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Citation for final published version:

Marinetti, Cristina 2022. Doubly invisible: Anna Larpent, Domestic Censorship, and the translation of performance cultures in Georgian Britain. *Translation Studies* 15 (3) , pp. 258-274. 10.1080/14781700.2022.2120064

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2022.2120064>

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# **Doubly invisible: Anna Larpent, domestic censorship, and the translation of performance cultures in Georgian Britain**

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on censored manuscripts and personal writing, the article uncovers the invisible role played by Anna Larpent, the wife of John Larpent (Royal Theatre Censor 1777–1824), in shaping foreign drama and opera in Georgian Britain. Anna’s journals demonstrate that, as a more attentive theatregoer and critic than her husband, she took on many aspects of the role of reviser and curator of the submitted plays and became an important mediator between European performance cultures and Georgian audiences. The article explores the complex and contradictory role played by Larpent as an “agent of translation” selecting and censoring European performance cultures throughout this period and introduces the notion of “domestic censorship” to give visibility to the labour and agency of women. In doing so, it highlights the value of archives of life writing in providing empirical evidence of the wide range of agents involved in shaping the translation of performance cultures.

**Keywords:** censorship; women’s history; agency; translation; performance cultures; 18<sup>th</sup> century theatre

## **Introduction**

A genteel eighteenth-century woman, daughter of a diplomat, mother of three, and wife of John Larpent, England’s chief theatre censor, Anna Margareta Larpent does not conform to the readily accepted view of the censor as a powerful cultural agent, who forcibly suppresses texts, polices morals, and actively shapes the circulation of ideas. Yet, as this article aims to demonstrate, she was one of the most influential figures of the period who was central to the selection, translation and circulation of European performance cultures in Georgian Britain.

Though not a translator herself, her strong ideas around propriety, morality, virtue, as well as her political and social conservatism acted as a filter which determined what was or was not permitted in a translated play. Careful analysis of her seventeen-volume manuscript diary, spanning the years 1773–1830, reveals a lifelong and active role as “unofficial” censor of all foreign drama and opera performed in Britain.<sup>1</sup> In dialogue with the themes of the special issue, this article brings to light for the first time the crucial and yet invisible role played by Anna Larpent as an agent of translation as it interrogates the unique contexts and material conditions that characterized the translation of performed drama in Georgian Britain.

As this special issue importantly argues, the material complexities of performance cultures with their different media, semiotic systems and multiple agencies have tended to relegate this form of translation to the margins of historiographical accounts. This is particularly the case for the study of censorship. The main thrust of scholarship on translation and censorship centres on the exploration of censorial practices in relation to literature and print culture (Wolf 2004; Billiani 2007; Merkle 2010; Merkle et al. 2016) and this leaves a significant blind spot in how we understand censorship in translation. Recent studies on theatre censorship and translation have stressed the value of theatre archives in uncovering the complex and often overlapping practices of translation and censorship (Woods 2012; Krebs 2007). By putting human agency at the centre of cultural production, my own recent work on the Larpent archives provides new perspectives on the material conditions that shaped the translation of drama and uncovers the invisible role played by censors and actors in the shaping of translated plays (Marinetti 2020).

This article extends that work further by considering the question of gender and the added invisibility that established gender roles imposed on the labour of women as cultural agents. Anna Larpent’s multifaceted and at times contradictory role as a “doubly invisible” censor embodies a complex conflict between the nationalist and conservative ideologies which dominated public culture in this period, and the strong, personal desire of a profoundly intellectual woman to engage with the cultural and political debates of her time. Her personal writing enables us to uncover this tension and reveal a unique “domestic” dimension to the censorship of translated plays in this period. Anna Larpent’s diary has been extensively studied by historians as an invaluable testimony to 18<sup>th</sup> century cultural history (Miller-Colombo 1996; Morris 2010) and to the history of censorship (Connolly 1976; Worrall 2006) but this is the first study that uncovers its implications for translation research and argues that by being an invisible censor, Larpent was also, importantly, an agent of translation.

Theoretically, the article takes issue with Pierre Bourdieu's influential notion of "structural censorship" (1991, 10) as the dominant frame for explaining censoring practices in translation research and suggests that its interpretation in the context of translation censorship leads to neglecting the contribution of women who have historically been excluded from public discourse and therefore historical narratives around censorship and translation. A necessary corrective to Bourdieu's structural censorship is Bruno Latour's view of social practices, such as translation and censorship, as "processes of assemblage" (2005, 5) which "involve a multiplicity of mediators" (7). Such a broadening of perspective helps us to analyse social and historical process from the inside, and to observe how agents make their decisions as well as interact with one another. If we were to look at the censored plays in isolation, we would only find the labour of John Larpent, the official Examiner of plays. By combining the censored manuscripts with Anna Larpent's personal writing, it is possible to uncover the significant and yet invisible agency of "the censor's wife" in rewriting foreign drama for public performance.

In tracing Anna Larpent's contribution to translation history and with it the domestic dimension of translation censorship, the article will consider the following questions: what was Anna Larpent's role in helping her husband with censoring continental drama and opera? What form did her agency take? What do her interventions reveal about the different modes of agency at play in the translation of performance cultures? What does her private and domestic experience tell us about the role played by censors as agents of translation? The article begins by outlining the unique conditions that shaped the translation of European performance cultures in Georgian Britain and made censorship, and the office of the Examiner of Plays, central to how plays were translated for public performance. Drawing on Anna Larpent's own manuscript diary and selected censored manuscripts, the article then explores the complex and often contradictory roles she played in the selection, licensing, and censoring of European performance cultures throughout this period, and introduces the notion of "domestic censorship" as a way of giving visibility to the labour and agency of women.

### **The translation of performance cultures in Georgian Britain**

Translation was central to performance culture in Georgian Britain, despite the little attention that it has garnered in historiographical discussions of the period (Kewes 2008; Marinetti 2020). According to Allardyce Nicoll's bibliography of 18th-century theatre, nearly half of the plays written in English during the century were based on foreign sources (1927, 56). One of

the reasons for this large-scale importation of continental performance cultures was the exponential growth of theatre as the dominant form of popular culture. Theatregoing was a mass phenomenon in this period. By 1805 in England alone there were over 280 theatres. Some of these, such as Drury Lane and Haymarket, could hold over 3,000 spectators at one time (Worrall 2006). This made theatre and opera incredibly influential. The growth of translation of foreign drama and opera came at a time of great cultural and national development.

Britain was becoming increasingly cosmopolitan, with the development of technology enabling greater travel and trade (Colley 2009). However, Britain was also developing an increasing sense of national identity, which was moulded in opposition to the values of Revolutionary France and was bolstered by the pervasive nationalist discourses that accompanied the British involvement in the Napoleonic wars (Colley 2009). Continental performance cultures and their translations were placed at the heart of this conflict, fuelling anxieties about “Britishness” and contributing to a complex debate of social and cultural values (Colley 2009). Anna Larpent’s journals embody this tension between her cosmopolitan outlook that valued European culture and enlightenment literature and a profound fear of the threat that continental ideas and morals could pose to British cultural and social values.<sup>2</sup> As the next sections will illustrate, censorial practices in this period became very stringent against foreign drama and led to the suppression of any potentially subversive, pro-French or anti-aristocratic leanings which could incite rebellion against the establishment.

Importantly, the translation of performance cultures involved different cultural forces and forms of labour from those that shaped poetry and fiction (Marinetti 2020). These forces were not the result of literary criticism or the economics of publishing but were embedded in the process of theatre making and involved the intervention of actors, theatre managers, censors, and audiences. What makes matters more challenging when looking at the translation of performance cultures in this period is the fact that, unlike poetry and fiction, the “process of fabrication” (Buzelin 2005) of translated drama and opera is not fully visible in the published plays. This is because published plays, unlike scripts that were meant to be performed on stage, were not subject to the material processes of censorship, rehearsals, and staging. As unique testimonies of the censorship and staging processes, the censored manuscripts, like the ones analysed here, provide empirical evidence of the multiple forms of labour which operated solely on performed drama and make the translation of performance cultures unique.

A further reason that made translation for performance distinctive was the material conditions under which theatre operated in Britain. These had changed dramatically as a direct

result of the Licensing Act of 1737, which introduced censorship on an unprecedented scale (Worrall 2006, 2). The Act required that all companies submit all scripts, which included both new plays and translations, to the theatre censors for approval before performing them. Theatres that sought to perform uncensored scripts would have to pay a £50 fine (around £8,000 in today's currency) and even more seriously would have their licence revoked. Such hefty consequences meant that all new plays, including all translations and drama that were performed in a foreign language, had to be sent to John Larpent for approval. This meant that the Larpents had complete decisional power over the content of performed drama (Connolly 1976, 15). Statutory censorship made the office of the censor central to the circulation of performance cultures in this period and gave John and Anna Larpent absolute control over how foreign plays were rewritten for public performance.

### **Translation, agency and censorship: from the “institutional” to the “domestic”**

Scholarly research in translation and censorship has demonstrated the significant impact that institutionalized, ideological censorship has had on all forms and genres of translation (Wolf 2004; Billiani 2006; Merkle et al. 2016). Francesca Billiani, among others, defines censorship through a sociological lens which foregrounds agency, and her detailed introduction to the term and its contexts will be useful in framing what follows. For Billiani, censorship is at its broadest “discourses by one agent or structure over another agent aiming at filtering the stream of information from one source to another” (2007, 35). Particularly relevant to the present discussion are her remarks on censorship as an instrument used to mould, if not enforce, worldview and discourse production. Not only do censors often have absolute control over whether a foreign text is allowed to circulate in the target culture, but their ideology and judgement act as a filter which determines what is or is not permitted in a translation.

As two complementary and often intertwined forms of discourse, censorship and translation cannot be entirely removed from each other and they are often co-present. As Michael Holman and Joan Boase-Beier remind us, this makes the boundaries between the labour of the translator and that of censor quite porous: “[T]he activities of the translator and censor are in many ways related [...] both are gatekeepers, standing at crucial points of control, monitoring what comes in and what stays outside any given cultural or linguistic territory” (1999, 11). Of course, direct censors and translators are not the only agents who influence what is or is not permitted in a translation. “Editors, publishers, directors, producers, founders”

(Woods 2012, 6) constitute a network of agents which can affect a complex and very effective form of “polymorphous” censorship (Billiani 2007, 3). Unlike censorship for the press, which was activated only after an offensive text had been published, the censorship of translated plays took the form of what Denise Merkle terms “prior-censorship” (Merkle 2002, 11–12). Here the suppression or alteration of a potentially subversive text occurred before public presentation, during the process of licensing. The Examiner of Plays’ work involved a range of practices from the simple licensing of uncontroversial plays, to the deletion/amendment of numerous passages and entire scenes, to the suppression of entire plays (Worrall 2006, 103). Given that censorial decisions were not open to appeal, the censor ultimately had more control over the final appearance of the translation than the translators themselves.

Billiani and others have drawn on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “structural censorship” and have explained it as an overarching force which imposes “implicit social control” (Billiani 2007, 22). According to this view, it is through structural censorship that a given field “controls discourse by controlling both the access to the means of expression and the forms that expression takes” (Merkle 2002, 15). Bourdieu’s notion of “structural censorship” does not refer to the explicit activity of political or institutional organizations seeking to suppress or restrict the circulation of knowledge. Rather, he is referring to a general characteristic of markets or fields which requires that, if one wishes to produce discourse successfully within a particular field, one must observe the forms and conventions of that field (Bourdieu 1991, 20). Social agents develop rules of behaviour which Bourdieu describes as “habitus” and explains as “a feel for the game, for a particular, historically determined game” (Bourdieu 1990, 62–63). But what of those agents who “develop a feel for the game” but are not granted access to the institutional roles that enable them to exercise that influence? To understand the trajectory of translation agents, one also needs to understand “the evolving shape of the fields individuals move through and account for those personal attributes which enable and constrain action” (van Doorslaer and Mc Martin 2022, 4).

Feminist scholars have questioned the extent to which Bourdieu’s framework accounts for the trajectories of women as social agents (Lovell 2000, 14) because historically they have tended to exercise their influence primarily in the domestic sphere, outside the boundaries of public culture and its fields (theatre, literature, politics). Unlike her husband, Anna Larpent was not an official government censor, so her agency in shaping translated plays does not correspond to official institutional censorship but neither does it fall into the category of Bourdieu’s “structural censorship”. In *Language and Symbolic Power* Bourdieu suggest that

ensorship may be an unavoidable structural necessity (1991, 10). He proposes a form of self-censorship which is internalized within the agent: “Censorship is never quite as perfect or as invisible as when each agent has nothing to say apart from what he is objectively authorised to say [...] he is [...] censored once and for all, through the forms of perception and expression that he has internalised and which impose their form on all his expressions” (1991, 11). I argue that this internalized censorship is not as irretrievable as Bourdieu claims.

In her analysis of two key orientations to translation sociology, H el ene Buzelin (2015) argues that Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory can be a useful corrective for studying translation agency in action. One of the key advantages of Latour’s approach is that it enables scholars to look at agency and networks which go beyond the translation field (e.g. editing, publishing or censorial practices) and thus broaden the discussion around translation. Latour argues that studying processes of assemblage, for example of a translated text, rather than explaining phenomena as part of social structures makes it possible to let the voices of the actors speak in their own “intra-language” as opposed to the language of the analyst (2004, 18). This is what this article attempts to do by exploring the traces of censorship visible in Anna Larpent’s own account of her “domestic censorship”. Such traces are vital to piece together “the process of assemblage” (Latour 2005, 5) that continental performance cultures underwent before reaching British audiences. Anna Larpent’s personal writing enables us to uncover the decision-making process of censors, which is much more complex and nuanced than censorship archives can give them credit for. This gives visibility to the contradictions which exist between the acts of a censor and their inner thoughts, while also highlighting the importance of looking beyond the professional roles played by male censors to the domestic dimension that censorship took. I argue that Anna Larpent engaged in the only form of agency that was open to genteel women at the time, one that occurred in the private sphere of her family home. Anna Larpent’s “domestic censorship” was indeed less visible than her husband’s official role but it was nonetheless equally influential in developing censorial norms which would restrict the circulation of particular types or features of European performance cultures.

An influential body of writing on women’s history argues that engaging with private and life writing by women is vital to offer a full picture of social life in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Vickery 1998). Women’s letters and diaries show that female experience in this period was carved up by the roles they played, and these roles were increasingly more influential than traditional historical accounts give them credit for. Amanda Vickery (1998, 8–9) makes a powerful case that the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the time when the everyday worlds of men and women became



separated into different spheres of action (the public and the private) as a result of industrial capitalism and the emergence of a class society. Women from commercial, professional, and gentry families, whom she calls – using their own self-definitions – “genteel” women, actually experienced expanding social and intellectual horizons in the 18<sup>th</sup> century which enabled them to enter and contribute to a range of public spaces, including theatres. However, women’s involvement in cultural institutions was never on a professional or institutional level and the labour and agency of these women rarely left traces in historical accounts based on public records. The only way of tracing the contribution of these women is by engaging with archives of life writing and domestic history.

### **Domesticity and the censoring of performance cultures (1790–1800)**

The domesticity of dramatic censorship is one of the most remarkable aspects of the translation of performance cultures in this period and it is embodied in the partnership between John and Anna Larpent. The descriptions we find in Anna’s diary reveal not just a glimpse into the domestic set up of a Georgian middle-class family life, but, crucially, insights into the life and views of an intellectual woman who frequently read and criticized new plays sent to her husband for licensing and often acted as “unofficial” censor herself. Theatre historians have read Anna Larpent’s input in different ways. Leonard Connolly minimises her role as something of a mere adjunct to her husband, deeming her “an altogether useful sort of a wife for an examiner of plays to have” (1976, 39). David Worrall uses her input to dismiss the Larpents’ collective output as “something of an unofficial cottage-industry conducted in the domestic setting of a Georgian living room” (2006, 105). Besides belittling and demeaning Anna’s extensive knowledge and critical appreciation of foreign and domestic drama, which far exceeded her husband’s, such comments betray a view of censorship as only pertaining to the realm of institutional discourse and underestimate the power wielded by women as theatregoers and consumers of culture in establishing and policing notions of morality, taste and propriety.

Anna Larpent’s journals offer a unique window into the attitudes and assumptions about foreign cultures that lay behind the censoring of translated drama. She was a voracious reader of historical books, news media, periodicals and, of course, plays. In some years, like 1792–1793, she read over a hundred publications including classics, poetry, plays, histories, and newspapers. Among these we find a significant number of translations but also foreign texts in

the original language (by authors such as Voltaire, Fontenelle, Guicciardini, Monboldo and Goldoni). She read history and politics seeking an objective view on events in the past and present, yet her reading of such works was affected by prejudices and contemporary reaction to news of the day. We can see this clearly in her frequent derogatory comments about “the French” and “the Catholics” as a corrupt and corrupting influence (Larpent MD, 16 January 1802). These increased substantially in the years following the French Revolution as we can see from her entry for 2 March 1792 where she writes about her response to Pierre Brantôme’s controversial portrait of Marguerite de Valois, Queen of Navarre and France (1598–1599):

Finished “Memories de M de Valois”. I wonder [sic] any historian could set down to write this strange, chequered life of a wanton woman belonging to an execrable court, yet the history is conducted without indelicacy, although it fills the mind with horror and shows what the French are, what court intrigue is. The story of St Bartholomew is told at length, and shows that they always were a sanguinary people audacious in iniquity, cruelty and treachery. (Larpent MD, 2 March 1792)

Despite showcasing an ability to assess the quality of historical writing from an objective perspective (“the history is conducted without indelicacy”), Larpent betrays here a lack of critical distance which leads to turning historically contextualized behaviours (“the massacre of Huguenots at St Bartholomew”) into inherent national traits where “the French” as a whole become “a sanguinary people audacious in iniquity, cruelty and treachery” (Larpent MD, 2 March 1792).

Anna Larpent’s diaries also demonstrate that she was an avid theatregoer and attended the playhouse much more frequently than her husband (Morris 2010). She often records her visits to the theatre and gives free expression to her views. These reveal not only that she had a keen interest in the theatre, but also that she held strong (albeit conservative) views as to what was acceptable and appropriate for public performance. The multiple diary entries relating to her theatre visits in this period suggest that Anna Larpent valued good acting, a solid and well-constructed plot, poetic language, as well as sentiment, affection, moral integrity and virtue. On 3 March 1792, for instance, she comments favourably on Holcroft’s play *The Road to Ruin* (1792) by praising the “excellently drawn struggle between ye feelings of the heart and ye Judgement of experienced sensible Age” (Larpent, MD, 3 March 1792). Equally insightful are Anna Larpent’s dislikes, which included an abhorrence of indelicacy or immorality in any context, especially comedy and a complete condemnation of anything resembling *commedia dell’arte* pantomime, which she considered “sad and stupid” (Larpent, MD, 21 April 1792),

“poor and flimsy” (Larpent, MD, 12 January 1792), and containing “low, indelicate and immoral things” (Larpent, MD, 13 March 1794). One of many examples of her frequent denunciation of the moral failings of *commedia* humour is her comment on Bryne’s *Oscar and Malvina* (1792) which she described as “a pantomimical jumble of barbarous Customs and modern nonsense” in which “ye Old Debauchee, & ye Jealous Old Wife are disgusting rather than humorous” (Larpent, MD, 23 April 1792). Anna’s reactions to matters of taste and propriety in performed drama, which she regularly shared with her husband, would have echoed those of many contemporary bourgeois theatregoers (Brewer 2013). In this sense, she was an important link between her husband (who rarely went to the theatre and did not seem to have any interest in it) and London audiences.

The Larpents were responsible for the licensing and censoring of an impressive number of dramatic texts during John Larpent’s tenure as Chief Examiner of Plays (1778–1824). My analysis of the Catalogue of censored manuscripts held at the Huntington Library shows that in the period between 1790–1800 they licensed a total of 438 texts (Table 1). These included a variety of formats and genres including *Main Pieces*, 3–5 act plays which constituted a theatre’s principal entertainment, followed by *Afterpieces*, 1–2 act plays, usually musical or farcical pieces, which accompanied the main entertainment. Italian operas constituted a separate category altogether as they were the only foreign language scripts to be submitted for licensing (and subsequently performed) untranslated in the original Italian.

<Table 1 about here>

Table 1. Types of plays in the Larpent Archive of Censored plays between 1790–1800.

While it is not possible to trace with precision how many of the texts licensed between 1790–1800 were translations, scholars of the period claim, as we have seen, that foreign sources accounted for nearly half of all plays performed (Nicoll 1927; Hale 2006). Of the 438 texts submitted to Larpent between 1790–1800, only a handful are acknowledged translations.<sup>3</sup> Dissociation between the performed play and the original texts was unsurprising considering the powerful criticism of continental values that was dominant in English public discourse at the time. It is possible, however, to trace a good number of further adaptations of French, Italian, Spanish and German plays among the Larpent archive texts licensed in this decade.<sup>4</sup>

About half of all the scripts submitted for licencing during this period have markings, not all of which are attributable to John and Anna Larpent. Changes to words and phrasing tended to be rehearsal annotations made by actors and stage managers or, in the case of Italian opera, by the librettist/arranger himself. We must remember that the scripts submitted for licencing were working documents and not final, clean copies. This makes it difficult at times to identify alterations as examples of censorship. However, generally John and Anna Larpent's interventions were quite different from rehearsal annotations or corrections, and tended to consist of clear excisions of lines or entire passages (either via crossing out or the use of x to bracket passages to be censored, as seen in Figure 1).

<Figure 1 about here>

Figure 1. Larpent manuscript of three translated plays: *The Widow of Malabar* (1791), Thomas Holcroft's *Knave or Not* (1790) and Charles Stuart's *She Would Be a Duchess* (1791) with examples of the censor's markings.

The influence of Anna Larpent's standards of morality on John's censorial practice is particularly visible in the multiple excised passages regarding sexual conduct and propriety. Though it is not possible to identify Anna Larpent's own handwriting in the marking of the pieces for excision, her diary records her reading on John's request, or being read to many plays which include extensive cuts. These include the cuts illustrated in Figure 1 from an anonymous translation of Antoine-Marin Lemierre's *La Veuve du Malabar*, *The Widow of Malabar* (1791),<sup>5</sup> Charles Stuart's *She Would be a Dutchess* (1791),<sup>6</sup> and Thomas Holcroft's *Knave or Not* (1790). References to physical affection between the sexes, as well as any indication of romantic passion, are consistently deleted from the manuscript translations. Deletions include, for example, metaphors used to express romantic passion: "When if I read thee right, thy soul overflows with milk of passion and kindness" (Larpent Archive of Manuscript Plays, Lemierre, *The Widow of Malabar*, 1791). Even more targeted are comments hinting at potential sexual misconduct by the upper classes, even when spoken by servants, as in the case of the following passage marked for deletion: "You'll be my Don Duchess – You've great good luck, my Jewel, to have one that had been a footman – as Footmen are great Favourites with the Ladies now-a-days" (Larpent Archive of Manuscript Plays, Stuart, *She Would be a Duchess*, LM915, 1791).

Playwrights who translated for performance were very much aware of the censor's absolute authority over the content of their translated plays and had certainly experienced their repressive powers first-hand. Holcroft's *Knave or Not* (1790), a patchwork translation of Goldoni's *Il raggiratore* (1756) and *Il padre di famiglia* (1750) submitted to John Larpent for the first time in 1790, was banned from performance until it was completely re-written and resubmitted in 1806. Among the deleted passages we find a clear example of political censorship. The deleted passage below comes from a scene where Melrose/Pasquale, a swindler who pretends to be a nobleman to take advantage of a series of aristocrats, addresses the audience once he has been found out. The monologue, as it appears in Goldoni's play is very different from Holcroft's rendition.

Ah sì, mi rimprovera  
ognuno con ragione.  
L'ospedale de' pazzi è  
luogo degno di me; luogo  
degnò di un povero  
presuntuoso, che cercando  
nobilitarsi colla vanità del  
passato, si è rovinato in  
presente, e lo sarà peggio  
ancora nell'avvenire.  
Prendano esempio da me i  
pazzi gloriosi, che chi si  
crede di essere più di quello  
ch'egli è (Goldoni, *Il  
raggiratore*, 1756)

You all reproach me with  
good reason. I am only fit for  
bedlam; that's the only place  
for a poor man, who was  
conceited enough to seek to  
turn himself into a Lord and  
with the vanity of his past, he  
ruined his present, and made  
his future worse still. Let my  
story be an example for those  
glorious madmen, that those  
who believe to be more than  
they are [My translation]

I find no difficulty in being as  
extravagant as a lord, as proud  
as a Lord, as idle as a Lord,  
and as impudent as a Lord. I  
could game like a Lord, be  
duped like a Lord, run in debt  
like a Lord and never pay, as  
naturally as if I had been born  
a Lord. Let Lords look to it,  
then, and reform. Let them be  
as supervisor to the poor in  
virtue as they are in power,  
and I will blush for being an  
impostor (Larpent Archive of  
Manuscript Plays, Holcroft,  
*Knave or not*, 1790)

A likely reason for such extensive excision is that the Larpensts would have considered Holcroft's overt criticism of the hypocrisy of aristocratic life as dangerously subversive and a threat to the established class hierarchies in 18<sup>th</sup>-century British society. Multiple examples of the Larpensts' suppression of any suggestions which were critical of the ruling classes are visible in other censored translations, especially by Goldoni, which include the deletion of some of the most political speeches Goldoni places in the mouths of his servants (Marinetti

2020). Like so many genteel women in this period, Anna Larpent developed a sophisticated understanding of contemporary drama as a theatregoer and a consumer of culture. Her privileged position as the wife of the theatre censor, enabled her to play a crucial role in policing notions of morality, taste and propriety that reached Georgian audiences in English translation.

### **Doubly invisible: Anna Margaretta Larpent as censor and agent of translation**

As the article's title suggests, Anna Larpent has remained doubly invisible in the history of translation in this period: as an agent of translation, since the role of the theatre censor in shaping translated drama has yet to be fully acknowledged; and as a woman whose voice was relegated to the margin of 18<sup>th</sup> century public intellectual life. While the previous section demonstrated how Anna's views on matters of taste, propriety and moral conduct were behind John Larpent's censorial interventions in the translated plays submitted for licensing, this section argues for a recognition of Anna's role as an active agent of translation and the multiple ways in which she herself intervened in shaping European performance cultures for British audiences. While the Larpent collection of manuscript plays shows very little direct evidence of Anna's active censoring of plays, her manuscript diary shows many examples of how her ideas and opinions had a profound influence on the shape of translated plays and she effectively acted as a gatekeeper between continental ideas and British audiences.

Between 1790 and 1800, Anna Larpent read and re-read some seventy plays (Connolly 1976, 35–38) for her husband in addition to the ones he read out to her, and all the Italian operas submitted during this period. When it came to assessing translated plays or foreign language texts, Anna was in fact much more qualified than her husband. She had an excellent command of French to the point that she read almost as much French as English fiction (Brewer 1997, 78). Her diary is peppered with aptly placed French or Italian expressions and her journals also shows evidence of Anna's reading of plays by Schiller and Kotzebue in the original German. Like many 18<sup>th</sup>-century theatregoers, however, Anna also betrayed significant cultural anxiety about the achievements of other European nations, which was reinforced by an influx of foreign artists from the continent (Brewer 1997, 79). Anna's role as an agent of censorship took at least four different forms: acting as a sounding board for her husband for the plays he was censoring; reading the plays herself and reporting her opinions to John; authorizing plays directly (especially Italian opera); and engaging with female authors/translators.

The journals often show John reading manuscripts aloud as Anna performed a variety of domestic tasks: sewing shirts, mending linen, and caning chairs. Numerous entries from the diary point clearly to her direct involvement, such as: “Mr Larpent read us a new MS play submitted for Licensing. *The Fugitives*” (Larpent, MD, 12 March 1795). Anna assisted her husband not only as a critical reader and audience of the manuscript plays but also as a personal secretary and ultimately as the cataloguer and curator of the Larpent manuscript collection. It is clear from the handwriting in the catalogue of plays that it was Anna who first organized and systematized the manuscripts submitted for licensing, drafting multiple lists and ultimately re-organizing them into a complete catalogue, thus playing the role of both archivist and record keeper. Consider, for example, the entries dated 13 March and 10 April 1790, among others, where Anna comments that she “wrote fair the Catalogue of Licensed Plays” (Larpent, MD, 1790). Without her and her labour, neither the catalogue of censored plays nor the invaluable insights into the practice of censoring of European performance cultures would have made it to the present day.

Not surprisingly, given the invisibility of Anna’s censoring role, there is only one play in the entire collection that bears Anna’s signature (Figure 2), which reads “Approved by AML”. However, when we look at her diary we find frequent entries that refer to Anna’s reading manuscripts submitted for licensing. The diary shows that she often read manuscript plays early in the morning before carrying out her domestic duties as the lady of the house and tutor for her children, or late at night, after entertaining guests. The entry from March 1792 is a useful illustration of Anna’s routine around licensing, she writes: “[A]fter they went, red [sic.] a MSS farce submitted for licensing titled *The Mermaid*, sad stuff, low and unconnected nonsense, absurd humour” (Larpent, MD 23 March, 1792). The manuscript of *The Mermaid* (1792) was granted a licence but not without excision of extensive passages referring to sexual innuendos between the savvy female servant and the uncouth male servant (Larpent Archive of Manuscript Plays, *The Mermaid*, LM939, 1792). Larpent’s excision of these passages which were scenes taken wholesale from *commedia dell’arte scenari* show, once again, Anna’s influential role in blocking all references to popular, working-class humour from circulating in the theatre.

<Figure 2 about here>

Figure 2. Anna Larpent’s signature approving *The Virgin of the Sun* for licensing.

Anna's influence over the field of performed drama was not limited to her work on the submitted playscripts. The journals provide evidence that suggest that Anna was seen in theatre circles as a powerful ally for aspiring playwrights. Anna's notes in the diary show that authors, especially female authors/translators, would apply directly to her to intercede on their behalf in the process of licensing. Anna was an admirer and great supporter of Elizabeth Inchbold. The diary is peppered with many examples of her admiration for Inchbold's work which she sees as "highly interesting", "commendable" and full of "truth and virtue" (Larpent, MD, 1798). Inchbold's manuscript translations submitted for licensing were generally approved by the Larpents with little or no intervention. After seeing one of her translations from the German, *Lover's Vows* (1798), at the theatre Anna comments that there is "great ingenuity" in the play "The Characters err – but remorse – & Sentiments amiable in themselves – Soften our disgust, we pity, we pardon" (Larpent, MD, 1798). But Anna was not always supportive of female writers, and there is evidence that she used her position to deliberately hinder the licensing of female dramatists who she considered less than moral. Playwright Eliza Phelp Parsons applied directly to Anna for approval of a play she had translated in 1792 and Anna records in her diary "This evening I wrote to Ms Parsons whose conduct I disapprove. She applied to me for supporting a Farce she has written. I cannot support her for she is unprincipled in her conduct" (Larpent, MD, 12 April 1792). These examples add yet another dimension to Anna Larpent's influence in the circulation of performance cultures: that of gatekeeper, supporting the work of some female translators while suppressing that of others depending on a complex tension between of her view of the plays themselves and of the moral conduct of the female author/translator.

### **What escaped censorship: Anna Larpent and Italian opera**

Undeniably, there is a contradiction in Larpent's work as a censor between her intervention in the circulation of European drama in translation and her treatment of Italian opera. While Italian opera may seem like a special case in this period because it was the only dramatic genre that circulated untranslated, it is my contention in this article, in line with this special issue, that anyone who had a hand in mediating, shaping, fostering or hindering the circulation of European performance cultures is, in fact, an "agent of translation". In this sense, Anna Larpent held considerable power over the circulation of European performance cultures through her role as the sole examiner of Italian opera. She was single-handedly responsible for the licensing of all Italian opera submitted to the censor (Connolly 1976). There is no credible evidence that



Anna actually denied licensing to any of the operas submitted in this period and she seems to have made minimal interventions on the plays themselves. Of the 62 Italian operas submitted in this period, 28 have annotations and corrections.<sup>7</sup> However, an analysis of the type of annotations reveals that in most cases these are attributable to the composer/arranger of the piece for the London performance, rather than to the censor. Most annotations seem to be rehearsal notes as they involve word- or syntax-level interventions aimed to make the scripts more singable for English singers of Italian opera or include the addition of stage directions. What is interesting in this context, however, is the degree of freedom that the absence of censorship granted Italian opera.

Anna Larpent herself shows in her diary that she has read and approved operas which have passages that, had they been translated into English, would have certainly fallen foul of censorship. Numerous passages from a range of different operas licensed by Larpent in this period (Moretti's *La vergine del sole* [1791], Guglielmi's *La Pastorella Nobile* [1791]; Boggio's *Teodolinda* [1793], Sografi's *La principessa filosofa* [1800]) show frequent references to physical affection between the sexes accompanied by the indication of romantic passion ("Un accento un guardo basta, a scoprirle tutto il cor!"/ "One word, one look is enough to uncover all her heart/chest") (Larpent Archive of Manuscript Plays, Sografi, *La principessa filosofa* 1800). As discussed in the previous section, these are the very passages that Anna would have pointed out to John Larpent for excision in English translation and yet, when left to her own devices as the sole censor of Italian opera these references to romantic passion remain consistently untouched.

A more extended example of this phenomenon is Paisiello's *Nina*, which Anna Larpent licensed with no amendments in May 1797 and was immensely successful in its production at The King's Theatre, Haymarket. Moreover, Anna comments on having enjoyed the piece first-hand on stage: "Evening went to Ye Opera. Nina. In which Bante Shines – it is a very pretty composition – independent of musical merit the poetry is elegant and the story interesting" (Larpent, MD, 16 May 1797).

Lin: Oh, momento fortunato	Lin: Oh what fortunate moment
Qual content, amati [sic] bene	What happiness, my love
Nin: Ei mi chiede, amati [sic] bene	Nin: He tells me you are my love
L'idol mio dica cosi	my hero says so

Lin: Sempre, sempre amato bene	Lin: Always, always, my love
Nina mia diro' così	My Nina, I shall say so
spesso, io t'amo ti dicea	often times, I used to tell you: I love you
Nin: T'amo io pur gli rispondea	Nin: I love you too, I replied to him
Lin: Ti diceva	Lin: He told you
Nin: T'amo, T'amo	Nin: I love you, I love you
Lin: Rispondevi	Lin: You replied
Nin: T'amo, T'amo	Nin: I love you, I love you
Lin: Gli diresti ancor così	Lin: Would you say the same again to him
Deh, per esso a me lo di	Tell me on his behalf
Nin: T'amo	Nin: I love you
Lin: A me?	Lin: Me?
Nin: Si,t'amo, si	Nin: Yes, I love you, yes
Lin: Ah che amabil momenti	Lin: Ah what loving moments
(Larpent Archive of Manuscript Plays, Paisiello, Nina, 1797)	[my translation]

The passage involves a passionate dialogue between Lindoro and Nina where they express their love for each other in a crescendo, first through a playful and fictitious third person (“io t’amo, di dicea/t’amo io pur gli rispondea” [“often times I used to tell you I love you/I love you too, I replied to him”]) moving up to the final expression of passion to each other (“gli diresti ancor così deh per esso me lo di/T’amo/a me?/Si, t’amo, si” [“would you say the same again to him/ Tell me on his behalf/ I love you/ me?/ yes, I love you, yes”]). It is very surprising that such an extended passionate scene between the young lovers in an opera Anna clearly had read and knew well remained uncensored. Not only that, but Anna also clearly approved the “interesting story” and the “elegant poetry” of the opera (Larpent, MD, 16 May 1797), seemingly oblivious of the kind of references to romantic passion she would have objected to in an English translation. Such peculiar attitude towards Italian opera can be understood if we consider the cultural capital held by the Italian language at the time. Opera scholars such as Henry Knepler

demonstrate that that French and Italian were markers of distinction among the middle classes, and being seen to understand and appreciate opera in the original Italian was a way of securing one's position among the elite, "even if one only pretended to know it" (1968, 55). The fact that untranslated Italian opera circulated practically uncensored in Britain is also a further demonstration of how the process of translation into English, and the strict censorship practices that accompanied it, were a vehicle through which the establishment controlled public discourse in Georgian society. The figure of Anna Larpent embodies this complex conflict between the dominant nationalist ideology which rejected all references to foreign morality and behaviour and the cultural capital of Italian opera which, as a marker of refined taste and breeding, could not possibly be seen to contain corrupting or objectionable content.

## **Conclusions**

This article began by making the claim that more work needs to be done to bring to light the unique set of circumstances and forms of labour that have characterized the translation of performance cultures through time. To address this deficit, the article set out to study the "process of assemblage" (Latour 2005, 5) that foreign performance cultures underwent before reaching British audiences and revealed the doubly invisible role played by Anna Larpent in suppressing and censoring but also facilitating the circulation of foreign drama and opera for performance. My study of the Larpent manuscript plays and of Anna Larpent's journals demonstrates how in a field like 18<sup>th</sup>-century British theatre, where censorship occurred prior to publication, John and Anna Larpent were powerful agents of translation and they ultimately had more control over the form of the text than the translators themselves. Anna Larpent's diary entries show that, as a more experienced and attentive theatregoer and critic than her husband, she took on many aspects of the role of reviser and curator of the submitted plays and, in so doing, she became an important and invisible mediator between European performance cultures and Georgian audiences.

The figure of Anna Larpent that emerges here is one that is both complex and contradictory: embodying, on the one hand, the dominant nationalist ideology which suppressed all references to foreign morality and behaviour, whilst on the other hand enabling the circulation of Italian opera, which held considerable cultural capital in Georgian Britain, virtually uncensored. Offering a unique window into the decision-making processes behind censorship, my analysis of Anna Larpent's personal writing showed that while she generally

did not license the plays directly, it was her values and worldviews that guided John Larpent's hand in his frequent and extensive excisions of political or morally questionable passages. She also took on the role gatekeeper, supporting the work of some female translators while suppressing that of others, often, as a result of her of the moral conduct of the translator rather than the content of the plays. A careful reading of her diary reveals that Anna Larpent was a fascinating and complex figure, who could be incredibly repressive as a censor of translated plays but when it came to Italian opera, she facilitated the circulation of very modern representations of femininity and romantic passion.

Theoretically, the article also argues that in our exploration of the “processes of assemblage” (Latour 2005) of translated texts, we must pay more attention to uncovering the hidden trajectories of women as agents of translation and this includes questioning established models used to explain social practices, such as direct and structural censorship. This case study shows that Anna Larpent engaged in the only form of agency that was open to women at the time, one that occurred in the private sphere of their family home. While traces of her work are virtually non-existent in public records and all censorial interventions are attributed to her husband, Anna Larpent's journal reveals that her reading habits, her knowledge of languages and her genuine passion for the theatre equipped her to play leading role in developing censorial norms which both restricted and facilitated the circulation of foreign performance cultures. Anna Larpent's “domestic censorship” may have been less visible than her husband's official role but it was equally influential in “moulding worldview and discourse production” (Billiani 2007, 35) while her ideology and judgement acted as a filter for what was and was not permitted in a translation. Heeding the call made by Luc Van Doorslaer and Jack McMartin in the first issue of the new journal *Translation and Society* to re-imagine the future of translation and the social (2022, 8), I argue that more work needs to be done to uncover the invisible labour of partners/assistants/cataloguers/confidants of official censors and renowned translators, and let their hidden voices, opinions and above all their unacknowledged and unpaid labour come to light. It is exactly those invisible voices, concealed within the private sphere of the family home, that can provide us with a fuller picture of the complex material conditions through which ideas and values circulate across languages.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Note on contributor

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Larpent's journals are held at the Huntington library in San Francisco but they are also available, via subscription, through the Eighteenth Century Drama collection online (ECD) and at the British library in microfiche format.

<sup>2</sup> Larpent remarks multiples times on the corrupting influence of French novels, condemning their descriptions as "abominably loose & disgusting to the modest". Anna Margareta Larpent, *Manuscript Diary, MD*, 1790–1830, Huntington Library Manuscripts, HM\_LD 31201, volume 1, entry 16 January 1802. Huntington Library, San Marino California, hereafter MD.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, most of the acknowledged translations in the Larpent archives are from the German playwright Kozebue whose work was very fashionable in that decade and a few other European playwrights. Here is the full list of acknowledged translations with their sources: *Phedra*, Thomas Morris (1793) from Racine; *Emilia Galotti*, John Kemble (1794), from Lessing; *A Curiosity*, William Thomas Lewis (1798), *Lover's Vows*, Elizabeth Inchbold (1798), from Kozebue.

<sup>4</sup> Among these are several pieces drawn from *commedia dell'arte scenari* and others from Italian, Spanish, German and French repertoires. To name but a few, see *Harlequin Touchstone*, Charles Dibdin (1790); *Blue Beard* (1793); *Harlequin Museum* (1793); *Harlequin Faustus, or the Devil will have his own*, Harris (1793); *Harlequin Peasant*, Colman (1793); *The Vulcano*, Thomas Dibdin (1799).

<sup>5</sup> Translation of *La veuve du Malabar, ou, L'empire des coutumes* (1784) by Antoine-Marin Lemierre. This corresponds to Larpent Manuscript LA 870. For brevity, in the list of references I include one unique reference to the Larpent Archive of Manuscript Plays.

<sup>6</sup> The title page on the Larpent manuscript states that this play was "taken from the Spanish" but it has not been possible to trace the actual Spanish source.

<sup>7</sup> These figures are based on the Larpent archive summary, which flags up all manuscripts with annotations. My own analysis of the annotated scripts has found no evidence of censorial excision, usually accompanied by crossing out, with no alternative suggestions made. All annotations are at word level and include suggestions.

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