Bluestocking Feminism and British-German Cultural Transfer, 1750-1837

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Afterword

Les Terrains Plus Vastes

In this book about British-German cultural transfer I have followed the recent “spatial turn” in historiography and concerned myself with terrains vastes. I began with the University of Göttingen and its English ties, expanded through Lower Saxony to Weimar and back across the Channel, toured to Naples and then moved beyond the Atlantic to Canada and returned to Europe. Actors expanded along with the geography: not only significant figures played a part, from professors to tourists to gymnasts to settlers and indigenous Americans, but also material, geographical, and infrastructural elements that brought the various actors to crucial places at telling moments. Publications such as books, textbooks, and periodicals; personal communications in the form of letters and journals; artistic representations, contracts, records; libraries, collections, shelves of books, and souvenirs; modes of discourse; systems of rank, transport, law, and war; mosquitoes and an erupting volcano: all have contributed to this story of British-German ties during the Personal Union.

As my account appeared to expand ever outward and become more inclusive, it worked its way into a figure of associations in the manner of Bruno Latour’s actor networks. The very different protagonists displayed distinct styles of transfer and mediation in interconnected ongoing systems, rotating around various geographical and institutional “centers of calculation.” I will take up one more such center as a concluding emblem of the type of British-German transfer I have been describing:
The “Garden Kingdom of Dessau-Wörlitz,” created by Prince Leopold Friedrich Franz of Anhalt-Dessau in the last decades of the eighteenth century, offers both a conclusion to my book and initiates a discussion of questions for further study.

Prince Franz (1740–1817), often called “Father Franz” by his manifestly fond subjects, took over rule of the small principality of Anhalt-Dessau, sandwiched between Weimar and Prussia, in 1758. An Anglophile, he modeled the park at Wörlitz on English gardens that he visited on four different trips to Britain, and the development of the Garden Kingdom demonstrates how creating space for human, material, and intellectual connection could further progressive aims. Indeed, Prince Franz was motivated not merely by novelty, aesthetics, or the desire for outdoor diversion; he recognized the sociopolitical significance of his estate and wished it to convey Enlightenment ideas to the general public.\(^1\) For one thing, the estate was fully accessible to the people at all times, every day of the year, as it had no walls nor gates nor even sunken fences. The palace, and its collections and library, were open to the public as well. He advocated religious tolerance and conveyed this by building a synagogue in proximity to a Christian church and a representation of natural religion, so that visitors walking through the landscape would see these, juxtaposed within one fan view, thereby rendered equivalent and in harmonious relationship; he constructed a nonsectarian cemetery as well. Freedom of the press meant the possibility for publication of the Jewish newspaper *Sulamith*. Prince Franz established housing for the poor that included not only shelter but also education; he built a hospital, instituted a scheme of social security, and improved the roads.

On his four trips to England he witnessed not only new-style English gardens that he wished to imitate but also agricultural reforms and manufactures; he created a smaller replica of the iron Coalbrookdale Bridge. He also admired the Dissenting academies and came home to engage Johann Bernhard Basedow in the establishment of his Rousseauian school, the Philanthropin, at Dessau in 1774. To demonstrate that the glory of ancient times could be resuscitated, Prince Franz yearly imitated the Olympic Games in competitions at Drehberg from 1776 to 1799; he sponsored a pentathlon, and visitors attended from far and wide.\(^2\) Prince Franz also constructed a “Forster Pavilion” between 1781 and 1784 to honor Georg and his father, Johann Reinhold, and to house geographic and ethnological exhibits. He had received forty-four Tahitian and Tongan artifacts and a map from the Forsters in London in the summer of 1775, just after they had returned from the second Cook
voyage; it was necessary to construct a fitting site for display of these precious objects. (The Wörlitz collection is the third largest one devoted to Forster materials; it follows those of the Pitt Rivers Museum and the collection at the University of Göttingen.) Georg Forster himself visited Dessau-Wörlitz three times, in 1779, 1785, and 1788. He was taken with the prince’s reforms and made friends with the prince’s liberal companions Friedrich Wilhelm von Erdmannsdorf, Basedow, and Joachim Heinrich Campe, with whom he continued to correspond.³

Friedrich Franz moreover traveled to Italy in 1765–66 and from 1788 to 1794 he and his colleague Erdmannsdorf, fellow traveler on the Grand Tour and resident architect, constructed a model of Vesuvius in his Wörlitz park, and on special occasions this mountain was filled with fireworks launched at night to mimic volcanic eruptions. John Claudius Loudon, a Scottish horticulturalist who traveled through this part of Germany in 1814, described the phenomenon:

In the representation of eruptions, the hollow which surrounds the crater, and out of which it seems to rise, overflows with water, which is thrown up by a machine within the mountain, and which, like a magnificent cascade, rushes down, foaming and roaring, over the rocky ridge into the lake. A stone bridge, which is thrown over this hollow, leads to the great caldron, where the fireworks, projected through the mouth of the crater, are prepared, and in which, when the volcano is working, all kinds of inflammable materials are burned; when an immense smoke issues from the numerous apertures, and covers the top of the mountain with heavy black clouds. At the same time millions of sparks, rising from the gulf, form columns of fire, and streams of melted lava appear to flow down the sides of the mountain.⁴

On one side of the volcano Prince Franz built the “Villa Hamilton,” a copy of William Hamilton’s dwelling at Posillipo, in which Franz displayed Wedgwood copies of ancient vases—especially the famous Portland vase collected by Hamilton—as well as samples of lava and other geological specimens.⁵ On the other side of the volcano was an outdoor theater inspired by those at Pompeii and Herculaneum. The volcano, according to Simon Werrett, “was taken to represent enlightenment itself, as a constructive force shaping the environment for the benefit of mankind”⁶ and, it should be added, for the enhancement of its builder’s status, his reputation among visitors, and their moral and cultural instruction.

Prince Franz clearly succeeded in his political and didactic aims to
create an evocative landscape that would impress and enlighten visitors. When Goethe toured Wörlitz in May 1778, he wrote to Charlotte von Stein: “It is endlessly beautiful here. As we wandered among the lakes, canals and forests yesterday evening, I was moved by the way in which the gods had allowed the Prince to create a dream all around him. When one walks through it, it is like the telling of a fairy tale; it has the character of the Elysian Fields.” Goethe then sought to imitate Wörlitz park with Duke Carl August in Weimar. Commentators have noted the mystical Masonic elements of the park and likened the effects of Wörlitz to the enchantments in Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, an opera that was first performed there on 11 August 1794.

The idyll was not destroyed by revolution or the Napoleonic wars.
GutsMuths in 1793 used Dessau’s yearly Olympic festival as an example of how a sovereign can maintain the affection and unity of the community: “How important, and how much to be recommended, in an age of revolutions!” When Napoleon descended upon Dessau after victory at the Battle of Jena in October of 1806, Prince Franz further demonstrated political acumen in protecting his lands. His encounter with Napoleon is vividly described by the Oxford professor F. Max Müller, who grew up in Dessau and frames his 1897 account as a childhood memory of his mother, who was a granddaughter of the educator Basedow. In Müller’s rendering the two men embody a confrontation of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism with a new imperial politics.

The old Prince had to receive him bareheaded at the foot of the staircase of his castle. My mother, then a child of six, remembered seeing her own grand and beautiful prince standing erect before the small and pale Corsican. The Prince, however, in his meeting with the Emperor, was not afraid to wear the Prussian order of the Black Eagle on his breast, and when he was asked by Napoleon whether he too had sent a contingent to the Prussian army, he said, “No, sir.” “Why not?” asked the Emperor. “Because I have not been asked,” was the answer. “But if you had been asked?” continued the Emperor. “Then I should certainly have sent my soldiers,” the Prince replied; and he added, “Your majesty knows the right of the stronger.” This was a not very prudent remark to make, but the Emperor seems to have liked the outspoken old man. He invited him to inspect with him the bridge over the Elbe which had been burnt by the Prussians to cover their retreat. He demanded that it should be rebuilt at once, and on that condition he promised to grant neutrality to the duchy. Nay, before leaving Dessau, in the morning he went so far as to ask his host whether he could do anything for him. “For myself,” the Prince replied, “I want nothing. I only ask for mercy for my people, for they are all to me like my children.”

This account may well be embroidered through family lore; however, the tone of the description accords with the general record of liberal Prince Franz, who was indeed able to achieve neutrality for the duchy and did impress Napoleon to the extent that he received an invitation, which was apparently declined, to visit France. Motivated by Enlightenment ideals, delighted by English ways, all the while following patriarchal and absolutist traditions, Prince Franz pursued his manifold endeavors in
Anhalt-Dessau. He thereby demonstrated the profound extent to which travel could inspire plans for reform, the long-standing influence and depth of the English model in German life despite or because of French intellectual and military incursions, and the way in which an Anglophile’s plucky retort to a French emperor finds its way back to a British audience through a well-placed local mediator.

Prince Franz’s garden at Wörlitz thus epitomizes the ongoing European transfer of ideas, goods, people, and methods for progressive enlightenment ends into the nineteenth century. Were I writing a more traditional history, I might have chosen the figure of Prince Franz—or Georg Forster or Joseph Johnson—and composed a full chapter explaining the academic or intellectual or cultural prominence he achieved. But much of what I have described was not completed by these figures; what they began was continued, furthered, and changed—“translated” in Latour’s terms—by other mediators, especially bluestockings in my account, who helped make visible the social effects that mattered for this historical narrative. So I am less concerned about the men’s eminence or the egocentric network surrounding them and more interested in their function as dynamic conduits, mediators themselves, as well as in the mediators they rouse or enable. This approach has consequently facilitated the writing of feminist and gender history, since the intellectual women with whom these figures worked have not been subordinated to a narrative about them but to a story of the issues and goals that impelled eventual reform efforts.

Hence the study has been organized around geographical and institutional “centers of calculation”—Göttingen, Weimar, Naples, Canada, or Dessau—and has then “followed the actors” who functioned in and emerged from them, drawing attention to what they cared about and to the language in which they themselves articulated those concerns. As Latour has argued, “We have to resist the idea that there exists somewhere a dictionary where all the variegated words of the actors can be translated into the few words of the social vocabulary. . . . We have to resist pretending that actors have only a language while the analyst possesses the meta-language in which the first is ‘embedded.’”12 Latour is critiquing traditional sociology, but historians too can profit from considering what is lost when scant attention is paid to the precise and reverberating meanings of actors in context before their words or movements are contained by a preconceived notion or category of thought. Anna Jameson, who has received much attention and might be described as a hero of my account, is, however, first and foremost a dynamic mediator and
translator: a vehicle who, through the resonant language of her popular and trusted voice, via travel and correspondence and literary endeavors, proceeds to gather, alter, and propagate notions and books and material goods so that they influence and eventually issue in an enacted politics. That is, by various means, using different tools, she hoped to shape political discourses until public opinion, legislation, and the enforcement of legislation might serve to bring about social change in Britain and Germany—a process that for the most part, however, she did not live to see, and that was substantially promoted and carried out by other actors.

Viewing the creation of history by way of dynamic actor-networks therefore allows for a decentered reading that navigates terrains vastes to come to broad, if provisional, conclusions. Questions necessarily remain. For example, how exactly did the materials gathered by the Forsters in the Pacific, published in England and Germany, acquired by Prince Franz of Anhalt-Dessau and displayed to the general public at Wörlitz, affect the process of enlightenment in Dessau and beyond? What did inhabitants of the region and visitors to the park take away from this intriguingly populated and evocative landscape? I have quoted Goethe and suggested that, inspired, he returned to Weimar to design Wörlitz-like gardens there; I have explained how Salzmann, having worked with Basedow at Prince Franz’s famous Philanthropic school, started his own institution, hired GutsMuths, and published significant pedagogical works with transnational consequences. But there are further repercussions that might be pursued. How did Goethe’s Wörlitz experience shape not only the Weimar landscape but also his own work as a civil servant or his literary endeavors? What can be said about the other mediators and products that emerged from the stimulating environment of Wörlitz? And how did Wörlitz, as a mediator itself, alter the European story that the English gardens on which it was modeled were telling about the meaning of social spaces, the function of parks? The tale of competition between English and French styles can be enhanced by consideration of German examples and transnational movements.

How did Georg Forster respond to Wörlitz and the Forster Pavilion? How did Forster’s South Sea experiences affect not only his German reception but indeed his later radical agitation, writings, and English-German translations? The biographical accounts have surprisingly little to say of the impact of what must have been the central formative experience of Forster’s life; his early travels are oddly divorced from his later politics. And again, what of the material goods that came from the Pacific and the people on whom he bestowed them? We have record of
various South Sea items he presented to friends, but we have no knowledge, for example, of what happened to the cloth that he gave Caroline Michaelis, part of which was turned into an exotic ball gown, and that perhaps decorated pillows and windows in the Böhmer and Schlegel and Schelling households for years, likely stimulating observations, providing topics of conversation, creating hybrid cultural experiences and spaces. Mary Louise Pratt has suggested that we need to discover how Europe “construct[ed] itself from the outside in, out of materials infiltrated, donated, absorbed, appropriated, and imposed from contact zones all over the planet.” Though it may seem a trivial example, what cultural work was accomplished by Caroline’s prized bolt of cloth?

More generally, how was Georg Forster the voyager influenced by the academic approach to travel cultivated at the University of Göttingen? And how did that approach affect Alexander von Humboldt the explorer? Johann David Michaelis, the professor of Near Eastern studies and translator of Clarissa (chapter 2), modeled the academic approach to travel in his conception and direction of the Yemen expedition supported by King Frederick V of Denmark and completed by Carsten Niebuhr from 1761 to 1767: Michaelis created a list of questions to be answered by the explorers, nearly four hundred pages long, that was published in German and French and Dutch and became widespread in Europe, shaping other scientific journeys. We know that Georg Forster carried that book with him on Cook’s voyage. To what extent did Michaelis set Forster’s agenda? To what extent did Michaelis condition Humboldt the explorer?

Indeed, Humboldt was educated at Göttingen along with his brother Wilhelm; after traveling through Europe with Georg Forster he then conducted his celebrated scientific work in South America from 1799 to 1804. Pratt has characterized the travel accounts emerging from this style of journey as “anti-conquest,” a “strategy of innocence” veiling an attempt to exercise power over the visited territory. But whose power and whose strategy is under scrutiny? Humboldt likely imbibed at Göttingen long-standing ideas about what an expedition should entail; his method points to a network of earlier actors who may or may not have molded Humboldt’s findings, fame, and legacy.

And it was not only Michaelis’s influence that mattered; Michaelis had himself instructed the historian and political theorist August Schlözer, who then taught at Göttingen, initiated a popular lecture course on travel, and made the subject into an academic discipline. Schlözer completed editions of travel texts, including some for children, and devel-
oped a collection of travel literature that remains a notable part of the Göttingen Library holdings. The intellectual advantages of journeys had to be maximized, according to Schlözer, who, as I outlined in chapter 2, was at the time conducting an educational experiment on his daughter Dorothea and was even then taking her along on an extended trip to Italy; with a similar penchant for application he did sociological and historical work that bridged tourism and academic research expeditions. His well-attended lectures were offered from 1772 to 1795, sometimes to more than two hundred students. It is not known whether Alexander von Humboldt attended his course, but in the lecture notes of Ernst Friedrich Haupt, who attended in the winter term of 1795, one cannot miss Schlözer’s pragmatic emphasis: the advantages and disadvantages of different ways and means of travel, costs, lodgings, and even the virtues and vices of different companions. Traveling with women “is either unbearable or heavenly sweet. There is no medium”; traveling with servants “is expensive, often useless or even burdensome.” Since servants sometimes accompanied their masters to lectures, Schlözer in discussing them switched into Latin, which servants would not have understood. He explained how they should be treated en route: they should pay for their own meals out of an allowance, since innkeepers will otherwise take advantage; a servant who has traveled a lot will have an inflated sense of self-worth, which is insufferable; a new servant should never be hired along the way. Did such instruction help to form Humboldt’s nimble and successful travel style? If so, how might the impact on his outcomes be determined?

A danger of historiography in a Latourian mode, of course, is that of infinite regression, of pursuing six degrees of separation for every actor and ending up with confusing and undifferentiated reams of information. The goal, however, is not to reach a point of chaos but one of saturation. At a certain moment the network of associations takes a shape that is meaningful, and at that instant the historian should bring to bear on the material the kind of judgment and conclusions that the associations suggest and warrant, informed, naturally, by the historian’s goals and knowledge. The difference and the benefit is that a network-oriented historiography emphasizes the performative and the inclusive and thereby demonstrates not which protagonist wields power and can control the actions and fates of others, but how authority is created, assumed, and distributed, how resources move, how actors work as a collective to shape what was and what might have been.

The story of cultural transfer I have offered here is unquestionably
partial. I have not addressed the manifold cultural repercussions of business ties, for instance; I have not spelled out the role of agents like the Remnants in Hamburg or the Bests in London, who were active cultural mediators; I have not discussed trends following upon flows of immigration and emigration. This book represents one part of a new historiographical focus—promoted by scholars such as Jeremy Black, Hermann Wellenreuther, Brendan Simms, and others—on British-German links that were accelerated by the Personal Union. My aim has been to decenter historiography with a lens that zooms in to account for the movements of individuals and then opens up to see the terrains vastes, consistently taking account of women as the significant actors they were. In the process, such Swiftian changes in perspective have, I hope, allowed for fresh ways of seeing and querying the past, for holding asymmetrical ideas in the mind at once, as David Blackbourn has advised. As I have argued elsewhere, feminist historiography depends on this kind of mental agility, on recognizing simultaneously the micronarratives of individual striving and the grand narrative of women’s long-standing oppression. The same holds geographically, with individual provincial existences gradually being associated in networks of the terrains vastes, and politically, with each instance or event accumulating in a slow collective process of broad sociocultural change.  

It is a version of what Latour terms a “compositionist” approach, challenging familiar models of revolutionary substitution and incommensurable paradigm shifts. Even though much of the story of British-German cultural transfer remains to be told, then, my project might itself be viewed in Latourian terms: the study forms only part of a system of associations, and it remains for future studies to take up the arguments, translate and modify them, and expand the terrain.