Curiosity could be the motto for Bekenntnisse einer Giftmischerin, von ihr selbst geschrieben and its translation, Confessions of a Poisoner, Written by Herself. The work itself is a curiosity, a slender but sensational volume whose racy topics—incest, libertinage, and murder among them—drew readers when it was published anonymously in 1803 before being long forgotten; reprinted in 1923; and republished in 1988 in an abridged and altered edition. The work also inspires curiosity about its author, its genre, and about literary history in general. Was the author a man or a woman (scholars today generally attribute the work to Friederike Helene Unger, but her authorship has not been documented conclusively), and how does, or rather how would the author’s gender affect what we know about the topics, the attitudes, and the style of the book? Is there a connection between gender and genre that can be illustrated and tested here? The translators and editors of the volume, Raleigh Whiting and Diana Spokiene, raise these and other questions in their informative, well-researched, and well-written introduction, concluding that “the uncertainty of authorship enhances this unusual and forgotten novel’s significance and interest” and that for students of the European novel in the late
eighteenth century, the work “holds a wealth of perspectives: on the development of genres such as confessions, epistolary novel, and bildungsroman; on the emergence and evolution of themes such as the prospects of female Bildung and the fortunes of the woman writer” (Confessions, xxxi–xxxii).

The translation has been carefully done, with attention to the tone and peculiarities of the original and to contemporary allusions, and it can on the whole be termed successful. It is faithful; it reads well; and the translators work hard to uphold the precepts presented in their opening Note on Translation, among them the belief that a translation “should preserve the foreignness of the original, together with details of language and imagery that might constitute networks of theme and imagery essential to the original’s text.” (xxxvii) Foreignness has a literal quality in the Poisoner’s Confessions, because it is characteristic of the author’s style—and distinctive of the period—to adopt French terms in the way that English words are adopted in German today. That the authors present themselves with a Herculean task becomes apparent early on, when the word “devotiert” is used by the poisoner/narrator at the end of the letter that frames her confessions. Whiting and Spokiene render the word as “to vow,” a good, clear English word that is perhaps too good and too clear. In the original there is some doubt about the word’s meaning, since “devotieren” has no German echo (the adjective devot, meaning “devout,” has the same limited meaning in German that it does in English). Happily, “se dévouer” is not a false friend in English, but the word “to vow” renders none of the strangeness that the translators claim for their translation.

A more serious misstep is the rendering of the salutation “Hochverehrte!” in the opening lines of this same letter. A daunting challenge, to be sure, and “Most revered friend!” would be adroit if the narrator had not expressly
rejected the term *friend* a few lines earlier, giving voice to her conflicted feelings about the addressee, Julie Z., and to her sense of unworthiness at being called anyone’s friend. The narrator omits the word friend—loudly, one might say—and so should the translation. More than closeness to the original is at stake here. Or rather, the closeness has to do with the concept of friendship even more than with the word. By alluding so early to friendship and her exclusion from it, the narrator sounds the novel’s theme of a life maimed by parental misguidance and failed education. Here, in the absence of friendship, is a contrasting allusion to Rousseau as much as in the title *Confessions* and in the choice of the name “Julie” from *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (of which the poisoner’s confessions are “a darkly distorted echo,” as Whiting and Spokiane put it so well [*Confessions*, xvii]).

Another rendering that raises a question of substance is that of “Herausgeber” as “Publisher” in the notice *An den Leser / To the Reader of These Pages* directly preceding the letter to Julie Z. Perhaps the choice is meant as an allusion to the publishing house of Johann Friedrich Unger in order indirectly to underscore the presumed authorship of the *Confessions* by Unger’s wife Friederike Helene Unger. But the choice is reductive (“editor” is ambiguous, “publisher” is not) and anachronistic (Adelung explicitly defines the word as “Editor,” without any reference to “Verleger”). More significant still are the literary associations called forth by the presence of a “Herausgeber,” who is nearly a fixture of the epistolary genre (one thinks for example of Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse* or Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*).

Such slips are regrettable, because they give a false first impression of the whole, which accomplishes the difficult task of rendering a work whose content is sensational, to be sure, but whose distinctiveness derives from a masterful directness and sureness of style. The translators have for the
most part captured the balanced, controlled rhythm of the original and much of the deceptive simplicity that reflects the narrator’s manner and makes her crimes seem both more monstrous and more credible. Occasionally there is too much simplicity, for example when the variety of the original in the words *Vergnügen*, *Genuss*, and *Unterhaltung* is blandly rendered each time with the word “pleasure.”

Some misprints that I noted in the German were: “jezmals” for “jemals” (p. 8); “dass” for “das” (p. 25); “Lieutenant” for “Leutnant” (p. 61); “Francoise” for “Françoise” (note 16, p. 73); “erwerben” for “erworben” (p. 81); “Betsimmung” for “Bestimmung” (p. 87); “alzu” for “allzu” (p. 89); “Übrigens-” for “Übrigens” (p. 95); “unvernünftigen” for “Unvernünftigen” (p. 97); “unsehlbaren” for “unfehlbaren” (p. 112); “Anfangs” for “anfangs” and “mein Besuch” for “meinen Besuch” (p. 114); “unbegrenztes” for “unbegrenzteres” (p. 132); “alles Ernstes” for “allen Ernstes” (p. 178); “so wollte er doch lieber” (p. 179).

Above all, however, the edition of the *Confessions*, with its excellent introduction and useful annotations, provides a substantial contribution to literary history, amply fulfilling the aims of the MLA series in which it appears. But the MLA’s separation of the edition into two volumes, one for the German original and one for the English translation, brings me back to the question of curiosity in its double sense of oddity and sparked interest. I find it curious that only the poetry anthologies in the MLA series are published as dual editions, with the translation facing the original. If the prose works were long, that separation might be understandable; but this and the other works in the series are not long. Making accessible works that have been forgotten or ignored, most of them by women, enriches our knowledge of literary history and arouses our curiosity about literary judgments, prejudices, and reading habits in the past. Why would an
organization like the MLA, which supports the acquisition of foreign languages as well as the study of literary history, imply through its separation of original and translation that the two are invariably separate domains? Most readers of these editions are literary historians who have studied more than one foreign language, and if they have forgotten much of what they learned in college or graduate school, then there is all the more reason to help them revive and practice their dormant skills by putting translation and original face to face on opposing pages. If the series were to combine the original and the translation in one volume, it would foster readers’ curiosity about the original language as much as their curiosity about the work. That it does not is curioser and curioser.