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Indice

The Shelleys in Milan, 1818-2018
Guest editors: *Marco Canani* and *Valentina Varinelli*

Rassegne

L'analisi linguistica e letteraria XXVII (2019) 19-34

"Newly Unfrozen Senses and Imagination": Shelley's Translation of the *Symposium* and His Development as a Writer in Italy

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Shelley's major effort during his first months in Italy in 1818 was a rapid and brilliant translation of Plato's *Symposium*. A translation of that particular work, with its overt and central celebration of homosexuality, was, in an English context, a daring and potentially dangerous undertaking at that time. Shelley's work on the translation had two highly significant effects. Firstly it brought him up against the limits of freedom in personal conduct and intellectual experiment, given the legal and cultural realities of his native social world. Thereafter, Shelley's behaviour undergoes a tempered maturation which becomes steadily more noticeable through the four years of his Italian exile. Secondly, the Platonic text exposed Shelley to a sophisticated dialogic and dramatic form which makes an immediate and transformative impact on his major poems of the Italian period. The translation of the *Symposium* thus plays a pivotal role in the development of Shelley's mature style, opening the way to his emergence as a major poet.

Keywords: Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Symposium*, translation, love, drama

Shelley left England for the last time on Thursday 12 March 1818, making his way through France and Savoy across the Alps to arrive in Milan on 4 April. He travelled with a large trunk full of books. He also carried a number of notebooks. It was of course Shelley's practice to compose directly into notebooks; he seems to have carried one with him at all times, for he used them constantly, in every kind of setting, in the study but also out of doors, in a carriage, even on horseback. At least three notebooks carried from England already contained work from the months preceding his departure. He bought new notebooks soon after arriving in Italy[1].

[1] For a detailed account of almost all of Shelley's surviving notebooks, including their contents and dates of use, see the exhaustive descriptive catalogue by B.C. Barker-Benfield, *Shelleyan Writing Materials in the Bodleian Library: A Catalogue of Formats, Papers, and Watermarks*, in *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*, Vol. 23, Garland, New York 2002, pp. 7-68. It is not known how many of the notebooks used in England Shelley brought with him to Italy, but it is certain these included the notebooks now shelf-marked in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, as Bodleian MS. Shelley e. 4, Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. e. 12, and Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. e. 15 (and probably also Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. e. 16). Immediately upon arrival in Italy he acquired at least notebooks Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. e. 6 and Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. e. 11.

Given his constant use of such notebooks there is an interesting question as to what, if anything, he was actually writing in the first few weeks and months of his life in Italy. There is no scholarly consensus about this. Between late March and mid July, we do not know for certain that Shelley wrote anything at all except for one brief scrap of verse obviously composed while crossing the Apennines[2]. Such inactivity would have been highly unusual, virtually unique in fact in the context of his adult writing career. True, he was travelling a great deal and without a settled residence for much of the time, but that did not stop him at various other comparably unsettled periods of travel and disruption.

It can be argued that Shelley was in fact trying out various kinds of composition during that period of more than three months. He had with him two potentially significant works begun in England. The fragmentary poem now known as "Athanase" had been conceived in 1817, and he continued to work on it in Italy. Mary Shelley says it was drafted in December 1817, but parts strongly suggest the influence of an Italian spring, and Shelley could still have been working on it as late as December 1819. Similarly, *Rosalind and Helen* had been started much earlier, perhaps in the Geneva summer of 1816, and then resumed later in 1817. The published poem's opening however was clearly composed after Shelley and Mary visited Lake Como, and it was then further worked on at Bagni di Lucca, from where Shelley sent the finished poem back to England[3].

Shelley was twenty-five when he left England. Leaving out of account the several works produced in his teenage years, he had published *Queen Mab* privately, *The Revolt of Islam* under difficult circumstances, and a volume containing *Alastor* and some shorter poems. As with his various more or less fugitive prose publications, none of these volumes had attracted significant notice, except in the context of vilification, public and private, of his activities as a political radical, a blaspheming atheist, and an adulterer. And apart from two shorter poems we now think of as important in themselves and in heralding his later development ("Mont Blanc", and "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"), his identity as a poet was relatively unformed.

The unfinished poems, "Athanase" and *Rosalind and Helen*, cannot have taken up much of Shelley's extraordinary creative energies. Other writing projects were almost certainly conceived in preparation for his imminent immersion in Italian literature and history. "Athanase" is in *terza rima*. The aborted fragment "Mazenghi" is also in an Italian form, *sestina narrativa*. This poem is usually dated later than the first weeks in Italy, but its source in Sismondi's *Histoire des Républiques Italiennes* suggests preparatory reading for Italy, and the position of the draft in one of Shelley's English notebooks, together with some topographical and other details in the text, suggest that he worked on it soon after arriving in Italy, and probably during his stay with the Gisbornes in Leghorn in May[4]. He had also signalled his ambition to attempt a drama on the life of Torquato Tasso, and was doing background biographical reading in both England and Italy in the spring. A start

[2] See "Listen, listen, Mary mine –", in P.B. Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley*, Vol. 2, K. Everest – G. Matthews ed., Pearson Education, Harlow 2000 (Longman Annotated English Poets), pp. 351-352.

[3] See the headnotes to *Rosalind and Helen* and "Athanase", *Ibid.*, pp. 266-269, 311-313.

[4] See the headnote to "Mazenghi", *Ibid.*, pp. 352-354.

on one scene survives, positioned adjacent to the "Mazenghi" draft[5]. Drama was a new departure for Shelley, and his reading in May and June included a series of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas which were no doubt undertaken to help develop his sense of the demands of dramatic writing[6].

But most significantly, just before leaving England he had been working on translation from Greek, and also on a lesser scale from Latin. His translations of six of the so-called Homeric Hymns were made in January 1818, in a notebook he went on using in Italy for more than two years[7]. They are a fine achievement in themselves, but they also anticipate what were very probably a series of efforts in translation which bridge the transition from London in January 1818 to the first Italian summer at Bagni di Lucca. Immediately following the notebook draft of "Mazenghi" is a series of translations, firstly short pieces from Virgil, and then a complete translation of Euripides' satyr-play *The Cyclops*[8]. These works probably represent the main literary activity undertaken by Shelley through May, June and early July of 1818. His Greek studies with Peacock, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, Leigh Hunt and others at Marlow throughout 1817 had immersed him in the language and many major authors and works of Greek antiquity. Before leaving England he was working on translation, and during the coach journey across northern Europe he read aloud from an English version of August Wilhelm Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*. In that work Schlegel discusses *The Cyclops*, commenting favourably on aspects of the play but noting its rarity as the uniquely surviving specimen of its genre, and also, most interestingly, deploring its coarseness and crudity, containing as it does earthily ribald representations of cannibalism, rape, drunkenness, physical violence, swearing, and sodomy.

Shelley would have been attracted to *The Cyclops* by these very qualities, because he wanted, through translation, to show his countrymen what the ancient Greeks were really like. The appeal of a rare and unusual genre, dealing with themes and content impossible to represent publicly in Regency England, motivated him to a rendering of Euripides' play which is startlingly brilliant. It stands today as one of the greatest of all English versions of any Greek drama, capitalising on a sustained period of reading and study which clearly enabled a practised fluency in Shelley's handling of Greek into English which prepared the ground for a still greater achievement, his translation of Plato's *Symposium*.

During the first period of his life in Italy Shelley's experience was paradoxical and contradictory. He had freed himself from the tribulations and threats of his notoriety in the eyes of polite English society. He had also left behind the cold and dullness of English winter for the burgeoning brilliance of an Italian spring. For English travellers to the South the first experience of Italy was almost a cliché of paradisal weather and flora, mingled with the glorious remains of antiquity. This, up to a point, was how Shelley found it. He wrote

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 365-370.

[6] For detailed daily records of Shelley's reading see M. Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844*, P.R. Feldman – D. Scott-Kilvert ed., 2 vols, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987.

[7] Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. e. 12.

[8] Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodleian MS. Shelley e. 4.

to Peacock from Bagni di Lucca in July of his "newly unfrozen senses and imagination"[9]. And yet this 'paradise of exiles' was shadowed by persisting personal troubles carried from England with the baggage. He and Mary knew no Italians, and it would be a long time before Shelley developed any meaningful relationships with Italian natives. This isolation, contrasting with the external warmth of the environment, was compounded by a matching isolation from their own countrymen, who were plentiful around Bagni di Lucca in the summer. It is a period in which Shelley seems to drift deracinatedly through a gorgeous but alien social and natural world. So his companions were essentially books, those books in the large trunk carried on the carriage. The trunk had been impounded by customs officials at the Savoy border at Chambery, but had apparently at last arrived back with Shelley by 10 July, as on that day he wrote from Casa Bertini in Bagni di Lucca to the Gisbornes:

> We have spent a month here already in our accustomed solitude [...] and the choice society of all ages which I took care to pack up in a large trunk before we left England have revisited us here[10].

This "choice society of all ages" were the books he had with him, and it was in that immaterial and transhistorical realm of pure mind where Shelley now found himself. The trunk must have been very large indeed, because just going on the books we know he, and Mary, were reading at Casa Bertini, they seem to have numbered at least some one hundred volumes (though some of them must presumably have come from the Gisbornes' library in Leghorn). In this state of abstraction from immediately pressing social and cultural realities, and following on from his work on Euripides, Shelley turned to the most important translation of his life, Plato's *Symposium*. Shelley was exceptionally gifted as a translator, perhaps the greatest of all English poets in that regard. But his translation of the *Symposium* stands out even against that background. He accomplished it over just ten mornings, a most prodigious feat of intellect, indeed genius. The *Symposium* is more than 25,000 words long in English, so Shelley must have worked at the rate of more than 2,500 translated words each morning, an all but literally incredible achievement. The finished work left an indelible and abidingly central influence on Shelley's poetry and thought, accompanied as it was by reflections developed in the essay he titled "A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love", obviously intended as a preface to the translation itself. It also prompted the brief but immensely important essay "On Love", which is clearly shaped by elements of the Platonic work[11]. It is very important to under-

[9] P.B. Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, F.L. Jones ed., 2 vols, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1964, Vol. 2, p. 25.
[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
[11] The discussion which follows does not consider in any detail Shelley's extraordinary stylistic achievement in the prose of his translation; for a brilliant account of that achievement see M. O'Neill, *Emulating Plato: Shelley as Translator and Prose Poet*, in *The Unfamiliar Shelley*, A.M. Weinberg – T. Webb ed., Ashgate, Farnham 2009, pp. 239-256. There is also a wealth of interesting detailed analysis of Shelley's handling of the Greek in S. Nelson, *Shelley and Plato's Symposium: The Poet's Revenge*, "International Journal of the Classical Tradition", 14, 2007, pp. 100-129.

stand just how radical a project this was for Shelley, especially given the circumstances in which he had left England, and in the context of that isolation from both English and Italian society. It is the project of a mind freed from all constraint of custom and propriety, and thus free to go where intellect alone was leading.

On 25 July he wrote to Peacock:

> I have lately found myself totally incapable of original composition. I employed my mornings, therefore, in translating the *Symposium*, which I accomplished in ten days. Mary is now transcribing it, and I am writing a prefatory essay. I have been reading scarcely anything but Greek, and a little Italian poetry with Mary[12].

The hopelessly unreliable Thomas Medwin claimed that Shelley first encountered the *Symposium* at Eton, but this seems extremely unlikely[13]. He probably first read it in English translation during his brief time at University College, Oxford. Thomas Jefferson Hogg's biography is unusually precise in recalling the actual Platonic texts Shelley used at that time[14]. Then through the months of immersion in Greek authors at Albion House in 1817 Shelley read the *Symposium* in Greek and will undoubtedly have discussed it in a serious and sustained way with Peacock, Hogg and others. This goes some way to explaining his decision to translate the work into English. But that decision was more unusual than critics, scholars and biographers have tended to recognise, so it is worth considering carefully why he turned to the *Symposium* when he found himself "totally incapable of original composition".

The *Symposium* is of course concerned with love. Its essential argument is that the most basic kind of love is aroused by the stimulus of visual beauty. This is love as a relationship between two people who express their mutual feeling physically including through sexual intercourse. This kind of love is treated by Plato as a special case. It embodies, at a low level in philosophical terms, the higher force which impels humanity to seek understanding of the eternal, immutable 'form' or 'idea' of 'the beautiful itself'. So it is that in the long speech by Socrates which articulates the culminating arguments of the dialogue, Plato explains how he has learned from the prophetess Diotima that love ascends by stages from a low physical mode, via a series of increasingly generalised and abstract steps, to a purely intellectual and abstract love of beauty, understood as identical with goodness, and representing the achievement of true wisdom, the goal of philosophy itself. One can easily understand how this doctrine would have appealed to Shelley, offering a natural affinity with the 'Intellectual Beauty' he had already celebrated in verse as shadowing our perception of reality. He was disposed to think of experience as suggesting an ideal realm lying just beyond our

[12] P.B. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 26.

[13] T. Medwin, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, H. Buxton Forman ed., Oxford University Press, London 1913, p. 33.

[14] T.J. Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols, Moxon, London 1858, Vol. 1, p. 103. Shelley and Hogg read Plato at Oxford in the French translation of selected dialogues by André Dacier (1699), and in an English translation of Dacier; for full bibliographical details see J. Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley: A Study of Platonism and the Poetic Mind*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 1949, p. 33.

perception of the material world, driving the constantly deferred figurations of his distinctive poetic manner.

There were however also less abstract factors attracting Shelley to an account of love in its physical expression as something from which the mind might ascend to higher and purely intellectual insight. He had abandoned his first wife Harriet in 1814, and eloped with the sixteen-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. At the time Harriet was the mother of his baby daughter Ianthe, and pregnant with his son Charles. By the summer of 1818 this unhappy episode was far from receding into the past. Harriet Shelley committed suicide in December 1816, some two years after Shelley had left her. At almost the same time, Mary Shelley's half-sister Fanny also committed suicide, in obscure circumstances which may well have involved, among other things, her sense of an unrequited passion for Shelley. Shelley was shaken to the core by these appalling tragedies, and in a real sense it was a crisis which permanently changed him, away from the reckless impetuosity and single-minded determination with which he had been living out the implications of his intellectual convictions.

There were also consequences. Harriet's family pursued Shelley in the courts for custody of his two children by her, both of whom had been cared for by them following her death. The Lord Chancellor's formal order determining against Shelley's custody of his own children was made on 27 March 1817. This decision was a dreadful blow to Shelley, based as it explicitly was on the Westbrooks' case that, in addition to his failure to act responsibly towards his children while their mother was still alive, Shelley's published works revealed him as an avowed "revolutionist" in politics, and in religion an atheist and a blasphemer. The judgment also referred to the Lord Chancellor's understanding that if Shelley were to be awarded custody of his children, it was his intention "to educate them as he thinks proper", in other words to raise them as atheistical revolutionaries. The Lord Chancellor's decision was not the end of the matter, as there still had to be a judgement regarding "a proper plan for the maintenance and education of [the children]" including a determination as to who exactly would take charge of their upbringing. Shelley and his legal counsel made a proposal of a married couple that he considered suitable, and Harriet's family made a counter-proposal. The matter was reported on by an official of the Lord Chancellor on 1 August 1817, but further legal exchanges took place until a final decision was reached on 28 April 1818, and presumably communicated to Shelley in Italy[15].

Of the eight people in Shelley's Italian party, five were adults: Shelley himself, Mary, Mary's stepsister Claire Clairmont, and two female servants. The other three were very young children. Shelley's two surviving children with Mary were William, aged just over two, and Clara, six months old. The third child was Claire's one-year-old daughter Allegra, fathered by Byron. The importance of children has a special place in the argument of the *Symposium*. For Diotima explains to Socrates that Love is, in the words of Shelley's own translation, "the desire of generation in the beautiful, both with relation to the body and

[15] The Chancery Papers relating to Shelley's children by Harriet were published in T. Medwin, *Life*, pp. 463-486.

the soul" (206b, *BSM* 389)[16]. When Socrates responds that he finds that difficult to understand, Diotima explains as follows, again in the words of Shelley's translation:

> The bodies and the souls of all human beings are alike pregnant with their future progeny, and when we arrive at a certain age, our nature impels us to bring forth and propogate. This nature is unable to produce in that which is deformed, but it can produce in that which is beautiful. The intercourse of the male and female in generation, a divine work, through pregnancy and production, is, as it were, something immortal in mortality (206c, *BSM* 119).

In other words, even the lowest form of love, that response to visual beauty which stimulates sexual attraction, is akin to the higher forms which lead ultimately to immortality of the soul, because for mortals, limited to the gross material world of the senses, producing children is a kind of immortality, a mode of the self's transmission forward through time. It is one form of the immortality which, for example, Shelley was to celebrate for Keats three years later in *Adonais*, the immortality conferred by the creation of art. This is the progeny of the soul, generated by intercourse with the beautiful, just as children are the progeny of the body, generated by physical intercourse.

Notwithstanding his tortured relations with his children by his first wife Harriet, and the circumstances of the terrible deaths of both Clara and William, Shelley seems to have related to little children with powerful affection and affinity[17]. In the spring and early summer of 1818 the children must have been a great pleasure in the dislocated isolation of their first weeks and months as exiles. But, more than that, the children were a main part of why Shelley, Mary, Claire and the children were there at all. Part of Shelley's motivation in travelling to Italy was a serious concern for his health. In December of 1817 he wrote of his fear that he had a consumptive disease which necessitated a southern climate[18]. He claimed that in devoting half a year to the composition of *Laon and Cythna* he had "felt the precariousness of my life, and [...] engaged in [the] task resolved to leave some record of myself". Much of *Laon and Cythna*, he said, had been written "as the communications of a dying man"[19].

But another major reason for the move to Italy was Shelley and Mary's concern that the Lord Chancellor's decision to deprive them of the custody of his children Ianthe and Charles by Harriet might also threaten their custody of William and Clara. This worry had been with them since at least the middle of 1817, when Shelley wrote to Byron from

[16] References to the *Symposium* are to the Stephanus pagination, standard in modern editions. Where Shelley's translation is cited, references are to the sole known surviving source, Mary Shelley's fair copy in the notebook shelf-marked as Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. d. 8, reproduced with facsimile and transcription in *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*, Vol. 20, M. O'Neill ed., Garland, New York 1994, henceforth referred to as *BSM*.

[17] See for example Peacock's account in his *Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley*: "Shelley was extremely fond of his children. He was pre-eminently an affectionate father" (*The Halliford Edition of the Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, H.F.B. Brett-Smith – C.E. Jones ed., 10 vols, Constable & Co., London 1924-34, Vol. 8, p. 70).

[18] P.B. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 573.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 577.

Marlow of his fears that a criminal suit against him would grow out of the Chancery proceedings over custody:

> I suppose you know that the tyranny, civil and religious, under which this country groans, has visited me somewhat severely. I neither like it the worse nor the better for this. It was always the object of my unbounded abhorrence. But it may become necessary that I should quit the country. It is possible that the interference exercised by Chancery in the instance of my two children might be attempted to be extended to William. Should this be the case, I shall depart[20].

This anxiety proved unfounded. But the very possibility of such a proceeding is extraordinary in itself, reminding us just how extreme was Shelley's notoriety in England. The Lord Chancellor's decision to deprive Shelley of the custody of his own children set a legal precedent which is still cited today. *The Necessity of Atheism*, the pamphlet which led to his expulsion from Oxford, was amongst the very first openly titled atheistical works to be published in England. Perhaps even more exceptional was Shelley's proposal, just after his expulsion, to relinquish the entail on a portion of his inheritance. To his father at least, this was a more terrible extremity of conviction even than atheism. It would have been the first example in English legal history of such an act, let alone with its associated condition that the inheritance should revert to the female line[21]. All of these extremes of behaviour and conviction had most recently been compounded by the explicit themes of *The Revolt of Islam*. This of course was the title under which a revised version of *Laon and Cythna* had been published as Shelley was leaving England. He had been obliged to accept the need for revisions to conceal the original poem's representation of incest and blasphemy. His publisher Ollier had first accepted the work for publication without realising its potentially dangerous content, but the book's printer alerted him to the possibility of prosecution. Ollier could as publisher very easily have been arrested and prosecuted for blasphemous libel. Incest was not then a civil crime under English law though it could theoretically be prosecuted by an ecclesiastical court. But a poem positively celebrating incest would have been highly controversial, not least because of the rumours swirling around Shelley's known association with Byron and his supposedly incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh, and public suspicions about the alleged 'league of incest' at Geneva in the summer of 1816, and the reputed 'seraglio at Marlow' in 1817.

All these factors bear on Shelley's decision to translate Plato's *Symposium* into English. He will of course have been motivated by the appeal of the abstract Platonic argument, that love proceeds in an upward ascent from physical love to the soul's intuition of the good and the beautiful; the ascent from Venus Pandemos to Venus Urania. But the reason he actually cites is different. On 10 July he wrote to the Gisbornes:

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 547.

[21] See K. Everest, *Shelley and His Contemporaries*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, M. O'Neill – A. Howe ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, pp. 513-529.

> I am employed just now having little better to do, in translating into my fainting & inefficient periods the divine eloquence of Plato's Symposium – only as an exercise or perhaps to give Mary some idea of the manners & feelings of the Athenians – so different on many subjects from that of any other community that ever existed[22].

Shelley's scheme "to give Mary some idea of the manners & feelings of the Athenians" was not primarily intended to provide insight into Diotima's theory of the higher love. It was rather designed to show her the homoerotic culture of male Athenian aristocratic society in the fifth century BC, the cultural elite of which Plato was himself a member. In writing to Peacock from Bagni di Lucca Shelley reported his translation work, in a prose style that tiptoes elliptically round the actual content of the *Symposium*:

> I have translated, and Mary has transcribed, the Symposium [...] and I am proceeding to employ myself on a discourse, upon the subject with reference to the difference of sentiments respecting it, existing between the Greeks and modern nations; a subject to be handled with that delicate caution which either I cannot or I will not practise in other matters, but which here I acknowledge to be necessary. Not that I have any serious thought of publishing either this discourse or the *Symposium*, at least till I return to England, when we may discuss the propriety of it[23].

The "subject to be handled with [...] delicate caution" was ancient Greek homosexuality, something not simply present, quite unmistakably, in the *Symposium*, but completely central both to its cultural ethos, and its arguments. Shelley's "Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love", explains how

> there is no book which shows the Greeks precisely as they were; they seem all written for children, with the caution that no practice or sentiment highly inconsistent with our own manners should be mentioned, lest those manners should receive outrage and violation. But there are many to whom the Greek language is inaccessible who ought not to be excluded by this prudery to possess an exact and comprehensive conception of the history of man; for there is no knowledge concerning what man has been, and may be, from partaking of which a person can depart without becoming in some degree more philosophical, tolerant, and just[24].

Shelley would have encountered in his recent reading of Schlegel, of Barthelemy's *Travels of Anacharsis*, and the novels of Wieland, plenty of examples of this "prudery" in evading or concealing the importance of homosexuality in Plato's social and intellectual world. When however Shelley remarks to Peacock that he has no "serious thought of publishing" either the "Discourse" or the *Symposium*, "at least till I return to England", we should consider the real implications of any such possibility. The "delicate caution" needed to circumvent what

[22] P.B. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 20.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[24] Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. e. 11, pp. 31-32; cp. the text in P.B. Shelley, *Shelley's Prose: or, The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, D.L. Clark ed., University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque 1954, p. 219.

he calls the "prudery" of his own times was most definitely a highly necessary attitude. He had throughout the preceding seven years, since his expulsion from University, disdained to employ any such caution as a betrayal of his deepest convictions, political, religious, or sexual. But in this context, he admits a need for circumspection. Why was this special circumspection acknowledged, even by the fearlessly dauntless radical Shelley?

In 1818, as we have noticed, blasphemous libel was a civil crime, punishable by a fine and, in serious cases, even imprisonment. Incest was a crime only before an ecclesiastical court, and rarely prosecuted. The sexual aspect of homosexuality, however, was a capital offence in English law; the sole prescribed punishment was death by hanging. The crime of sodomy was regarded as the most vilely abhorrent of all offences, as is clear from Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, published in 1769 and in Shelley's day the supreme legal authority. Blackstone explains that, working from biblical precedents, the historic legal punishment for sodomy in western Europe had been death by burning. That punishment was still being inflicted, in France for example, in the 1780s. The punishment in English law of death by hanging was still being carried out beyond Shelley's lifetime, although the last executions took place in 1835. In 1861 the death sentence for the crime that could not be named in an English court was abolished, but replaced by life imprisonment[25]. One can only speculate what the public reaction in England might have been to a published work openly representing homosexuals and homoerotic sexual practices. It would presumably have been prosecuted under the obscenity laws. These laws had been a real threat to publishers and printers since the successful prosecution of Edmund Curll in 1727, which set a much-cited legal precedent. As a matter of interest, a defence of literary merit in the case of an obscene publication was only established in English law in the 1960s, during the controversy surrounding the publication of D.H Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. But there was never any test case in Shelley's lifetime, or before it, because no-one would ever have considered such an outrage to public decency to be viable, or indeed possible[26].

[25] "What has here been observed, especially with regard to the manner of proof, which ought to be the more clear in proportion as the crime is more detestable, may be applied to another offence, of a still deeper malignity; the *infamous crime against nature*, committed either with man or beast. A crime, which ought to be strictly and impartially proved, and then strictly and impartially punished. But it is an offence of so dark a nature, so easily charged, and the negative so difficult to be proved, that the accusation should be clearly made out: for, if false, it deserves punishment inferior only to that of the crime itself. / I will not act so disagreeable a part, to my readers as well as myself, as to dwell any longer upon a subject, the very mention of which is a disgrace to human nature. It will be more eligible to imitate in this respect the delicacy of our English law, which treats it, in its very indictments, as a crime not fit to be named; '*peccatum illud horribile, inter christianos non nominandum*' [that horrible sin not to be named among Christians]" (W. Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England. Book the Fourth, with the last corrections of the author, and with notes by J.T. Coleridge*, Cadell, London 1825[16], pp. 214-215). Each year of Shelley's life saw several executions for the crime of sodomy in England, against a background of virulent homophobia sustained by converging religious, legal and cultural factors; see L. Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in 19th-Century England*, Faber and Faber, London 1985, especially pp. 1-62.

[26] The legal situation in Italy in 1818 was less overtly oppressive; Rome was the acknowledged "gay capital of Europe" in the eighteenth century (see L. Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love*, p. 45), and Byron's experiences

It has often been noted that not only did Shelley make no attempt to publish either his translation, or his introductory essay, but that when it was finally published in 1840, in Mary Shelley's edition of his prose, both the essay and the translation were edited by Mary together with Leigh Hunt in order to remove all the explicit passages which had in fact been the main purpose of the translation in the first place[27]. Unbowdlerised texts were not to be published for almost another century, in a privately printed edition of 1931 limited to 100 copies[28]. At that time of course sodomy was still a serious crime in English law, and would continue to be so until finally decriminalised, albeit conditionally, in the 1960s[29].

There are two aspects that should then strike us about Shelley's decision to translate the *Symposium*, and to translate it specifically in order to acquaint everyone not having classical Greek with the facts of homosexuality as an integral part of the dominant male ruling elite in ancient Athens. On the one hand, it opens the possibility that Shelley's detailed study of the Platonic account of the highest form of love was in fact a by-product of the more immediate polemical motivation, even though considered retrospectively it was an interest with profound implications for his development. On the other hand, the ten days he spent on his translation at Bagni di Lucca in July 1818, the first piece of extended serious literary work he produced in Italy, brought him hard up against the limits of what even he could accept as legitimate public intervention. Taking these two aspects together we could argue that this moment brought a kind of termination to the habits of behaviour which had brought him such damaging notoriety, and which had brought chaos and tragedy to the lives of people close to him. At the same time, it opened an intellectual and artistic way forward which enabled him to become a great poet.

Plato was not a well-known, widely read or widely studied classical writer in the England of Shelley's day. He was not taught in the ancient Universities until the second half of the nineteenth century, and some of the dialogues were not translated into English until

in Venice included the relaxed and open countenance of homosexuality. Tommaso Sgricci, the *improvvisatore* of the Shelleys' acquaintance in Pisa in 1821, was openly homosexual. Sodomy had been decriminalised across most of western Europe by the *Code Napoleon*, but in 1818 Tuscany had fallen back under the more restrictive Prussian legal code enforced by the Austrian occupation. At the time of the Shelleys' residence at Bagni di Lucca the Duchy of Lucca had been recently carved out of Tuscany by the Congress of Vienna, which installed the Bourbon Queen Maria Luisa, a fiercely religious Catholic who nevertheless supported enlightenment values. Shelley's writings in the summer of 1818 convey no sense at all of his impression of local Italian politics or cultural mores, and his translation of the *Symposium* seems to have been undertaken in what he thought of as an English cultural context.

[27] P.B. Shelley, *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, Mrs. Shelley ed., Moxon, London 1840. Richard Holmes notes how the bowdlerised early printed texts of Shelley's translation were actually taken as evidence of Shelley's "suppressed homosexuality", on the inference that there were passages he could not face translating (R. Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1974, p. 432).

[28] P.B. Shelley, *Plato's Banquet, Translated from the Greek by Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Sir J. Shelley-Rolls – R. Ingpen ed., Privately printed, 1931. Shelley's translation first became widely available in J. Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley*, pp. 414-460; see also *The Symposium of Plato: The Shelley Translation*, D.K. O'Connor ed., St Augustine's Press, South Bend 2002.

[29] It is remarkable to note how circumspectly defensive a tone it was still felt necessary to adopt by Kenneth Dover in the Preface to his magisterially scholarly study *Greek Homosexuality*, Duckworth, London 1978.

decades after Shelley's death[30]. There is no doubt that this relative neglect was in significant measure a response to what was perceived as the inappropriate sexual mores informing some of Plato's major works. By the end of the eighteenth century, throughout the whole of Europe, about two thirds of the dialogues had been translated into one or more languages. But the only translation into any language of Plato's complete works was that of the great Florentine Renaissance scholar Marsilio Ficino, whose Latin translation was published in 1484. The Bipont edition of Plato which Shelley used included Ficino's translation, which he consulted as he worked on the Greek. There was however in the whole of Europe no other translation of the complete works after the end of the sixteenth century until one appeared in Italian in 1742. This was followed in 1804 by Thomas Taylor's *Works of Plato*, the first translation into English of the complete corpus. Thomas Taylor the Platonist, as he was known in his own lifetime, was a self-taught scholar whose boundless enthusiasm for Plato and the Neo-Platonists was mainly responsible for the surge of interest in Platonic philosophy in the English Romantic period. His work had severe limitations, combining together elements from widely diverse and historically separate ancient philosophers into an all-purpose 'Platonism', and, as Coleridge remarked, offering in his translations "difficult Greek transformed into incomprehensible English"[31]. But his edition of Plato's works in English did include a translation of the *Symposium*, although it was not by Taylor himself but by Floyer Sydenham, an eighteenth-century scholar who had died in debtors' prison in 1787 after beginning a translation of the Platonic dialogues, which Taylor's own translation brought to completion. Sydenham's translation of the *Symposium* was the very first into English, but it is interesting to note that in his introduction to it Taylor laments the fact that Sydenham declined to translate the final speech of Alcibiades. In that speech Alcibiades – like all the speakers in the *Symposium* a character based on a real person, Alcibiades, the charismatic political and military protégé of Pericles – drunkenly elaborates on his sexual passion for Socrates and recounts his several attempts to get Socrates to have sex with him. That was enough to persuade Sydenham, in Taylor's words, "to abandon the design of publishing his translation of this speech [...] thinking that some part of it is so grossly indecent that it may offend the virtuous and encourage the vicious". Taylor deplores this omission and provides his own culturally acceptable gloss on the meaning of Alcibiades' speech:

> This apparent indecency is introduced conformably to the machinery of the mysteries, with no other view than to purify the reader from every thing indecent, and to liberate him, in short, from vulgar love, by exciting the amatory eye of intellect to the vision of objects ineffably beautiful and truly divine[32].

[30] See F.B. Evans III, *Platonic Scholarship in Eighteenth-Century England*, "Modern Philology", 41, 1943, pp. 103-110.
[31] Cited in J. Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley*, p. 503.
[32] *The Works of Plato*, F. Sydenham – T. Taylor trans., 5 vols., Printed for Taylor, London 1804, Vol. 3, p. 438.

Taylor's rendering of the Platonic text however is only made conformable with this interpretation by silently changing male to female pronouns and by a judicious omission or alteration of key passages and phrases. This distortive purifying of the "grossly indecent" Greek is exactly what Mary Shelley and Leigh Hunt felt understandably obliged to perpetrate on Shelley's accurate and mostly inclusive translation. We can follow the process exactly because the printer's copy for the 1840 text survives as our only manuscript source for Shelley's *Symposium*. One excellent example of their work is the passage in which Aristophanes gives his famous account of the origin of human desire for sexual and spiritual union with another.

He explains in true Aristophanic spirit that humans were originally spherical beings each with two sets of limbs, two sets of genitals and two faces one on either side of a long neck. These spherical humans were divided into three sexes, male, female, and androgynous. They proved troublesome to the Gods, even threatening their dominion, and were punished by being split in two by Zeus "as people cut eggs before they salt them, or as I have seen eggs cut with hairs" (Shelley's translation of Stephanus 190d7, *BSM* 89. Thus punished, humans have ever after suffered a longing to be reunited with their lost half. Individuals who were once half of a male being long for union with another male, those who were female seek a female, and only those who were originally androgyne seek completion in union with the opposite sex. Shelley's translation of the speech is characteristically brilliant, catching perfectly the playful earthiness and humour of Aristophanes while also delicately expressing the underlying note of sadness in desire for a lost wholeness:

> These are they who devote their whole lives to each other, with a vain and inexpressible longing to obtain from each other something they know not what; for it is not merely the sensual delights of their intercourse for the sake of which they dedicate themselves to each other with such serious affection; but the soul of each manifestly thirsts for, from the other, something which there are no words to describe and divines that which it seeks and traces obscurely the footsteps of its obscure desire (192c-d, *BSM* 92).

In fact Shelley's translation of Aristophanes' speech is influenced by his sense of what could not be risked in the face of contemporary notions of propriety. Plato's Greek explains that conventional heterosexual intercourse, in order to propogate, was a consequence of splitting the spherical beings. But Shelley omits the sentence following this:

> So Zeus moved their genitals round to the front of their bodies and thus introduced intercourse between two human beings, with the man as the agent of generation taking place within the woman. His reasons for doing this were to ensure that, when couples embraced, as well as male-female relationships leading to procreation and offspring, male-male relationships would at least involve sexual satisfaction, so that people would relax, get on with their work and take care of other aspects of life (191c, R. Waterfield trans.)[33].

[33] Plato, *The Symposium*, R. Waterfield trans., Oxford University Press, Oxford 1994, p. 27.

The final eight words of the passage in the preceding quote from Shelley's translation, "traces obscurely the footsteps of its obscure desire", are his rendering of a single word in the Greek (*ainit-testhai*) meaning 'to speak enigmatically or indirectly', as if in the manner of an oracle, and suggest how intently Shelley must have brooded over the phrasing of his translation. The passage assumes the normality of sexual relations whether they be male/female, male/male, or female/female, and was therefore unpublishable in an unambiguous translation, in 1818, 1840, or indeed for another century and more. That fact of the culture of fifth-century Athens was, as we have seen, a primary motive in undertaking the translation. But the Aristophanic parable in the *Symposium* will also have resonated powerfully for Shelley. Three years earlier his first major long poem, *Alastor*, had represented the fate of a poet who, obsessed with a search for an ideal beyond materiality, projects his longing onto a female 'other' who could complete his selfhood. In *Alastor* the search leads to a sterile commitment to seek beyond nature for the ideal, culminating in a fatal failure of relationship with real people and present realities. The resonance would not have been confined to poetry and intellectual idealism, for as we have seen Shelley's early insistence on living fearlessly by difficult convictions had wrought havoc in his own and other lives. The newly exiled Shelley, chastened by experience, discovered in his close study of the *Symposium* a relaxedly adult and humanely comical perspective on sexual relations, which nevertheless carries a note of sadly frustrated longing for union with a kindred soul. The Platonic account made a profound and enduring impression, registered in the essay "On Love" which Shelley drafted immediately after completing his translation. There he writes:

> If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another's; if we feel, we would that another's nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own, that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart's best blood. [...] We are born into the world and there is something within us which from the instant that we live and move thirsts after its likeness. [...] We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of everything excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man[34].

The thought merges various themes of the Platonic text in a way that seems to clarify for Shelley, as if for the first time, isolated in the hills above Lucca, a hitherto dangerously destructive disposition to project idealising fantasies onto real people, and in particular onto real women. In the short years that remained to him he wrestled continuously with this tendency, becoming ever more aware of his potentially disturbing ability to blend actual relationships with the search for an embodied ideal. It points forward to the extraordinary achievement of *Epipsychidion*, and to the subtle and enigmatic beauty of the late poems to Jane Williams.

[34] Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. e. 11, pp. 4-5; cp. P.B. Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, D.H. Reiman – N. Fraistat ed., Norton, New York 2002, pp. 503-504.

There is also another dimension of the *Symposium* which we can understand as creating a new inflection in Shelley's development as a poet. The *Symposium* is in essence a dramatic work. Its difficult and beautiful Greek is rhetorically various, and carries an action which consists in speeches by different characters, set within the dramatic frame of a conversation in which one character invites another to recall the events of a philosophical drinking party which had in fact taken place some years earlier. There are seven speeches in all, first a series of five given in turn by Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, and Agathon. These speeches play off one against another, and characterise their speakers while observing various formalities of Greek prose style. There is then a long and very important speech by Socrates, in which he explains the account of love he has received from the prophetess Diotima involving the notion of an ascent from the Pandemian to the Uranian Aphrodite, from sexual love to absolute love of abstract wisdom. Finally the atmosphere is completely changed with the late arrival of the drunken Alcibiades, who extols Socrates' sexual attractions with unrestrained frankness and energy. Shelley handles the shifting styles, voices and tones with a wonderfully assured fluency that catches the atmosphere of animated exchange better than any other English translation.

It also produces a work utterly unlike anything that Shelley had managed up to that point. It is a work which proceeds by engaging with opposed ideas and voices through a dynamic of dramatic exchange between contrasting perspectives. We recall that Shelley had arrived in Italy with the idea already in mind for a drama on the life of Tasso, but in writing to Peacock about the project he had sounded a self-sceptical note:

> I have devoted this summer and indeed the next year to the composition of a tragedy on the subject of Tasso's madness, which I find upon inspection is, if properly treated, admirably dramatic and poetical. – But, you will say I have no dramatic talent. Very true in a certain sense; but I have taken the resolution to see what kind of a tragedy a person without dramatic talent could write[35].

It is ironic that the failure to make meaningful progress on this Tasso project brought on what Shelley spoke of as a block on original poetic creativity which provided the occasion for the Plato translation, something he later remarked to Peacock he had begun only because he found himself "totally incapable of original composition". His immersion in the *Symposium* opens a channel to the great poetry he was about to produce, heralding the emergence of a newly sophisticated sceptical orientation. The major works of Shelley's maturity are informed by the play of unresolved contraries, elusively self-undermining tensions, sometimes framed in a specifically dramatic genre, sometimes present more generally in implicitly contradictory poetic structures. These are qualities which we find everywhere in the major poetry of the Italian years, whether it be the underlying dubiety of political optimism in *Hellas*, the sense of strain between real women and idealised beings in *Epipsychidion*, or the tensed balance of opposed meanings for life within *The Triumph of Life*.

[35] P.B. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 8.

The first new original work which Shelley produced after July 1818 and his translation of the *Symposium* were the poems he began between late August and early October, first while staying with Byron in Venice and then at I Cappuccini in the Euganean Hills. "Lines Written among the Euganean Hills", the first complete poem he wrote after the *Symposium*, clearly bears the marks of the terrible personal calamities which had continued to befall Shelley and his family, but it also shows a striking new confidence in its poetic voice, and is able to bring for the first time a sustained perspective on Italy itself, albeit again employing a long temporal overview and a transnational sense of the movement of history. That new confidence finds its most powerful expression, however, in the first act of *Prometheus Unbound*, which was begun around the same time. Shelley's conception of his poetic drama embodies with extraordinary richness the transhistorical and Greek-influenced perspectives developed in the weeks at Bagni di Lucca, in the company of that "choice society of all ages" he had unpacked from his book trunk. It also ushers in a new scale of poetic achievement. The opposed terms of perennial problems in human history, tyranny and democracy, ideals and reality, temporality and the immutable truths of experience, are given a new kind of life in characterised voices whose dialogue carries philosophical and historical debate. There is also a new dynamic of causality, a sense of the plot of history, which complements the sustained fluent density of the verse. It is a Greek conception turned brilliantly to serve Shelley's artistic and intellectual purposes as he embarked on his creative maturity. It is hard to see how such a remarkable leap forward would have been possible without the *Symposium*.

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