Caroline de Crespigny Translates Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski: Forgotten Romantic Poetess as Translator of Neo-Latin Verse.

The end of the Romantic period in England spelled the end of the immense popularity which Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski, the greatest Polish Neo-Latin poet, enjoyed in the British Isles. The change was on the one hand caused by the decreasing level of knowledge of Latin, quickly disappearing from school curricula, while on the other hand by the passage of time. After two centuries of very vivid presence in Britain, Sarbiewski’s lyrics no longer spoke of matters important and contemporary to poets and their readers.

The change did not mean, however, that Sarbiewski’s poetry disappeared from the British Isles completely. It was still present as an important element of European literary heritage and as such it continued to appear in new translations included in collections and editions intended to illustrate the history of either Neo-Latin or Polish literature. As Sarbiewski was still something of a household name, some poets and translators, as they had done in the 18th century, chose his poems for translation in order to demonstrate their literary skills. One of the last such poets was Caroline Champion de Crespigny and the two translations published in her 1848 collection My Souvenir will be the subject of the present study. However, as de Crespigny is virtually unknown, it seems necessary to start the discussion from an extended biographical note.

Caroline Champion de Crespigny (née Bathurst) (1798?–1862?) was a descendant of the political and literary family of Bathursts, her father was Dr Henry Bathurst (1744-1837), the stormy and liberal Bishop of Norwich. Her uncle, Allen Bathurst, 1st Earl Bathurst, (1684-1775) was a friend of Pope, Sterne, Swift, and Congreve. The first three Earls Bathurst were members of the British Governments in the 18th and the 19th centuries, 4th and 5th Earls MPs. Caroline was a younger sister of Benjamin Bathurst (1784-1809), an English diplomat who mysteriously disappeared during the Napoleonic Wars while on a diplomatic mission in

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2 See Krzysztof Fordoński. “To Secure a Favourable Reception” - The Role and Place of Translations of the Poetry of Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski in 18th Century Collections of Minor English Poets” in press.
Prussia and who has since become the hero of a number of, mostly science-fiction, short stories and novels. In Caroline’s lifetime the family was on friendly terms with Lord Byron who knew captain Walter Bathurst (1764-1827), Caroline’s another uncle, and in whose ship, the Salsette, Byron and Hobhouse had traveled from Smyrna to Constantinople during their visit to the Levant. Although rumours concerning Caroline’s love affair with Lord Byron appear in various sources⁵ even if such an affair ever took place it must have been extremely fleeting one.

And yet little is known about Caroline herself beyond what can be deduced mostly from the volume of poems *My Souvenir or Poems by Caroline de Crespigny with Translations etc.* published in 1844 in London and Heidelberg, and extremely scarce data available elsewhere. Even the dates of her birth and death are uncertain. The earliest date of birth, 1795 is given in a short biographical note added to one of her poems published by *Musical World*⁸, most sources, including Medwin’s biography in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*⁵ and a note to a portrait of de Cresspigny available on the BBC website⁶, opt for 1798⁷. However, the website Ancestry.com, variously gives her birthdate as either 1797 or 1801 and the Norfolk Cathedral as the place of birth⁸. The same website claims she died on December 26, 1862, somewhere in Middlesex, which seems probable as Medwin certainly returned to England in 1862 and it is quite improbable that he might have left the ailing de Crespigny alone in Germany. Medwin’s biography, however, gives the dates of her life as (1798–1858×62) while *Musical World* claims she lived until 1864⁹.

In 1822, Caroline married Heaton Champion de Crespigny (1796-1858) (afterwards she signed her works as Caroline de Crespigny), a poor descendant of an equally illustrious family¹⁰ and they lived together in Norwich. Even though Heaton did not have a university degree his father-in-law admitted him into holy orders and offered a position in the diocese¹¹.

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⁷ Also Ernest J. Lovell jr.op. cit., p. 304.

⁸ [http://records.ancestry.com/Caroline_Bathurst_records.ashx?pid=53571806](http://records.ancestry.com/Caroline_Bathurst_records.ashx?pid=53571806) (access 12 Nov. 2013). Apart from the main family trees based on parish registers, the website includes family trees created by its members and, consequently, the dates are not always fully credible.

⁹ Caroline De Crespigny, “The Dream.”

¹⁰ Including the minor early Romantic poet Mary Clarke Champion de Crespigny (1748-1812) who was Heaton’s grandmother.

¹¹ The place of birth of their children was “Norwich Cathedral” which suggests that they lived in one of the houses in the cathedral close, traditionally rented to people employed by the diocese. The bishop offered a position in the diocese also to his own son Henry Bathurst (d. 1844) who became the archdeacon of Norwich.
The marriage, even though originally a love-match, apparently was neither happy nor prosperous as by 1832 her husband ended up in debtor’s prison\textsuperscript{12}. About 1837 (certainly after 1833 when her fifth child was born and died in infancy although it might have been only after the death of the bishop in 1837 when she came into her own money) she left her husband and England. De Crespigny eventually settled down with her children in Heidelberg (then in the Grand Duchy of Baden) before 1841. Germany was apparently much cheaper place to live and she could manage there on the money inherited from her father. Her husband ultimately migrated to Australia, where he was later joined by their elder children and where the family still resides\textsuperscript{13}. While in Heidelberg, where she earned the name of bluestocking for herself, apart from \textit{The Souvenir} mentioned above, de Crespigny published two major volumes of translations and original poems: \textit{The Enchanted Rose: a Romant in Three Cantos. Translated from the German of Ernst Schulze} (1844) and \textit{A Vision of Great Men with Other Poems as Translated from the Poetesses of Germany etc.} (1848). Especially the latter volume, including a vast collection of translations from German women writers should attract the attention of modern feminist scholars.

It was in Heidelberg in 1841 that de Crespigny met the “friend”, mentioned in the “Preface” to her collection. It was apparently captain Thomas Medwin (1788-1869), a friend and biographer of his cousin Percy Bysshe Shelley (\textit{The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley}, 1847), and a friend and biographer of Lord Byron (\textit{Conversations of Lord Byron}, 1824), with whom she lived in Heidelberg for almost twenty years. The encounter can be proven by Medwin’s novel \textit{Lady Singleton} (1842) as her “verse appears at the head of a great many of his chapters, beginning with the first” and she is most probably “the high-born and highly-gifted lady” whom Medwin thanks in his preface.\textsuperscript{14}

Even if their mutual attachment went beyond a purely intellectual connection (Lovell states clearly that Medwin “would probably have married Caroline if he could”\textsuperscript{15}), neither of them could afford to divorce their respective spouses and remarry. Medwin had abandoned his wife (possible mentally ill but the details on the matter are inconclusive) and two daughters in 1829 when he went bankrupt. Their mixed German and English circle of friends and acquaintances included, among others, Fanny Brawne Lindon, the love of John Keats. De Crespigny was close enough to Medwin that during the events of the 1848 revolution,

\textsuperscript{12} Ernest J. Lovell \textit{jr}. \textit{op. cit.}, p. 303.
\textsuperscript{13} Probably the most famous of de Crespigny’s Australian descendants are Richard Rafe Champion de Crespigny (b. 1936), a renowned sinologist, historian and translator of classical Chinese literature, and Robert Champion de Crespigny (b. 1950), businessman specializing in gold mining.
\textsuperscript{14} Ernest J. Lovell \textit{jr}. \textit{op. cit.}, p. 303.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 308.
Medwin took her with him to the relatively safe Wurttemberg\textsuperscript{16}. In England, however, she was, inasmuch as it can be ascertained from the scarcity of available contemporary materials (there is only one review of her book) almost completely forgotten.

*My Souvenir...* includes a large selection of translations from Latin, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and German poets placed side by side with a collection of original poems which apparently de Crespigny had been writing at least from the early 1820s. It is possible to date at least some of them on the basis of the events they refer to such as the death of de Crespigny’s niece Rosa Bathurst in March 1824 (“Lines Written on Hearing of the Death of My Niece Rosa Bathurst, Drowned in the Tiber – Aged Seventeen”), the death of captain Walter Bathurst in the battle of Navarino in 1827 (“To the Memory of Captain de Crespigny”), or the 93\textsuperscript{rd} birthday of the bishop of Norwich which was also celebrated in 1827 (“Sonnet addrest to my Father, the late Bishop of Norwich, on his 93\textsuperscript{rd} Birth-day”). Consequently, even though the poems were published only in 1844, de Crespigny emerges as a late Romantic rather than a Victorian poetess. It seems that she did not publish any poetry after 1848 although in 1862, she contributed a translation from Antipater to Medwin’s volume entitled *Odds and Ends.*\textsuperscript{17}

The only reviewer of the volume found the contents of *My Souvenir:*

>original verses on a variety of subjects, chiefly of domestic and pathetic character ... Besides the numerous original pieces, there are ... many translations from the Italian, Spanish, French, and German modern poets. The original compositions are rather distinguished by elegance, sweetness, and tenderness, than poetic power or passion, as might be expected from the contents of a lady’s *Souvenir.* They are in a variety of metres but show considerable sameness as to style and manner. The subjects of the translations are selected with taste and feeling; and those from the German are not the least attractive portion of the volume.\textsuperscript{18}

One must agree with the anonymous reviewer from the Scottish journal. De Crespigny’s original poetry can hardly be described as strikingly beautiful, although by no means may it be disqualified as the work of a poetaster. Unfortunately, her talents were quite apparently not sufficient for the task she set for herself attempting to translate Sarbiewski.

The review ends in praise of de Crespigny’s German translation, the translations from other languages are not mentioned quite as favourably. Quite interestingly, according to the

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 322.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 327.

accompanying “Preface”, most of the latter were translated with the assistance of the aforementioned “friend”\(^{19}\). De Crespigny states this in the “Preface” in a phrase which leaves some room for doubt as to the part she played in these translations herself:

I have to remark, that for a few of the poems, and for many of the Translations, contained in this Volume, marked with Astericks \(\text{sic!}\), I am indebted to a friend; that I gratefully acknowledge my obligations to Herr Dr. Diefenbach for his beautiful version of “my Moth”, and offer my best thanks, for having made known to his compatriots my “Student’s Funeral” to Herr Baader.\(^{20}\)

The two of her own poems she mentions, *On a Moth* and *On the Funeral of a German Student* are included in the volume along with German translations and the names of translators are given. The specific debt to a friend remains a mystery. It should be noted here that Medwin gained a lasting renown as the translator of Aeschylus and he copiously translated German poetry of his contemporaries for the English literary magazines such as *The Athenaeum*. To what extent did the polyglot Medwin help with the work on the translations from Sarbiewski? The help could have been anything from suggesting the poetry of Sarbiewski (with whom Medwin was quite probably acquainted as a student) as a possible material for translation, through editing de Crespigny’s translation, providing prose translations which she could have made into poems, to the least probably possibility of translating the poems on his own. At this point there is no certain answer to this question, although it should be stated that the chances that de Crespigny knew Latin sufficiently well to read or translate poetry written in the language are extremely slim.

The volume includes two translations from Sarbiewski whom she keeps on calling Sobieski, apparently mistaking the poet for another famous Pole of the 17\(^{th}\) century, King John III Sobieski\(^{21}\): *To My Lyre. From the Latin of Casimir Sobieski* and *To a Rose. From the Latin of Casimir Sobieski*. The mistaken name reveals that de Crespigny did not have access to an edition of Sarbiewski’s poems but, much more likely, only to a hand-written copy or, less likely, a publication in some journal or anthology, probably of only these two poems. The two original poems, *Lyr. II 3 Ad suam testudinem* and *Lyr. IV 18 Ad Rosam Quotannis Kalendis Iunii D. Virginis caput coronaturus*, were extremely popular in Great Britain, we

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\(^{19}\) A similar remark may be found in the “Preface” to Caroline de Crespigny. *A Vision of Great Men, with Other Poems: And Translations from the Poetesses of Germany*. London / Heidelberg 1848, p. VIII.

\(^{20}\) Caroline de Crespigny. *My Souvenir or Poems by Caroline de Crespigny*. With Translations etc., London / Heidelberg 1844, p. XII. The complete texts of both collections of de Crespigny are available on Google Books.

\(^{21}\) It is not the only such mistake – in *A Vision of Great Men... a translation from the Danish poet Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) is given with the note “from the Swedish of Andersen” (Caroline De Crespigny. *A Vision of Great Men* p. 173).
know of 13 translations of the former and 9 translations of the latter which places them among the four Sarbiewski’s lyrics most often translated in Great Britain.

Both translations offer a rather uninspired rendering of the contents of the original poems with little if any attempt to render the original forms.

To My Lyre
From the Latin of Casimir Sobieski

O my treasure – thou child of the bleak Appenine!
Lightly sway on a branch of this tall towering pine!
And as everything basks in the smiles of the spring,
To the leaves, as they whisper delight, sweetly sing.

Bid those quivering strings, as they vibrate on high,
In the breath of the breeze faint and faintlier sigh;
And while all here below slumbers moveless and still,
Let me dream away life on this green sloping hill.

Ha! what clouds on the clear face of Heaven darkly lour!
Whistles loud in my ear the on-gathering shower!
Come my lyre! let us fly, ere to night turn the day,
Thus like shadows, our joys ever hasten away.22

In her poem de Crespigny alters the original contents rather freely to suit her form, distant from the original unrhymed alcaics although the only of her contemporary translators to attempt to render Sarbiewski’s form was John Bowring, all others also opted for rhymed verse. She also seems to find it difficult to squeeze the contents (Latin is by far more succinct than English, most of Sarbiewski’s translators faced the problem, solving it often by not keeping with the length of the originals and adding extra stanzas) greatly expanding the length of her lines.

Suffice it to say that in the original there is nothing about either the Appenines or pines. The change of the latter, apparently enforced by rhyme pattern, reveals how completely blind de Crespigny is to the intricate pattern of religious and cultural allusions of the original poem. Sarbiewski’s lute (the poet uses a learned word ‘testitudo’ in the title) hangs from a poplar in a Biblical allusion to Psalms. The ending seems to make little sense, in the poem the joys do not hasten away “like shadows”, they are rather replaced or chased away by the latter.

To a Rose
From the Latin of Casimir Sobieski

Born of the bright and Summer skies,
Gem of the world why lowly lies
Thy lovely head – Uplift thyself! Arise,
Fair Child of Heaven!

To welcome thee, when thou goest forth
In all thy beauty; far from earth,
Into all regions of the biting North
Dark clouds are driven.

Her heart should be like unsunned snow,
Her tresses dyed in sunset’s glow,
Emblem of all that’s pure, who thee should show
Twined round her brows.

What hand could dare that wreath entwine?
What hand? no other hand but thine!
The flowing locks of but one Maid divine,
Become the Rose.23

De Crespigny maintains the Marian character of the original, an attitude which was far from obvious as it is visible from many other contemporary translations24. She even goes as

23 Caroline De Crespigny. My Souvenir, p. 182. The poem is followed by the footnote: “In Poland the Rose is “The Virgin’s” flower” by de Crespigny.
far as to offer some additional clarification in the footnote. The first stanza follows the original quite closely but this cannot be said of the second one. The image of the change of seasons is rendered in Sarbiewski’s poem through the image of the change of winds: Zephyrus/Favonius, god of western wind (respectively in Greek and Roman mythology, Sarbiewski apparently boasts his knowledge of both using the two names in his poem) frightens away Boreas, the god of northern wind. In de Crespigny’s version it is the southern wind that pushes clouds to the North which reflects neither the original concept nor the typical weather pattern either in Italy or in Britain. Oddly enough the original concept of Sarbiewski, that of the west wind bringing the spring has been used in English literature at least since the days of Chaucer. The two final stanzas render the original concepts only in the most general term, offering images vaguely connected to the original ones.

Just as in the previously presented poem, the form chosen by de Crespigny is also rather distant from the original Sapphic Minor stanza. It should be noted, however, that the translator replaces it with a stanza which shows some similarities to the original one (which should be four lines, three of which are pentameter of eleven syllables and one dimeter of five syllables) as it also consists of three longer line (tetrameters) and one shorter line (trimeter). Even though the translator either cannot or chooses against following the original structure, there is an awareness of the existence of such a structure in the Latin poem. The difference in length of lines is further stressed by the rhyme pattern AAAB CCCB DDDE FFFE, absent in the unrhymed original.

If, as one may suppose, de Crespigny chose to include the translations from the famous Neo-Latin poet, to boast her competence as a translator also from the Latin, she failed rather miserably in the attempt. The failure is the more striking as her German translations are by far more successful. Neither of the translations from Sarbiewski renders justice to the complexity of the original form and contents, they do not strike the reader with a particular beauty as original pieces either. The two minor poems remain more of a souvenir of the final stage of the long period when translating Sarbiewski was a way for poets and translators to establish their position and display their professional competence. The translations of de Crespigny and the almost contemporary translations of the reverend Richard Coxe, published in 1848, put an end to this particular tradition.

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The two poems are at the same time a testimony to the literary ambitions of Caroline de Crespigny, an unjustly forgotten poetess and translator of the late Romantic period, whose oeuvre and biography the present papers attempts to rediscover even though it obviously concentrates on a relatively minor aspect of her achievements. In a broader sense the two short poems are a testimony to the ambitions of English writing women (de Crespigny was one of five poetesses who translated Sarbiewski from the 17th to the 19th century) trying to carve a place for themselves in the literary world.

Bibliography


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