

MARIA VELLUTI'S THEATER TRANSLATIONS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRAZIL: A *MISE-EN-SCÈNE*

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Abstract: Maria Velluti (1827-1891) was a dancer, actor, director, translator and playwright. She arrived in Brazil in her twenties and became a renowned actor, playwright, and translator. She translated over forty plays, many of which she directed, produced, cast, and starred. Two of her translations from French were published in her lifetime: *A vida de uma atriz* (1859) and *A viuva das camelias* (1859). Based on her prolific output, it could be said that Velluti shook the foundations of Brazil's nineteenth-century theater scene not only by introducing modern dramas of French realist tradition to the major theater companies of her time, but also by writing in an environment where most playwrights were men with a sound background in literature. This study highlights the significance of Velluti's life and works. It is a *mise-en-scène* of Velluti as a nineteenth-century woman, actor, playwright, and translator in her own right. It "places on the stage" the myriad of roles Velluti played, thus countering dominant historiographical discourses that describe her in a merely supporting role —a role she unmistakably did not set out to play.

Keywords: Maria Velluti; women translators; nineteenth-century; theater; translation historiography

AS TRADUÇÕES TEATRAIS DE MARIA VELLUTI NO BRASIL DOS OITOCENTOS: UMA *MISE-EN-SCÈNE*

Resumo: Maria Velluti (1827-1891), dançarina, atriz, diretora, tradutora e dramaturga, chegou ao Brasil com cerca de vinte anos e fez carreira



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como renomada atriz, dramaturga e tradutora. Tradutora, traduziu mais de quarenta peças, muitas das quais dirigiu, produziu e estrelou, além de selecionar o elenco. Duas de suas traduções do francês foram publicadas em vida: *A vida de uma atriz* (1859) e *A viúva das camelias* (1859). Com base em sua prolífica produção, é possível afirmar que Velluti abalou os alicerces da cena teatral brasileira do século XIX não apenas ao apresentar dramas modernos de tradição realista francesa às principais companhias teatrais de sua época, mas também ao escrever em um ambiente em que a maioria dos dramaturgos era de homens, com sólida formação em literatura. Este estudo destaca o significado da vida e das obras de Velluti. É uma *mise-en-scène* de Velluti como mulher, atriz, dramaturga e tradutora do século XIX. Apresentamos a miríade de papéis que Velluti desempenhou, contrariando os discursos historiográficos dominantes que a descrevem em papel meramente coadjuvante – um papel que ela sabidamente não se propusera a representar.

Palavras-chave: Maria Velluti; mulheres tradutoras; teatro; século XIX; historiografia da tradução

Introduction

Maria da Conceição Singer Velluti (1827-1891), Maria Velluti Ribeiro de Souza, or Maria Velluti (sometimes Velutti) was a dancer, actor, director, translator, and playwright, who was born on December 10, 1827 in Lisbon, Portugal. She began her acting career in the Portuguese capital at the Conservatório Real as a dancer, launched by João Baptista de Almeida Garrett (1799-1854), who “had a certain preference for her” (Esteves & Osório de Castro, 2013, p. 559; Sousa Bastos, 1898, p. 442). In 1846, she went on to the Teatro Nacional Lisbonense, where she debuted in “Apartamento de dois maridos” and starred in Dumas’s “Louise Bernard”, alongside Fortunata Levy (Esteves & Osório de Castro, 2013, p. 559).

Velluti arrived in Brazil in 1847 in her twenties, in the wake of increased women migration patterns to Brazil in the nineteenth-century (Silva-Reis & Fonseca, 2021, p. 159). In addition to Portuguese, she also spoke Italian, French, and English, and was

part of a small group of literate women in nineteenth-century Brazil¹. Not only did she translate and write both for publication and performance, but she also performed her own plays, thus putting herself forward as woman-body. Velluti lived in Brazil until her death in Rio de Janeiro, in 1891, at 64.

It should be noted that, alongside Velluti, several women dramatists born abroad² have also resided in a limbo, even though they built long and successful careers in Brazil. This is at least explained in part by the fact that scholars of Brazilian arts have often chosen to ignore their contributions since they are seldom considered *Brazilian*. Should nationality not erase them completely from Brazilian theater history, gender often does. We therefore argue that Velluti is one of many women artists who challenged and shaped society, but have been obnubilated by *malestream* history. Velluti's work in Brazilian theater involved acting, directing, and translating plays. She chose the plays she translated and fed French realism into Brazilian society, thus shifting paradigms in the theater scene, which had been governed by neoclassical tragedies. She was acclaimed in the newspapers of her time for her original play "Uma mulher que perde e uma mulher que salva", which she also produced and directed. When one considers the number of plays she translated, directed, and produced, it is safe to affirm that, had she been a man, Velluti would have been recognized as a key figure in Brazil's nineteenth-century theater by now.

In scholarly works on Brazilian theater, the role of women artists is either downplayed (Orsini, 1988)—in cases when women played a role of higher visibility, such as playwright or director (Vasques, 2001)—, or outright negated (Leite, 1965; Wyler, 2001). According to Luiza Barreto Leite, during Velluti's time, women's contribution to drama was virtually ignored (Leite, 1965,

¹ Until 1827 women were not admitted to the newly established primary education in Brazil. White elite women were educated by private tutors.

² Most of the first women dramatists in Brazil were born abroad. This is the case of Eugênia Câmara, originally from Portugal, and Joana Manso de Noronha, from Argentina.

p. 12). Translation historiographer Lia Wyler was as categorical as Leite when stating women played *no* role in translating theater in the nineteenth century (Wyler, 2001, p. 83). Velluti's work has fallen victim to this trend and has been understated in numerous accounts of Brazilian theater both during her lifetime and after. Velluti was overlooked, for instance, by fellow actor Joaquim Maia (1844-1897), who was called out for not mentioning Velluti's contributions or Gabriella de Vecchy's (1821-1882) in the piece "O theatro entre nós" written for the *Diário de Notícias* newspaper in 1889. This was two years before Velluti's death. A subsequent piece by an anonymous criticized Maia's *forgetfulness* and was published under the same title "O theatro entre nós" in the same newspaper. The anonymous piece read:

Notei também uma omissão referente à primitiva companhia Joaquim Heleodoro, o introductor do theatro moderno entre nós. Vejo a falta de nome notabilíssimos. São elles: Gabriella, que ainda não teve substituta [...] e Maria Velluti, distincta litterata o actriz de genero³. ("O theatro entre nós", 1889, p. 2)

In order to capture the magnitude and research potential of Velluti's body of work, this paper places it on center stage, thus challenging historiographical discourses that have insisted in describing Velluti in a supporting role. In this study, historical sources on Velluti fall under two main groups. The first made up of scholarly works (history books, academic papers, master's theses and dissertations). The second group comprising pieces published in the nineteenth-century press (news, advertisements, theater reviews, opinions and

³ "I also noted an omission concerning the original composition of the theater company created by Joaquim Heleodoro, who introduced modern theater among us. I see that important names have been left out. They are: Gabriella, who has not yet had a substitute, . . . and Maria Velluti, distinguished writer or actress of the genre." (All translations are ours unless otherwise noted.)

obituaries). In the first group of sources, Velluti's name appears as *actress* or *wife*, and is pegged to her husband's⁴, despite the fact she had her own career as a dramatist and was one of the most prolific theater translators of her time. Velluti translated around forty plays and penned at least one original (Araújo, 2009; Costa, 2021; Esteves & Castro, 2013; Sousa, 1960; Sousa Bastos, 1898). She translated from French and Italian, and also knew English ("Maria Velluti", 1871, p. 1). So far, historical accounts have not been able to do justice to Velluti's life and works. They have rather virtually erased her—and other women (Souto-Maior, 1996; Souza, 1991)—from theater history, the history of translation, as well as from history in general, thus from the artistic canon.

In conformity with mainstream male-centered historical accounts, Velluti's main male coeval, João Caetano (1808-1863), as well as her husband, Joaquim Augusto Ribeiro de Souza (1825-1873), have received their share of acknowledgement and praise in the Brazilian theater canon. Historiographical discourses often imply necessary causality between her husband's work as a theater actor and director and her own career in theater and translated work. Moreover, meagre attention has been given to her work as an original playwright. Emphasis is always given to Ribeiro de Souza, even when both husband and wife work alongside. This systematic erasure of Velluti's contributions continue to be reproduced in recent works. For instance, in Jaqueline Silva Mendes's 2014 master's thesis on theater in the province of São Luís do Maranhão⁵, both Ribeiro de Souza and Velluti appear in the main text and receive footnotes that go one before the other on the same page. The footnote devoted to Ribeiro de Souza reads:

⁴ Maria Velluti was married to actor and producer Joaquim Augusto Ribeiro de Souza.

⁵ Having toured the main cities of the time, Velluti and Ribeiro de Souza spent most of their career in Brazil's Southeast, in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In Mendes's MA thesis, the couple is mentioned incidentally. Since they are not the focus of the study, the footnotes exemplify the bias with which Velluti has been represented here and elsewhere.

Nascido no Rio de Janeiro a 26 de julho de 1825 e falecido em 17 de janeiro de 1873. Estreou no São Francisco em 1841, na Companhia de João Caetano. Foi discípulo favorito do ensaiador francês Émile Doux. Na cidade de São Paulo, ganhou a medalha de ouro com a inscrição: O restaurador do teatro de São Paulo. Cf. Silva (1938, p. 183-184)⁶. (Mendes, 2014, p. 113)

The footnote devoted to Velluti, on the other hand, reads “Nasceu em Lisboa em 10 de setembro de 1827. Chegou ao Brasil em 1847. Casou-se com o ator Joaquim Augusto. Traduziu grande número de peças⁷” (Mendes, 2014, p. 113). The note on Velluti defines her in relation to her husband, thus implying his career was more significant than hers. Moreover, the note on Velluti does not refer the reader to the “great number of plays” she translated, nor does it mention her work as an actor and playwright.

The examples above pertain to the erasure of women in history, however, this erasure is also materialized in terms of the use of sources. Take the Wikipedia entry for Maria Velluti as another example. It has been recently updated but has failed to include – and even deleted – works by women scholars (“Maria Velluti”, 2020, 2022); works on Velluti which are freely available online and aim at valuing and making visible her legacy. These works include Monteiro (2016), Stark (2017, 2019), Silva-Reis & Fonseca (2018), Costa (2022), Fonseca (2022).

The systematic overlook of women’s work in theater – and that of women scholars – keeps women’s legacy from being bestowed on subsequent generations and ultimately renders invisible their otherwise meaningful and influential lives and contributions. By

⁶ “Born in Rio de Janeiro on July 26, 1825, died on January 17, 1873. He started at the São Francisco theater in 1841, in João Caetano’s company. He was the favorite disciple of French director Émile Doux. In the city of São Paulo, he received the gold medal with the inscription: *Restorer of the São Paulo theater.*”

⁷ “Born in Lisbon on September 10, 1827. Arrived in Brazil in 1847. Married to actor Joaquim Augusto. Translated a great number of plays.”

placing Velluti on center stage, we engage in what at times appears to be a sisyphian task of writing women [back] into History.

Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Scene: Rivalry between Two Theater Companies

In Brazil's nineteenth-century theatre scene, there arose a stimulating rivalry between two companies that competed for the audience and divided the opinion of the press. Before the Teatro Ginásio Dramático was founded, João Caetano reigned absolute until 1855:

O Teatro S. Pedro de Alcântara, o maior e principal da cidade, subsidiado pelo governo imperial, era administrado pelo ator e empresário João Caetano, que tinha atrás de si um passado de glórias: fora o primeiro a criar uma companhia dramática brasileira, e, junto com Gonçalves de Magalhães, renovara a cena romântica em 1838 [...]. O repertório de tragédias neoclássicas, melodramas e dramas românticos que ofereceu ao público ao longo da carreira projetou-o como gênio da cena, intérprete inigualável e sem rivais em território brasileiro⁸. (Faria, 2008, p. 154)

However, after João Caetano had a disagreement with Portuguese actor Maria Velluti, whom he fired from his company, Velluti went on to organize an entirely new theater company having conceived its aesthetic proposition and persuaded banker Joaquim

⁸ "The Teatro S. Pedro de Alcântara, the largest and main theater in Rio, funded by the imperial government was led by actor, director and theater agent João Caetano, who had a past of glories: He had been the first to create a Brazilian theater company and had revamped the Romantic scene in 1838 [...]. The repertoire of neoclassical tragedies, melodramas and romantic dramas that he offered to the public throughout his career transformed him into a genius of the stage, an actor with no equal or rival on Brazilian soil."

Heleodoro Gomes dos Santos to fund the endeavor (Stark, 2017, p. 194). In its first months of existence, the Ginásio Dramático staged short comedies and vaudevilles by French dramatist Eugène Scribe (1791-1861), translated by Maria Velluti. In the years that followed, the Ginásio Dramático specialized in French realist plays that addressed everyday situations. As João Roberto Faria describes,

De um modo geral, a comédia realista francesa é uma peça séria, que não procura provocar o riso, pois visa antes de tudo à descrição positiva dos costumes e valores da vida burguesa. Os diálogos e as cenas são construídos com o máximo de naturalidade, mas ao realismo pretendido soma-se uma preocupação com a finalidade moral que o teatro pode alcançar. Ou seja: à descrição dos costumes justapõe-se a prescrição de valores como o trabalho, a honestidade, o casamento e a família, no interior de um enredo que contrapõe bons e maus burgueses. Nessa dramaturgia não há mais lugar para os desvarios românticos, presentes nos dramas de Victor Hugo e Alexandre Dumas, ou para os exageros dos melodramas. O bom senso burguês prevalece para que o palco se transforme em uma tribuna, um espaço para o debate de idéias sobre a vida em família e em sociedade⁹. (Faria, 2008, p. 12)

⁹ “In general, French realist comedy is a serious play, that does not make one laugh, since it aims, first and foremost, to describe in a positive light the customs and values of bourgeois life. Its dialogues and scenes strive for maximum naturalness, but there is also a concern with the moral purpose that theater can attain. That is to say: The description of customs overlaps with the prescription of values such as work, honesty, marriage, and family, within a plot that contrasts a good and a bad bourgeoisie. In this kind of theater there is no more room for romantic derangements that one finds in the dramas of Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas, or for the exaggeration of melodramas. The bourgeois common sense prevails so that the stage becomes a tribune, a place for debating ideas about family life and society.”

Machado de Assis (1839-1908), one of Brazil's most renowned writers, was a theater critic in the nineteenth century. It did not take too long for young talented minds, such as Machado, to acknowledge the freshness and innovation brought by realist theater and, therefore, side with Ginásio Dramático's productions. Machado was aware of what was happening onstage at the Teatro São Pedro and at the Ginásio Dramático; he knew the two companies were waging a war for aesthetic ground. On one side, João Caetano, the great romantic actor and director; on the other, young intellectuals who supported realist aesthetics. Machado de Assis chose the latter. Both the traditional Teatro São Pedro and the new Ginásio Dramático were regularly attended by the Brazilian royal family¹⁰. During the five years Joaquim Heleodoro was in charge of Teatro São Pedro (from 1855 to 1860), the Imperial Family attended approximately thirty plays (Santos, 2005), scores of which were translated and staged by Velluti. In 1860, with the death of Joaquim Heleodoro, the Ginásio theater company came to an end, but a group of artists—Velluti included—invited Furtado Coelho to open a new company, which was then called Sociedade Dramática Nacional, which would work at the Ginásio theater. The new company brought together two former theater companies: Coelho's Teatro das Variedades and Heleodoro's Ginásio Dramático (Zambrano, 2018). As announced in the *Correio Mercantil* and in the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* newspapers in September 1860, Maria Velluti became part of the Sociedade Dramática Nacional, together with Eugênia Câmara and others. Velluti and Câmara had been the first actresses to translate the plays they also staged (Monteiro, 2016). Moreover, Velluti also acted in plays she directed and her career as an actor was intertwined with her translation work, as well as to her work as a playwright.

¹⁰ Brazil had declared independence from Portugal in 1822, becoming the Empire of Brazil, the only European-rooted monarchy in the Americas. His Imperial Majesty, D. Pedro II, was a patron of the arts and a regular theater goer.

Writing for the Theater: Published Translations and Manuscripts

During the 1850s, Maria Velluti translated at least twenty-five plays for the Ginásio Dramático. It is important to notice that, in many newspaper advertisements, Velluti's name does not appear next to the titles of the plays she translated (Monteiro, 2016; Costa, 2021). For this reason, one can assume that the total number of plays Velluti translated is higher. Notwithstanding the challenges of searching newspaper sources, we argue for the importance of resorting to them to carry out a comprehensive *mise-en-scene* of Velluti's work, which the so-called hard history sources have not seldom overlooked and downplayed. It is relevant to note that the theater and the press¹¹ were established in Brazil roughly at the same time, and were closely connected. Brazilian newspapers published many pieces on theater, including theater reviews and advertisements.

Translated plays, despite being widely advertised in the news, were rarely published in print. This fact had a strong impact on the development of the canon, since publications are a powerful tool in investigating—and establishing—theater history (Araújo, 2009). Because women were more unlikely to be published than their male counterparts, it has been a challenge to establish the legacy of women dramatists. Apart from her two known published translations from the French, which include *A vida de uma atriz* (1859) de Anicet-Bourgeois e Théodore Barrière (1854) and *A viúva das camélias* (1859) de Siraudin, Delacour e Thiboust (1857), the overwhelming majority of Velluti's translated plays never left manuscript form, which contributed to their loss. An excerpt of Victoriano Palhares's open letter to Velluti in the *Diário de Pernambuco* newspaper, in 1869, illustrates how manuscripts circulated in the nineteenth century: “Minha senhora.—Li o drama em um acto escripto por V. Exc. o qual tão acertadamente intitulou de—*Uma mulher que perde e uma mulher que salva*. Li-o, reli-o, e

¹¹ The ban on printing presses was lifted in Brazil in 1821.

ainda o estaria lendo si m'õ não arrancasse das mãos a necessidade urgente de pô-lo já aos ensaios de scena¹²” (Palhares, 1869, p. 8). This excerpt shows how texts written for the theater were often ephemeral. They passed from hand to hand among actors, directors, and theater critics, and rarely came out in print. They were produced, consumed, and lost. Therefore, since there are no lasting records of most of Velluti's plays, what is known of her lost works is reduced to the information conveyed through newspaper publications and theater reviews of the time. This will be explored further in the next section.

The Newspaper as the Stage: Starring Velluti and Her Work

Because scholarly works in History have not yet fully acknowledged Velluti or other nineteenth-century women playwrights' contributions, it is only sensible for this investigation to turn to newspapers as a proficuous means of investigation (Ludwig, 2015) and as a carrier of voices from the past, or fragments of one's existence (Borges, 2005). The press has been a reliable source in gender studies, and, although the discourse produced by the press is but one source of historical discourse, according to Tania Regina de Luca, the potential of the press to capture the role of women across different historical periods has been recognized since the 1980s (Luca, 2005).

In the newspapers of nineteen-hundreds¹³, Velluti's presence is widespread. She is body and she is mind. She is admired as

¹² “Dear Madam, I have read the drama in one act penned by you, who very appropriately entitled it *Uma mulher que perde e uma mulher que salva* [A woman who saves and a woman who loses]. I read it re-read it, and would be still reading it if it were not for the urgent need to use it for the play's rehearsals.”

¹³ Among the newspapers in which Velluti's name appears, one can list *Diário de Pernambuco*, *O Espelho*, *Diário do Grão-Pará*, *Correio Mercantil*, *O Tempo*, *Correio da Tarde*, *Semana Illustrada*, *A Vida Fluminense*, *Publicador Maranhense*, *Correio Paulistano*, and *O Mosquito*.

a translator and as an actress: “Ilustre traductora” (illustrious translator), “exímia e fecunda traductora de mutas peças” (skilled and fertile translator of many plays) (“Ao publico”, 1859, p. 4), “verdadeiramente inspirada” (truly inspired actress) (Assis, 2009, p. 17), and one who “triumphas sobre a scena, e com phrase fiel, pomposa e rica, empunhas de Molière a douta pena¹⁴” (Brandão, 1859, p. 2). As a public figure, it was important for Velluti to be seen. This was acknowledged by her editors when they presented readers of her translation of *A vida de uma atriz* “o retrato da illustre traductora, ainda que sua modéstia o não consinta” (“Ao publico”, 1859, p. 4).¹⁵ She is subsequently acknowledged as a published translator: “porque ella não póde, (e se póde não deve) contrariar os desejos tão justos como respeitosos, dos sinceros apologistas do seu reconhecido merito” (“Ao publico” 1859, p. 4)¹⁶. She is also acknowledged as a talented theater director, according to the following passage in a newspaper article from September 1862:

Assistimos hontem ao ensaio do drama “Aurora de hoje” que a nossa companhia dramática annunciou para o dia 7. Julgamos que será bem desempenhado, attendendo-se ao esmero e maestria que a sra. Maria Velluti tem empregado no “mis en scene”¹⁷. (“Noticiario”, 1862, p. 2)

Regarding her translations, Velluti is not only consistently praised for the quality of her work, but also for her ability to

¹⁴ “Triumphs on stage with faithful, pompous and lavish phrases, holding Molière’s quill.”

¹⁵ “The portrait of the illustrious translator, despite her modesty not permitting it.”

¹⁶ “Because she cannot, (and if she can, she should not) go against the fair and respectful desire of those who sincerely insist on recognizing her merit.”

¹⁷ “Yesterday, we attended the rehearsal of the drama ‘Aurora de hoje,’ [Dawn of today] which our theater company announced for the 7th [September 1862]. We trust it will be well performed, due to the heed and mastery the Sra. Maria Velluti has employed in the ‘mise en scene.’”

carefully select the works she translates (“Ao publico”, 1859, p. 4). As a translator, Velluti fed into Brazil a wide range of plays from world theater:

Não me foi possível precisar epocha em que partiu para o Brazil. Lá, além de continuar a sua carreira artística, traduziu do francez e do italiano um numero incalculavel de peças [...]. É forçoso confessar que, pelo menos, as sabia escolher. Nunca vi nenhuma das suas traducções, mas no Rio eram apontadas como boas¹⁸. (Sousa Bastos, 1898, p. 442)

In a newspaper article from 11 September 1859, Machado de Assis praised Velluti's translation of the romantic drama “O asno morto” (Théodore Barrière's adaptation into theater of Jules Janin's novel *L'âne mort et la femme guillotinée*), and her acting in the leading role even more so:

A tradução é boa e só encontrei um *engage* que me fez mau efeito; mas são coisas que passam, e nem é de supor outra coisa tendo se ocupado desse trabalho importante a Sra. Velluti. [...] A Sra. Velluti, no papel difícil e trabalhoso de Henriqueta, esteve verdadeiramente inspirada e mostrou, como tantas vezes, que possui o fogo sagrado da arte¹⁹. (Assis, 2009, p. 68-69)

¹⁸ “I could not find out when she left to Brazil. There, in addition to continuing her artistic career, she translated a number of plays from French and Italian One must confess that, at least, she knew how to choose. I have never seen any of her translations, but in Rio they were remarked as good.”

¹⁹ “The translation is good, there was only one occasion of ill effect; but it is nothing, and no one could expect anything else, since this important work was carried out by the outstanding Ms. Velluti. [...]. Ms. Velluti, in the difficult and cumbersome role of *Henriqueta*, was truly inspired, and showed, as in many other occasions, that she has the sacred fire of art.”

In addition to this positive review by Machado de Assis, Velluti received other acknowledgements from contemporary intellectuals. A piece that stands out is a poem by Beatriz Francisca de Assis Brandão²⁰, from 1859. Brandão devotes a sonnet to the “distincta atriz e exímia traductora” (distinguished actress and consummate translator) and signs “por sua admiradora” (your admirer). The sonnet was published in the *Correio Mercantil* newspaper:

Afouta pisa o palco magestoso,
Primogenita illustre de Thalia;
Do vicio hediondo a mascara desvia,
Dá ao riso o ridículo orgulhoso.

Da virtude o semblante radioso
Se ostente sobre os gozos da alegria,
Teus talentos gentis, tua magia
Adoça o cálix acido e amargoso.

A sciencia, que o palco glorifica,
Brilha em teus actos magestosa e amena,
E duplicada c’rôa te dedica.

Tu, Velluti, triumphas sobre a scena,
E com phrase fiel, pomposa e rica,
Empunhas de Molière a douta penna. (Brandão, 1859, p. 2)

In Brandão’s sonnet, Velluti is represented as an artist—not an artisan—by another woman artist. In other words, she is presented as capable of creative work and, as such, does not merely copy

²⁰ Beatriz Francisca de Assis Brandão (1779-1868) was an accomplished Brazilian poet, translator and educator. Born in Vila Rica, Minas Gerais, Brandão wrote for several newspapers and is considered an important figure in nineteenth-century Brazil for having challenged conventions associated to the role of women in literature, as well as in the public domain.

or reproduce, but is rather unique to leave a mark in the world (Silva-Reis & Fonseca, 2018). As mentioned above, Velluti was not only an actor who played her parts; she also translated important works into a new Brazilian theater. Her translations contributed to introducing a repertoire of realist theater in Brazil, in a moment when productions of classical tragedies and comedies were the norm. This is the reason why Velluti is recognized as a woman of letters (“quill in hand”) by Beatriz Francisca de Assis Brandão, another woman of letters, who was also a translator of many genres, including drama (Blake, 1883, p. 387). Besides the sonnet above, Brandão devoted at least another work to Velluti, and a number of others to feminist journalist, writer, and translator Violante Atabalipa Ximenes de Bivar e Vellasco²¹ (Blake, 1883, p. 388). Velluti, in turn, devoted one of her published translations to actress Ludovina Soares da Costa (1802-1868), as described below, thus corroborating the existence of an active network of nineteenth-century women intellectuals in Brazil, who knew, supported and admired each other for their literary, social, political, and feminist accomplishments.

Gender, Criticism, and Sorority: Being a Woman Dramatist in Nineteenth-Century Brazil

The attention given to Velluti in the press was also negative at times (Fonseca, 2021) and criticism in the nineteenth-century press has been known to be aimed at individuals rather than at ideas; whereas certain groups of individuals were highly praised, others were consistently attacked (Alves, 2007, p. 50). Women

²¹ Violante Atabalipa Ximenes de Bivar e Vellasco (1817-1875) was the owner and editor of *O Jornal das Senhoras*, an influential and progressive newspaper founded and run for six months by feminist Argentine journalist and translator Joana de Paula Manso (1819-1875). *O Jornal das Senhoras* championed education for women and ran from 1852 to 1855. Shortly before her death, Vellasco launched *O Domingo* (1874), another newspaper that aimed at advancing women's rights in Brazil.

who dared to break into public life through writing were likely to belong to the latter group, and their intellectual acumen or roles outside the home were considered *unnatural* to their gender. In the 1800s, women were held by standards of modesty — an attitude of propriety and decency — that were incompatible with writing for the public. When the work of women did make news, praise would include features such as their “undeniable modesty” in an attempt to excuse them for having dared to leave the private or only having done so after meeting what was expected from them in the private realm (Silva-Reis & Fonseca, 2018, p. 38). The first recorded theater translations carried out by women appeared in Brazil in the second half of the nineteenth-century. Then, although translation—and writing—were fields still dominated by men, many women were translating. While most of their names remain unknown, their work has been essential to the forging of Brazilian literature as we know it, as well as to the spread of republican and feminist ideas through books and the press (Silva-Reis & Fonseca, 2018, p. 27). It is relevant to notice that, in the nineteenth-century, theater translation was considered an inferior genre when compared to the translation of novels, a work that was mostly done by renowned male writers. As such, due to their lack of intellectual or literary prestige, plays may have been considered more suitable to be translated by women (Silva-Reis & Fonseca, 2018, p. 34).

One of Velluti’s harshest critics was Dr. Til, who attributed Velluti’s success as translator to a certain Sr. S. H. J., who allegedly *improved* her work and, therefore, was the one who really deserved the glory (Dr. Til, 1857, p. 2). The words of Brazilian playwright Maria Angélica Ribeiro²², in the introduction to her play *Cancros sociais* (1866), summarize the criticism women writers—such as Velluti, Brandão, and Ribeiro herself—endured throughout their career:

²² Maria Angélica Ribeiro (1829-1880) is considered the first Brazilian-born dramatist to have a play staged in her native country. She also translated for the theater and wrote over fifteen plays, many of which were staged at the Ginásio Dramático. *Anjo sem asas* (1858), *Gabriela* (1863), and *Cancros sociais* (1865) are her most famous works. Velluti worked in *Gabriela* (1863).

O que sai de lavra feminina, ou *não presta*, ou *é trabalho de homem*. E nesta última suposição, vai uma idéia oculta e desonesta.

E para que compraríamos, nós mulheres, a fama de sermos autoras de trabalhos que não fossem nossos, se com ela nada ganhamos, nem temos possibilidade de obter lugar ou emprego pelos nossos méritos literários? Valem-nos eles de coisa alguma?

Será pelos lucros?...

Santo Deus! A calúnia nem reflete isso²³. (Ribeiro, 2006, p. 272-73)

Ribeiro was also strongly criticized for her work, despite coming from a privileged background, mostly complying with gender roles—she was married with children—, and *only* writing for the theater. Velluti, in turn, not only translated for the theater, but also directed, produced, and/or starred many of the plays. Therefore, she endured harsher criticism than Ribeiro. In the foreword to her translation *A vida de uma atriz*, discussed in detail in “Mulheres de imaginação ardente e seus leitores terríveis” (Fonseca, 2021), Velluti states she had stopped writing precisely because of systematic criticism:

Felizmente mostrava as minhas produções a entendedores que me dizião, sobre a poesia: Está bonito!... mas não está bom... falta-lhe metro. Sobre a prosa a mesma cousa: falta-lhe grammatica. [...] Guardo as minhas idéas, e não

²³ “The writings of women are either *no good* or are the work of a man. In the latter assumption, there lies a dishonest and hidden idea. And why would we women claim authorship of works if they were not ours, if we gain nothing with them, we do not even have the possibility of gaining a position or employment because of our literary merits? Are they worth anything to us? Because of profit? God almighty! The slander would not justify it!”

aprendo nem uma nem outra cousa. [...]. Renunciei e fiz muito bem²⁴. (Velluti, 1859, p. 9)

Criticism was no novelty to Velluti. Before she left Portugal, where she worked as a dancer and actress, she was considered “formosíssima” (stunning), but “tinha mau timbre de voz e defeitos de pronúncia” (had a poor voice and pronunciation defects) (Esteves & Osório de Castro, 2013, p. 559). In her obituary published in *O Tempo*, Velluti’s acting career was downplayed, even though her talent as a writer and translator was acknowledged: “se não era uma actriz de nomeada, era uma escriptora emerita, e como traductora, ainda melhores traducções não foram feitas da *Viuva das camelias*, e outras peças theatraes” (“Maria Velluti”, 1871, p. 1)²⁵. According to the same obituary, she was envied by many literary figures from both sexes (“Maria Velluti”, 1871, p. 1).

And one’s *sex* was not to be forgotten in the nineteenth century. Especially not when a certain woman was likely to be jolting the foundations of the Brazilian theatrical scene by not only challenging the major theater company of the time with modern dramas of French realist theater, but also by writing in an environment where most playwrights had a background in literature and were male. In the open letter to Velluti, Victoriano Palhares, a theater critic from Pernambuco, praised her work and intelligence on the occasion of the opening night of her original drama “Uma mulher que perde e uma mulher que salva” [A Woman who Loses and a Woman who Saves], and observed: “Que V. Exc. é dotada de uma intelligencia rara, e o que mais raro é, principalmente no sexo a que V. Exc.

²⁴ “Fortunately, I showed my writings to the experts who said, about [my] poetry: It’s beautiful!... But it is not good... it lacks meter. The same thing [they said] about [my] prose: It lacks grammar. . . . I renounced [writing] and it was very well I did so.”

²⁵ “If not a renowned actress, she was a renowned writer, and as a translator, there have been no better translations of *Viuva das camelias* and other plays [...].”

pertence, que esse talento foi sempre cuidadosa e escrupulosamente cultivado²⁶” (Palhares, 1869, p. 8).

When “Uma mulher que perde e uma mulher que salva” was staged for the first time, Velluti was no longer living in Rio de Janeiro. By then, she was working for the *Empreza Dramatica de Duarte de Coimbra*, in Pernambuco. The play opened in the *Teatro Santa Isabel*, in Recife, on May 14, 1869, and Velluti played the blind *Dona Leopoldina*, while her husband in real life, *Joaquim Augusto Ribeiro de Souza*, interpreted *Álvaro*, *Leopoldina's* husband in the play. In Palhares’ extensive open letter to Velluti, the theater critic offers a detailed account of the acting and the play. He also categorically recommends that Velluti extend her play from one to three acts to do justice to the richness of its dramatic elements.

In his letter, Palhares notes that Velluti – most probably abiding by the modesty principles of the time – had told him she had had very little time to work on the play, that the play was in fact tentative; in other words, it was her first as a playwright, and that she had wanted to finish it before she gave in to discouragement. Palhares then claims that Velluti was too insecure of herself and that “God had given her vast ingenuity and was probably not pleased by her unfounded fear”. One last excerpt worth stressing is when the critic begs Velluti to continue to write by stating,

Creia minha senhora, que V. Exc. Acaba de enriquecer o theatro brasileiro com uma composição de nota; o drama de V. Exc. É uma joia. Em nome d’arte, pois, em nome do Brasil, minha patria, e que a V. Exc. tambem se apraz de considerar e amar como a uma filha, peço-lhe que escreva e escreva sempre²⁷. (Palhares, 1869, p. 8)

²⁶ “That you madam are gifted with a rare intelligence, and what is even rarer, mainly in the sex to which you belong, that this talent was always carefully and scrupulously cultivated.”

²⁷ “Believe me, Madam, that you have just enriched Brazilian theater with a noteworthy composition; your drama is a jewel. In the name of art, and in the name

“Uma mulher que perde e uma mulher que salva” was also acclaimed in Rio de Janeiro. However, the fact Velluti was a woman dramatist was used to belittle Brazilian male coevals, as in the following opinion published in *O Mosquito* newspaper:

Por falar em musa nacional, ocorre-me que a Sra Velluti, viuva do fallecido Joaquim Augusto, faz na proxima terça-feira o seu beneficio. Não será preciso, quero crê-lo por vergonha do nosso publico, recommendar este beneficio; o que eu quero apenas sublinhar é que a Sra Velluti leva á scena um drama seu, *Mulher que perde e mulher que salva*. É na verdade vergonhoso para os nossos dramaturgos que seja uma mulher quem lhes dê o exemplo do trabalho, affoutando-se a levar á scena uma produção nacional. Ou todos os nossos escriptores dramaticos repentinamente cahiram em esterilidade ou então não sei²⁸. (“Salpicos”, 1873, p. 6-7)

Unfortunately, “Uma mulher que perde e uma mulher que salva” was not published, and only circulated in the form of a manuscript. Nevertheless, years earlier in 1859, Velluti had published two of her translations: *A viuva das camelias*. *Scenas da vida parisiense* and *A vida de uma atriz: Drama em cinco actos e oito quadros*.

A vida de uma atriz included a foreword by Velluti (1859a), as well as the portrait of Ludovina Soares da Costa²⁹ to whom Velluti

of Brazil, my motherland, and which you also consider and love like a daughter, I beg you to write and always write.”

²⁸ “Speaking of a national muse, it occurred to me that Sra. Velluti, widow of Joaquim Augusto, will hold her *Beneficio* next Tuesday. It is not necessary to recommend the play; the only thing that I would like to highlight is that Sra. Velluti brings to the stage her own drama, *Mulher que perde e mulher que salva*. It is indeed a shame to all our playwrights that it is a woman who has to provide them with an example of work, having the courage to stage a national production. Either our playwrights have all of a sudden fallen into sterility or I don’t know what happened.”

²⁹ In 1820, Ludovina Soares da Costa was the first lady of a theater in Porto, Portugal, and led the third Portuguese theater group to Rio de Janeiro. Having arrived

devoted the translation (Silva, 1862, p. 138; “Ao publico”, 1859, p. 4). Just as Beatriz Brandão—a woman of letters—acknowledged Velluti for *Uma mulher que perde e uma mulher que salva* that same year, Velluti—a woman of the theater—acknowledged Costa. In her dedication to Costa, Velluti signs: “Vossa afeiçãoada amiga e respeitosa Vr^a. Maria Velluti” (“Your affectionate friend and respectful admirer”) (Velluti, 1859a, p. 9).

Curtains Closed: A Body Resists

By plunging into Maria Velluti's life and works, we can gain a better knowledge of *l'air du temps* of nineteenth-century women of letters, as well as of the hegemonic forces most of them faced—and struggled against—as they attempted to project their minds and bodies through their work, to make themselves seen and heard. When newspaper sources reveal solidarity among women in the public scene, they signal that the emphasis on stereotypical rivalry among women that characterize historical discourses should be taken with a grain of salt. It has been said that Velluti was upset when she left Rio de Janeiro towards the end of the 1850s because of the roles she had lost to Eugênia Câmara³⁰, who also translated for the theater, and because of disagreements with Portuguese actress Adelaide Amaral (Monteiro, 2016). Whereas perhaps these quarrels may have contributed to Velluti's decision to tour the country, there were also many economic and professional reasons that could explain the move: much of the economic development was taking place in the northern and northeastern regions of Brazil;

in Rio in 1829, she was employed by the Theatro *São Pedro*, having worked with João Caetano, and later founded the Teatro da Praia de Dom Manuel. Costa was considered a brilliant actor and theater agent and was a central figure in the history of Brazilian and Portuguese theater.

³⁰ Eugênia Infante da Câmara (1837-1874) was an actor, poet, writer and translator of plays. Alongside with Velluti she was one of the first women actors to also translate the plays they staged.

theaters were active all over the country (in cities such as Belém, São Luís, and Recife, for example); and the city of São Paulo had begun to play a more significant role in the cultural arena. Moreover, one also needs to consider that, for Velluti's husband, travelling was possibly considered a way of life, since, as a young man, he had been a travelling salesman. In addition, even after Ribeiro de Souza established himself as an actor in Rio de Janeiro and Niterói, and before he was hired by a northeastern theater company, the couple spent some time in São Paulo (Stark, 2019). In other words, there was plenty of life and opportunities outside Rio to attribute her leaving due to rivalry with women she had been working alongside for many years.

At the end of her life, Velluti returned to Rio, where she died a widow on July 15, 1891, on a modest income. She was by then living off English lessons and a small stipend she reportedly received from an anonymous lady ("Maria Velluti", 1871, p. 1). Although nothing has been unveiled so far about her birth or childhood in Portugal, some records reveal she was related to actress Gabriela Velluti (Esteves & Osório de Castro, 2013, p. 559). A lampooning obituary states she "foi amada por Almeida Garrett, de quem tinha um filho que se fartou de lhe dar desgostos³¹" (Eloy, 1891, p. 1).

During her lifetime, Velluti was well known in Brazil and in Portugal as an actor and translator. Her recognition as a writer was, however, timid, although historical accounts of the positive reception of her many plays make the case for her relevant contribution to Brazilian theater. Notwithstanding the trenchant criticism received during her lifetime and after her death, mostly leashed out by male biographers—she was criticized for many *reasons*, from pronunciation and diction problems (Esteves & Osório de Castro, 2013, p. 559), to light-headedness (Paixão, 1916, p. 21), and lack of taste in fashion in her later years (Paixão, 1916, p. 20), for having aged fast (Sousa Bastos, 1898, p. 441), and even for her

³¹ "was loved by Almeida Garrett, with whom she had a son that only caused her sorrows."

ability to play both male and female roles with mastery (Coaracy, 1884, p. 187)—, Velluti countered and contributed to transforming nineteenth-century patriarchal society through theater. As a response to harsh criticism, she exposed herself more and more as a woman-body, leading her life wholly and publicly. As a woman owning herself, Velluti appears through aesthetic and discursive instruments, in the way she considered to be a woman dramatist in the Brazil of her time. Through her translations, Velluti not only chose what to feed into Brazilian theater culture, but also seized control of the roles she played and cast, combining translation, acting, producing and directing, thus giving new contours to what a woman-body or the “weaker sex” could achieve in the patriarchal Brazilian nineteenth-century theater scene.

Figure 1: Photographic insert of Maria Velluti in *A viúva das Camélias* (1859)



Source: Fundação Biblioteca Nacional do Rio de Janeiro (Public Domain).

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