

SANDRA J. RAPHAEL (*)

ITALIAN LESSONS FOR BRITISH BOTANISTS

Abstract - Seventeenth-century Italian connections with the development of botany and gardening in England include plants introduced via the Oxford Botanic Garden and dried specimens of plants from Pisa, which are still preserved in the Oxford herbarium. Boccone's *Icones & descriptiones rariorum plantarum* (1674) was printed in Oxford, and Ferrari's books of 1633 and 1646 were quoted by Hanmer in the 1650s. Many Englishmen travelled in Italy, but a few Italians sought refuge in England, like Giacomo Castelvetro, who wrote about Italian fruit and vegetables for one of his English patrons in 1614.

Key words - Oxford Botanic Garden, P. Boccone, W. Sherard, T. Hanmer, P.A. Mattioli, G. Castelvetro.

Riassunto - *Lezioni italiane per botanici inglesi*. Lo sviluppo della botanica e del giardinaggio in Inghilterra è connesso con apporti italiani del XVII secolo, che comprendono le piante introdotte per mezzo dell'Orto Botanico di Oxford e campioni essiccati di piante da Pisa, ancora conservati nell'Erbario di Oxford. L'opera di Boccone, *Icones & descriptiones rariorum plantarum* (1674), è stata stampata ad Oxford, e i libri pubblicati da Ferrari nel 1633 e nel 1646 sono stati citati da Hanmer negli anni 1650-1660. Molti inglesi hanno viaggiato in Italia, ma alcuni italiani hanno cercato rifugio in Inghilterra, come Giacomo Castelvetro, che ha scritto un'opera su frutti ed ortaggi italiani per uno dei suoi protettori inglesi nel 1614.

Parole chiave - Orto Botanico di Oxford, P. Boccone, W. Sherard, T. Hanmer, P.A. Mattioli, G. Castelvetro.

The design of Renaissance gardens in Italy was copied eagerly in other parts of Europe, but the influence of Italy on the contents of gardens and the spread of plants is much less familiar. From Italy the idea of botanic gardens as centres of teaching about plants spread across the rest of the continent, from Pisa, Padua and Florence in the 1540s (with Luca Ghini as the guiding hand of all three) to Leipzig and Leiden in the 1580s. In the next century the Oxford garden was founded in 1621, and later still those of Paris, Edinburgh, London (that is, Chelsea), Amsterdam, and even later, Cambridge. Though gardens in southern Europe had a large range of native medicinal plants to cultivate, trading centres in that region and further north added seeds and plants from more distant countries to the stock available.

In the home of the oldest Italian botanic garden, I should like to describe the Oxford garden, the oldest British one. Its founder was Henry Danvers, the Earl of Danby, who leased two hectares of land beside the river from Magdalen College, which is still the garden's

neighbour. Lord Danby, who lived from 1573 to 1644, was an important member of the court of King Charles I. By the 1620s he was building a country house at Cornbury, a few miles north-west of Oxford, and Nicholas Stone, his master mason there, was also commissioned in 1632 to build the walls and the gates modelled on Roman triumphal arches which still enclose the central part of the garden, filled with long beds demonstrating families of plants. The imposing main entrance is the largest of the gates. As well as working with Inigo Jones on the Banqueting House in Whitehall, Stone was also a sculptor who made several monuments still found in college chapels in Oxford, among them that of Sir Thomas Bodley at Merton College.

Lord Danby's portrait in his showy robes as a Knight of the Garter was painted by Van Dyck in 1633. The portrait was on show in the Van Dyck exhibition at the Royal Academy in London in 1999, though it usually lives in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, one of the pictures sold to Catherine the Great in 1779. John Aubrey described the man as «tall and spare; temperate; sedate and solid ... a great improver of his estate». We should be grateful that he was also eager to improve the amenities of the University. Given the troubles of the period, that is, Cromwell's commonwealth between the reigns of Charles I and Charles II, the first professor of botany at Oxford was not appointed until after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. He was Robert Morison, a Scottish physician who had spent some of his years of exile looking after the garden of Gaston d'Orléans at Blois. Before he arrived, the first keeper of the garden, Jacob Bobart, published the earliest catalogue of the garden's contents in 1648 (see the facsimile in University of Oxford Botanic Garden, 1999). About 20 of the 1500 plants in that list have obvious links with Italy, from a «broadleaved Roman wormwood» and «Italian purple starwort» to red or white *Gladiolus italicus*, «Matthiolum's true orpine», «Italian woodbine», that is, honeysuckle, a Roman nettle and a Roman cranesbill, «sowbread with round leaves», probably *Cyclamen rotundifolium*, and the «white flower-de-luce of Florence», the aromatic *Iris florentina*. We also had a Roman lettuce (still called romaine in American English, though it's now a cos lettuce in Britain), an orange or two, an everlasting pea, and the «Savoy colewort», my favourite cabbage with crinkled leaves.

Of the two most obvious Italian plants that escaped from the Oxford garden, one was listed in the 1648 catalogue as «Italian Gondeli» or *Cymbalaria italica* (*C. muralis*), better known as ivy-leaved toadflax or Oxford

(*)18 Argyle Street, Oxford, OX4 1SS, UK.

weed, a pretty little plant that is now thoroughly naturalized and grows on old walls over much of the country. Another early import from Italy that made itself at home is now less welcome, the Oxford ragwort, *Senecio squalidus*, a yellow-flowered composite that spread from Oxford to trouble horses and other animals that try to eat it – a sad fate for a plant with such romantic origins. This ragwort came into the Botanic Garden from Paolo Boccone (1633-1704), who collected its seeds from Mount Etna. Boccone, who ended his life as a Cistercian monk, was a native of Palermo who travelled widely in Europe and corresponded with botanists who shared his interests, Morison among them. Boccone visited England in 1673 and the following year the University Press at Oxford published his *Icones & descriptiones rariorum plantarum Siciliae, Melitae, Galliae, & Italiae*, edited by Morison and illustrating about 120 plants on over 50 engraved plates. The book is quite rare. Some copies are dedicated to the Royal Society of London (then only about fifteen years old), others to Charles Hatton, a former pupil of Morison's in France (Henrey, 1975). Morison consulted botanical books from Italy too, for some of the illustrations in the second part of his *Historia plantarum*, published in 1680, seem to be based on those of Fabio Colonna's *Ecphrasis* of 1616 (Vines and Druce, 1914). The Oxford garden and its Botany School were also fortunate in their second major patron, William Sherard (1658-1728), a devoted botanist and traveller, a friend of Sir Hans Sloane, whose collections were the foundation of the British Museum, and of other leading naturalists in several countries, from Tournefort in Paris to Pier Antonio Micheli in Florence. Sherard spent about three years in Italy in the late 1690s, but he had begun corresponding with botanists there before this journey. In Pisa Michelangelo Tilli showed him the Botanic Garden and gave him a set of plants which were labelled by Micheli and remain in the Sherardian Herbarium in Oxford, with other contributions by Micheli. Sherard also visited Rome and Naples, and possibly Sicily, adding dried specimens from all three places to his collection, as well as plants and seeds for Oxford and the gardens of other botanical friends in England, including the fine one at Eltham in Kent that belonged to his brother James. After his death his library of more than 600 volumes, with his herbarium and manuscripts, were left to the Botany School, with a new endowment for the professorship of botany, a post filled by J. J. Dillenius (1684-1747), a German botanist formerly employed by James Sherard to catalogue the contents of his garden, a catalogue published in 1732 as *Hortus Elthamensis* (Clokier, 1964).

The collection of plant specimens made for Sherard in Pisa is an echo of a similar if smaller one made in Padua for the diarist John Evelyn at the beginning of August in 1645: «I went to see the Garden of Simples, rarely furnished with plants, and gave order to the Gardner to make me a Collection of them for an *herbarium hyemalis*.» Of course, forming reference collections of dried plants like this was another Italian idea, usually attributed to Luca Ghini. Evelyn's collection remains with his manuscripts now in the British Library. Evelyn visited Pisa a little earlier, in October

1644, when he described the place «as much worthy the seeing as any city in Italy». Among the buildings he visited was «the Colledge to which joynes a Gallery so furnish'd with natural rarities, stones, minerals, shells, dryd Animals, Scelletes &c, as is hardly to be seene the like in Italy: to this the Physique-Garden lyes, where is a noble Palme tree from which I gathered a long branch.» That example is hardly one to follow. Back in the Oxford garden in 1654 he noticed olive trees growing, presumably under glass, «but no extraordinary curiosities, besides very good fruit».

One of Evelyn's friends and correspondents, Sir Thomas Hanmer (1612-1678) spent most of the 1650s quietly cultivating his garden at Bettisfield, just over the border in Wales. His garden book, dated 1659, was not published until 1933, but some of his comments on plants show that he was familiar with the books of Giovanni Battista Ferrari (1584-1655), both the 1633 one on flowers and the 1646 *Hesperides* on citrus fruit, for he refers to both (Hanmer, 1933). From «the great white spiked Ornithogalum, called by some the Italian Ornithogalum» he goes on to describe «another sort of Spiked White Ornithogalum described by Ferrarius, and called by him Peregrinum». Hanmer's description of «*Rosa sinensis*» with flowers that start white, then turn pink and purple, also suggests that «Hee that desireth a larger description of it, and of its culture may resort to Ferrarius, who hath written of it, and was the first raiser of it from seed in our parts of the world.» There is a certain tone of envy in Hanmer's account of orange and lemon trees. First the orange: «the fruite is well knowne in England, better than the tree, which is only kept in curious gardens by reason of its tendernes ... Wee have trees often from Italy and France, but they like not soe well with us, being commonly prejudic'd in the conveyance by sea, as those wee raise here from seed, and graff or enoculate». He recommended starting them off in pots, then moving them to larger cases, but still able to be carried in and out of shelter. «They have in Italy above twenty severall sorts of Oranges, some sowre, some very sweet, some with a sweetnes and sharpnes mixt together,» but he could not grow nearly so many in Wales. He was equally wistful about lemons: «They have in Italy above thirty sorts of Lemmons, but we have very few in England of any kind» and «In Italy they have diverse sorts of Citrons, and they call them both Orange trees, Lemmons, and Citrons by the name of Agrumi.» Some of the earliest oranges in an English garden are recorded at Beddington in Surrey in the 1590s. According to John Aubrey, Sir Francis Carew imported the trees from Italy, and John Evelyn reported in 1658 that the house was «famous for the first orange garden in England». By the time he saw them the trees were overgrown, but they were planted out of doors and covered in winter by what Evelyn called a «wooden tabernacle», which was heated with stoves. All those determined gardeners who worked so hard to grow oranges and other citrus fruit in a climate that usually kept the trees indoors might have been amused to know that most of the original drawings for Ferrari's *Hesperides* are now in the Royal Library at Windsor.

As Hanmer cited Ferrari, so earlier plant books cited

the work of Pietro Andrea Mattioli (1501-1578), for his Commentary on the herbal of Dioscorides soon became virtually a European garden flora in its own right, thanks to the explorations of Mattioli himself and the observations collected and sent to him by a dense network of correspondents. The first printed Oxford catalogue labelled one of its plants «Matthiolus's true orpine», which can be taken as an example of the authority of this book in 1648, about a hundred years after its first publication. From its first Italian edition in 1544, followed by many more in Latin and other languages, the book became a standard account of the plants then known. Its value was enhanced by the addition of illustrations, first a series of small ones by Giorgio Liberale of Udine, then a set of larger ones, nearly 600 of them, by Liberale and Wolfgang Meyerpeck. They were first used in a Czech edition printed in Prague in 1562, then in a German one, but eventually in the most beautiful edition of all, the one produced in Venice in 1565 by Vincenzo Valgrisi. These are among the very greatest botanical woodcuts, with delicate shading that makes colour almost irrelevant, though some copies were coloured. Robert Burton, an Oxford philosopher and the author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, first published in 1621, listed herbals among books to help «expell Idleness and Melancholy» and he seems to have expected them to be coloured: «To see a well-cut herball, all Hearbs, Trees, Flowers, Plants, expressed in their proper colours to the life, as that of *Matthiolus upon Dioscorides* ... and that last voluminous and mighty herball of [Besler of] Noremberge, wherein almost every Plant is to his owne bigness». There might well be worse ways of diverting sadness.

Several more editions of Mattioli used these large blocks, beautifully designed to arrange the plants to the best advantage while keeping them within the limits of the space available. During the seventeenth century engraving on metal began to replace woodcuts in botanical illustrations, but the Mattioli blocks were so outstanding that they were bought by an eighteenth-century French botanist, Henri-Louis Duhamel du Monceau (1700-1782), who used 154 of them to illustrate the two volumes of his *Traité des Arbres et Arbustes* in 1755. As he said in his preface, «J'ai eu le bonheur de recouvrer presque toutes les planches de la belle édition latine du Matthiole de Valgrisi: les Imprimeurs de mon Ouvrage ont fait graver avec soin celles qui y manquoient.» The hundred or so extra woodcuts of post-Mattioli plants in the Duhamel book may have been done with care, as he says, but they look incredibly stiff and lifeless compared with the work of Liberale and Meyerpeck.

The blocks of plants other than trees and shrubs remained in France with Duhamel's descendants. A few were sold to the Hunt Institute in Pittsburgh and three more went to Harvard, but the last survivors, about 120 of them, were sold in London in 1989, when I had the pleasure of cataloguing them and writing about both the blocks and the herbal they were made for. Many of the large pearwood blocks were still fit to be printed, and a devoted London printer made prints of several of them to accompany a grand edition of the

catalogue, which was printed by Martino Mardersteig in Verona (Watson, Raphael and Bain, 1989). These modern prints include the second tulip to be illustrated in Europe; Gesner got in a little earlier with a picture of the one he saw in Augsburg, but his is not as beautiful as this one.

If several English travellers turned to Italy when the political situation at home made it sensible to travel, England sometimes offered a refuge to Italians finding life difficult in their own towns. One of these was Giacomo Castelvetro, who was born in Modena in 1546 and died in London in 1616. His travels were prompted by trouble with the Inquisition, caused by his sympathy with the Protestant religion. During his early life he lived in several different European towns, studying in Germany and Switzerland and coming to London for the first time early in the 1570s. Here he taught Italian and found useful patrons, escorting one of them on a tour of Italy, including its vineyards. After further wandering he came back to England in the 1580s and in 1592 he became the Italian tutor of James VI of Scotland. From Edinburgh he went to Sweden, again as an Italian tutor, but he shared a taste for gardening with one of his pupils there, and he has left a record of an experiment with grafting a pear tree. Then he settled in Venice for a while, editing contemporary literature for publication.

Most of us came to know this man's writing through a translation of a manuscript he wrote late in his life for one of his patrons, the Countess of Bedford, the sister of one of his former pupils in Venice and a lady commemorated in many poems of the period. In 1614 he wrote the *Brieve racconto di tutte le radici, di tutte l'erbe et di tutti le frutti, che crudi o cotti in Italia si mangiano*, the manuscript published in translation over 350 years later as *The Fruit, Herbs & Vegetables of Italy* (Castelvetro, 1989). Three copies of the manuscript survive: they are divided into three sections, spring, summer, and autumn, with the fruit and vegetables of the seasons described, often with directions about how to prepare them. His advice about eating more fruit and vegetables is still wonderfully appropriate in Britain, even after nearly 400 years, and Castelvetro seems to have been well aware of the deficiencies of the English diet. His introduction to the spring section begins:

I often reflect upon the variety of good things to eat which have been introduced into this noble country of yours over the past fifty years ... Yet I am amazed that so few of these delicacies and health-giving plants are being grown to be eaten ... This moves me to write down all I can remember of the names of the herbs, fruits and plants we eat in Italy, my civilized homeland, and to explain how to prepare them, either raw or cooked, for the table, so that the English no longer need be deprived through lack of information of the delights of growing and eating them.

His recommendations for spring include hops, spinach, asparagus, broccoli, artichokes, peas, and long sets of directions for making mixed salads (with warnings about too much vinegar in the dressing). The fruits of

spring – strawberries and gooseberries seem a little early for the English climate – are accompanied by elderflowers, and aubergines. And so the catalogue goes on, complete with remarks on both cultivation and cookery. Among autumn apples and pears he concentrates on varieties not grown in England, including a «paradise apple» with fruit that smells sweet enough to scent linen. Castelvetro's translator has added appropriate illustrations to the book, an extra trimming for a text guaranteed to amuse both cooks and gardeners. His instructions about the contents and treatment of salads can be compared with those of John Evelyn in his treatise on the subject nearly a hundred years later. We are used to the idea of British travellers visiting Italy as part of their Grand Tour, visits to Italy and France that seem to have had a civilizing effect on at least some of these young men. The most obvious souvenirs they brought home were pictures and antiquities, but a few brought books or manuscript as well. In 1719 a doctor in Wells, a cathedral city in Somerset, was given an album of watercolours of plants, more than 200 of them on over 150 sheets. The gift came from a local clergyman, but the drawings were made in Italy late in the seventeenth century. Some of the plants were drawn from living examples, but at least twenty were copied from those in a manuscript herbal made in northern Italy early in the fifteenth century, and a few more seem to have been copied from an even earlier manuscript.

The visible watermarks of the paper containing the drawings are all Italian, from Ferrara, Verona, and Fabriano, among other towns, and all from the latter half of the seventeenth century. How an artist of this period was able to supplement studies of live plants with copies of much earlier drawings remains a mystery. By an odd chance both the seventeenth-century album and the fifteenth-century herbal behind some of the drawings made their way to England. The herbal is now in the British Library as Additional Manuscript 41623, bought in Germany in 1928 and now known as the *Codex Bellunensis*, for some of the locations for particular plants are in or near Belluno, Treviso, and other parts of the Veneto. The Latin text is based on Dioscorides, but its illustrations are rather more important, with about 250 plants on over 150 leaves. Some of the plants are wild ones, some must have been cultivated, but all were drawn from living examples, within about twenty years of botanical artists turning to drawing from life instead of copying the illustrations from one manuscript to another alongside the texts. The *Carrara Herbal*, my favourite manuscript, is also in the British Library now as MS Egerton 2020, bought about the middle of the nineteenth century from the Egerton fund. It was made in the 1390s and seems to

be among the first and finest manuscripts with plants drawn from life. The *Codex Bellunensis* is usually dated to the first or second decade of the fifteenth century, but it shares a new attitude to botanical art. Its plants include some of the earliest Italian wild flowers, among them the edelweiss copied in the album now in Wells. Other familiar plants copied from the *Codex* are hops, a mallow, chicory, fennel, cypress, and cyclamen.

There are more remarkable Italian botanical drawings in Britain in the seventeenth-century collection made by Cassiano dal Pozzo, most of which is now in the Royal Library at Windsor and is being published in a series of books with commentary by appropriate scholars. But it is still possible to be surprised by new things coming to light, like the two volumes of sixteenth-century drawings by Gherardo Cibo (1512-1600), an artist acquainted with Mattioli, identified in the British Library about ten years ago by Professor Lucia Tongiorgi Tomasi (Tongiorgi Tomasi, 1989), and most recently an album of drawings by Fabio Colonna, partly nature-printed, partly coloured, which is in the fine library of a National Trust house at Blickling, in Norfolk, apparently bought by the eighteenth-century collector who formed that library (Barker, 1999). Until the manuscript was exhibited as part of an exhibition in New York of interesting material from National Trust libraries, it was not known by historians of botanical illustration, but now it can be added to whatever else we know about the preparation of Colonna's books. It sometimes seems that scholarship depends in part on chances like this, which lead to the recognition of scattered fragments and the possibility of adding them to our knowledge of the past.

REFERENCES

- BARKER N. (1999). Treasures from the Libraries of National Trust Country Houses, 90-91. New York.
- CASTELVETRO G. (1989). The Fruit, Herbs & Vegetables of Italy, trans. G. Riley. London.
- CLOKIE H.N. (1964). An Account of the Herbaria of the Department of Botany of the University of Oxford, 17-28. Oxford.
- HANMER T. (1933). The Garden Book of Sir Thomas Hanmer, 50, 115, 132. London.
- HENREY B. (1975). British Botanical and Horticultural Literature before 1800, 1: 120-2. London.
- TONGIORGI TOMASI L. (1989). Gherardo Cibo: visions of landscape and botanical sciences in a sixteenth-century artist. *J. Garden History* 9 (4): 199-216.
- UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD BOTANIC GARDEN (1999). A Catalogue of the Plants ... [includes a facsimile of the 1648 catalogue]. Oxford.
- VINES S.H., DRUCE G.C. (1914). An Account of the Morisonian Herbarium, p. xliii. Oxford.
- WATSON W.P., RAPHAEL S., BAIN I. (1989). The Mattioli Woodblocks. London.