acknowledgement of the active woman reader, and a rejection of genre-stereotyping:

If women be excluded from the view of such works as appeare in their name, or if glory onely be sought in our common inscriptions it mattereth not whether the parties be men or women...my perswasion hath bene thus, that it is all one for a woman to pen a story as for a man to address his story to a woman. (fol. A4r-v)

She claims women should not be straightjacketed by assumptions about the kind of material they should translate: “amongst all my ill willers some I hope are not so straight that they would enforce me necessarily either not to write or to write of divinitie” (fol. A4v). Tyler clears a space for women writers and reader of romance, countering contemporary religious writers’ attacks on women reading such supposedly light material (Lucas 1989), as well as arguing for authorial autonomy. She situates her relationship between her work and her readers as a space of pleasurable dialogue: “My meaning hath been to make other parteners of my liking, as I doubt not, gentle reader, but if it shall please thee after serious matters to sport they self with this Spaniard...rather devised to beguile time than to breede matter of sad learning” (fol. A4v). By focusing on the delight and pleasure of her work (“a good companion to drive out a wery night, or a merry jest at thy bord,” fol. A4v), Tyler expressly advocates a theory of culture as pleasure.

Finally, throughout both dedication and preface, Tyler distinctly uses a repeating metaphor of translation and writing as a kind of birthing: repeatedly calling the work her “travaile” or “labour.” By re-appropriating what had often been a masculine usage of creative work as birth (such as Sidney’s sonnets, Friedman 1987; Harvey 1992; Uman 2012), Tyler’s articulation of female creativity as equivalent to men’s refuses both implicitly and explicitly to submit to patriarchal constructions of appropriate femininities.

Conclusion

Margaret Tyler’s outspoken defence of her own translation publication and practice is a sophisticated and proactive articulation of the equal role for women creatives in the English literary renaissance. Her work should be read alongside and as equal to, the work of other (male) literary theorists of the period, not confined to a “women’s writing” course. By seeing

her work within this broader context, as well as her defence of her writing as equal to men's, Tyler paves the way for other early modern women writers (such as Aemila Lanyer, [Mary Wroth](#), [Elizabeth Cary](#), [Anne Bradstreet](#), [Katherine Philips](#), and [Aphra Behn](#)) who all go on to argue that women writers should be seen as equal to men.

Cross References

[Lanyer, Aemilia](#)
[Wroth, Mary](#)
[Cary, Elizabeth](#)
[Bradstreet, Anne](#)
[Philips, Katherine](#)
[Behn, Aphra](#)

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