Eloisa : $b or, A series of original letters

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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Eloisa: Or, a Series of Original Letters

Collected and published by J.J. Rousseau

Translated from the French.

In Four Volumes.

The Second Edition.

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MDCCLXI.

Translation of M. Rousseau’s Preface

Great cities require public theatres, and romances are necessary to a corrupt people. I saw the manners of the times, and have published these letters. Would to heaven I had lived in an age when I ought rather to have thrown them in the fire!

Though I appear only as the editor of this work, I confess that I have had some share in the composition. But am I the sole author, and is the entire correspondence fictitious? Ye people of the world, of what importance is it to you? Certainly, to you, it is all a fiction.

Every honest man will avow the books which he publishes. I have prefixed my name to these letters, not with a design to appropriate them to myself, but that I might be answerable for them. If they deserve censure, let it fall on me; if they have any merit, I am not ambitious of the praise. If it is a bad book, I am the more obliged to own it: I do not wish to pass for better than I am.

As to the reality of the history, I declare that, though I have been several times in the country of the two lovers, I never heard either of Baron D'Etange, his daughter, Mr. Orbe, Lord B----, or Mr. Wolmar. I must also inform the reader that there are several topographical errors in this work; but whether they are the effect of ignorance or design, I leave undetermined. This is all I am at liberty to say: let every one think as he pleases.

The book seems not calculated for an extensive circulation, as it is not adapted to the generality of readers. The stile will offend people of taste, to austere men the matter will be alarming, and all the sentiments will seem unnatural to those who know not what is meant by the word virtue. It ought to displease the devotee, the libertine, the philosopher; to shock all the ladies of gallantry, and to scandalize every modest woman. By whom, therefore, will it be approved? Perhaps only by myself: certain I am, however, that it will not meet with _moderate_ approbation from any one.

Whoever may resolve to read these letters ought to arm himself with patience against faults of language, rusticity of stile, and pedantry of expression; he ought to remember that the writers are neither natives of France, wits, academicians, nor philosophers; but that they are young and unexperienced inhabitants of a remote village, who mistake the romantic extravagance of their own imagination, for philosophy.

Why should I fear to speak my thoughts? This collection of letters, with all their gothic air, will better suit a married lady than books of philosophy: it may even be of service to those who, in an irregular course of life, have yet preserved some affection for virtue. As to

young ladies, they are out of the question; no chaste virgin ever read a romance: but if perchance any young girl should dare to read a single page of this, she is inevitably lost. Yet let her not accuse me as the cause of her perdition: the mischief was done before; and since she has begun, let her proceed, for she has nothing worse to fear.

May the austere reader be disgusted in the first volume, revile the Editor, and throw the book into the fire. I shall not complain of injustice; for probably, in his place, I might have acted in the same manner. But if after having read to the end, any one should think fit to blame me for having published the book, let him, if he pleases, declare his opinion to all the world, except to me; for I perceive it would never be in my power to esteem such a man.

Preface by the Translator

It is by no means my design to swell the volume, or detain the reader from the pleasure he may reasonably expect in the perusal of this work: I say _reasonably_, because the author is a writer of great reputation. My sole intention is to give a concise account of my conduct in the execution of this arduous task; and to anticipate such accusations as may naturally be expected from some readers: I mean those who are but imperfectly acquainted with the French language, or who happen to entertain improper ideas of translation in general.

If I had chosen to preserve the original title, it would have stood thus: _Julia, or the New Eloisa_, in the general title-page; and in the particular one, _Letters of two Lovers, inhabitants of a small village at the foot of the Alps, collected and published,_ &c. Whatever objection I might have to this title, upon the whole, my principal reason for preferring the name of Eloisa to that of Julia, was, because

the public seemed unanimous in distinguishing the work by the former rather than the latter, and I was the more easily determined, as it was a matter of no importance to the reader.

The English nobleman who acts a considerable part in this romance, is called in the original, Lord Bomston, which I suppose Mr. Rousseau thought to be an English name, or at least very like one. It may possibly sound well enough in the ears of a Frenchman; but I believe the English reader will not be offended with me for having substituted that of Lord B---- in its room. It is amazing that the French novelists should be as ignorant of our common names, and the titles of our nobility, as they are of our manners. They seldom mention our country, or attempt to introduce an English character, without exposing themselves to our ridicule. I have seen one of their celebrated romances, in which a British nobleman, called the Duke of _Workinsheton_, is a principal personage; and another, in which the one identical lover of the heroine is sometimes a Duke, sometimes an Earl, and sometimes a simple Baronet; _Catombridge_ is, with them, an English city: and yet they endeavour to impose upon their readers by pretending that their novels are translations from the English.

With regard to this _Chef d'oeuvre_ of Mr. Rousseau, it was received with uncommon avidity in France, Italy, Germany, Holland, and, in short, through every part of the Continent where the French language is understood. In England, besides a very considerable number first imported, it has been already twice reprinted; but how much soever the world might be delighted with the original, I found it to be the general opinion of my countrymen, that it was one of those books which could not possibly be translated with any tolerable degree of justice to the author: and this general opinion, I own, was my chief

motive for undertaking the work.

There are, in this great city, a considerable number of industrious labourers, who maintain themselves, and perhaps a numerous family, by writing for the booksellers, by whom they are ranged in separate classes, according to their different abilities; and the very lowest class of all, is that of _Translators_. Now it cannot be supposed that such poor wretches as are deemed incapable of better employment, can be perfectly acquainted either with their own or with any other language: besides, were they ever so well qualified, it becomes their duty to execute as much work, in as little time, as possible; for, at all events, their children must have bread: therefore it were unreasonable to expect that they should spend their precious moments in poring over a difficult sentence in order to render their version the more elegant. This I take to be the true reason why our translations from the French are, in general, so extremely bad.

I confess, the idioms of the two languages are very different, and therefore that it will, in some instances, be impossible to reach the sublime delicacy of expression in an elegant French writer; but in return, their language is frequently so vague and diffuse, that it must be entirely the fault of the English translator if he does not often improve upon his original; but this will never be the case, unless we sit down with a design to translate the _ideas_ rather than the _words_ of our author.

Most of the translations which I have read, appear like a thin gauze spread over the original: the French language appears through every paragraph; but it is entirely owing to the want of bread, the want of attention, or want of ability in the translator. Mr. Pope, and some few

others, have shewn the world, that not only the ideas of the most sublime writers may be accurately expressed in a translation, but that it is possible to improve and adorn them with beauties peculiar to the English language.

If in the following pages, the reader expects to find a servile, literal, translation, he will be mistaken. I never could, and never will, copy the failings of my author, be his reputation ever so great, in those instances where they evidently proceed from want of attention. Mr. Rousseau writes with great ease and elegance, but he sometimes wants propriety of thought, and accuracy of expression.

As to the real merit of this performance, the universal approbation it has met with is a stronger recommendation than any thing I could say in its praise.

A Dialogue Between a Man of Letters and Mr. J. J. Rousseau

N. There, take your Manuscript: I have read it quite through.

R. _Quite through?_ I understand you: you think there are not many readers will follow your example.

N. _Vel duo, vel nemo._

R. _Turpe & miserabile._ But let me have your sincere opinion.

N. I dare not.

R. You have dared to the utmost by that single word: Pray explain yourself.

N. My opinion depends upon your answer to this question: is it a real, or fictitious, correspondence?

R. I cannot perceive the consequence. In order to give one’s sentiments of a book, of what importance can it be to know how it was written?

N. In this case it is of great importance. A portrait has its merit if it resembles the original, be that original ever so strange; but in a picture which is the produce of imagination, every human figure should resemble human nature, or the picture is of no value: yet supposing them both good in their kind, there is this difference, the portrait is interesting but to a few people, whilst the picture will please the public in general.

R. I conceive your meaning. If these letters are portraits, they are uninteresting; if they are pictures, they are ill done. Is it not so?

N. Precisely.

R. Thus I shall snatch your answers before you speak. But, as I cannot reply, directly to your question, I must beg leave to propose one in my turn. Suppose the worst: my Eloisa----

N. Oh! if she had really existed.

R. Well.

N. But certainly it is no more than a fiction.

R. Be it so.

N. Why then, there never was any thing more absurd: the letters are no letters, the romance is no romance, and the personages are people of another world.

R. I am sorry for it, for the sake of this.

N. Console yourself; there is no want of fools among us; but yours have no existence in nature.

R. I could----No, I perceive the drift of your curiosity. But why do you judge so precipitately? Can you be ignorant how widely human nature differs from itself? how opposite its characteristics? how prejudice and manners vary according to times, places, and age. Who is it that can prescribe bounds to nature and say, Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther?

N. If such reasoning were allowed, monsters, giants, pygmies and chimeras of all kinds might be specifically admitted into nature: every object would be disfigured, and we should have no common model of ourselves. I repeat it, in a picture of human nature, every figure should resemble man.

R. I confess it; but then we should distinguish between the variety in human nature and that which is essential to it. What would you say of one who should only be able to know mankind in the picture of a Frenchman?

N. What would you say of one who, without expressing features or shape, should paint a human figure covered with a veil? Should we not have reason to ask, where is the man?

R. Without expressing features or shape? Is this just? There is no perfection in human nature: that is indeed chimerical. A young virgin in love with virtue, yet swerving from its dictates, but reclaimed by the horror of a greater crime; a too easy friend punished at last by her own heart for her culpable indulgence; a young man, honest and sensible, but weak, yet in words a philosopher; an old gentleman bigotted to his nobility, and sacrificing every thing to opinion; a

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