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Genders and the Translated Text: Developments in "Transformation"

1. Introduction

There seem to be two paradigms ruling current work at the interface of Anglo-American translation studies and gender studies; the first is the ‘conventional’ assumption that there are groups of people in the world, or more specifically, in each society/culture that can be identified as women or men; the second is the relatively new idea that the diversity of sexual orientation and gender, class distinction, ethnicity, race and other sociopolitical factors is so great that it is impossible, or unwise, or meaningless to identify anyone as either male or female, either a man or a woman. Work in translation studies being done under the first paradigm tends to subscribe to ideas derived from feminist theory and practice and thus focus on women as a special, minority group that has a particular history within ‘patriarchal’ society, and has received special, usually biased, treatment in the area of translation as well. The second paradigm is still in development; it has been spawning work that focuses on gender as a discursive, performative act, and on the performative aspects of translation. In this second scenario, gender issues are often aligned with gay or lesbian identities/interests and the translation analyses deal with works in which traditional ideas about two genders are put in question. The notion of performativity

includes among other things the role theatricality and linguistic markers play in signifying ‘gayness’ (Harvey 1998: 305). Under the first paradigm, on the other hand, work is produced that typically explores women authors’ misrepresentation in translation, the invisibility of women translators, patriarchal aspects of translation theory and the discourse about translation, and so on.

2. Brief History

To date (1999) most publications bringing together gender issues and translation have subscribed to the first paradigm – the notion of gender as a phenomenon of acculturation, as a set of characteristics and behaviours acquired or imposed by society, as a construct that forms an individual. As Beauvoir’s dictum “on ne naît pas femme, on le devient” so neatly implies, gender imprints the dominant cultural expectations upon the male-sexed or female-sexed individual. This view sees gender as a set of learned behaviours and attitudes, which can be overcome or subverted. Similarly, socio-political bias due to gender is seen as reformable. In the work done on translation and gender up to the very recent past, this revisionist approach is highly visible. Simon’s Gender in Translation. Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission (1996), for example, discusses important (and largely ignored) women translators, presents issues in women’s/ feminists’ versions of the Bible, and studies the difficulties involved in translating the polysemous neologisms of ‘French feminism’ and the more general problematics of translating women’s writing across cultures. Flotow’s Translation and Gender. Translating in the ‘Era of Feminism’ (1997) clearly connects feminist interests with translation, discussing how various feminist interest groups have affected writing and translation, how translations examined from a feminist perspective may benefit from re-translation, and how feminist theory and translation theory come together to counteract what one critic has called the “androcentric slide into gender as trope in postmodern [and, I would add, many other forms of] translation theory (Chance 1998: 183).
3. Criticisms

This ‘first paradigm’ approach to gender issues in translation has not gone uncriticized. The ‘feminist’ angle in particular has raised the ire of certain critics who have castigated pro-active work that sets out ‘to make women visible and resident in language and society’ (my translation of de Lotbinière-Harwood 1991: 11) or to blatantly ‘woman-handle’ a text (Godard 1990: 94) for being hypocritical. The most indignant reaction has come from Rosemary Arrojo, a critic who views all translation as a grab for power (Arrojo 1995: 65), and the feminist translator’s claim that she is “aggressively assert[ing] her own presence in the space of translation” (Arrojo, citing Simon 1997: 271) as unacceptable since this ‘assertiveness’ is just another grab for power. In other words, deliberate manipulations of a text carried out by a feminist translator or in the name of feminist knowledge or perspectives are no different from those of any other translation produced under other ideological conditions. What Arrojo does not acknowledge, however, is the complex apparatus of prefaces, footnotes, and accompanying materials in which those claiming to be feminist translators explain and justify their work, contrary to the approaches of many other types of ‘power-grabbing’ translators.

On a more differentiated level, criticisms have been forthcoming about the translation of specifically feminist materials of the past three decades across the cultural boundaries of the West – from Quebec French to English, from Italian to English, from French to English, from English to German. Here, the problem is largely one of ‘transculturation’ (Allen 1999, Flotow 1997, Gillam 1995) though issues of power are also raised (Delphy 1995). These criticisms address the ‘translatability’ of certain feminist texts, for while the early feminist idea that all women share some common experience and knowledge came under fire in the late 1970s when ethnic and class differences began to be recognized as having considerable importance, translation/translators have to some extent ignored this differentiation and assumed that feminist texts are generally translatable across cultures. In Canada, this utopian view fostered intensive
collaboration between feminist writers and translators from Quebec and English-Canada as well as the development of ideas about “feminist translation” (Godard 1990). In the United States, the introduction and powerful impact of ‘French feminism’ is an example of this phenomenon at work at an academic level, as is the wholesale translation of American feminist materials into certain European languages, notably German. Criticisms of these facts of translation are of three different types: first, how can experimental feminist writing that takes a specific language, say, French, as both the source and target of its criticism ever be moved meaningfully into another language where the ‘patriarchal’ elements work differently? This question underlies criticisms of the Canadian situation. Second, what are the power politics behind the naming, translation and anthologizing of certain, here French, writers as feminists to the exclusion of others? Third, how can a different feminist history, derived from different cultural practices and histories, say the writings of Italian Luisa Muraro or the work of the Diotima group in Verona, be translated into American English, and a very different feminist culture?

It is useful to look a little more closely at these criticisms since they reveal the importance of studying cultural contexts and the position of sub-groups within them for understanding the production and reception of translated texts. In the Canadian setting alluded to above, one problem seems to lie in the ‘mimetic’ translations carried out by translators who preferred to translate sound over sense. Justifying their approach with the argument that Quebec feminist writers such as Nicole Brossard focussed on the oral nature of poetic language and derived the neologisms and wordplays designed to undermine ‘patriarchal’ meaning from this orality, they replicated sounds rather than somehow explicitating the Quebec text. When such translation is done for a complicitous, contemporaneous audience that ‘hears’ the work of a great author of the women’s movement, the translation ‘works’ (Flotow 2000b). For the next generation, which may be less aware of the politics of this poetry, such mimetic translation is hardly meaningful, however, as one critic points out; for her the ‘sound over sense’ translations indicate that
“English-Canadian feminists recognize Brossard’s value as a writer and social activist [but] are generally at a loss to translate either her texts or her ideas into their own culture” (Gillam 1995: 12).

The Anglo-American creation/fabrication of “French feminism” is another locus of current criticism. In a recent issue of *Yale French Studies* (No. 87, 1995), aptly entitled “Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism”, Christine Delphy puts into question the construction of this category and the content assigned to it. “French feminism” was developed largely through the selection, translation and anthologizing of certain texts and certain authors (Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray), some of whom reject the feminist label, yet are deemed “feminist” despite their protests (Delphy 1995: 196 and 212). Delphy speculates on the possible reasons for this fabrication. For example, she asserts that assigning the label ‘French’ to certain ideas and privileging texts that deal with these – specifically, psychoanalysis – allowed American feminists to push the responsibility for rescuing these materials from discredit onto a foreign element (*ibid.*: 210). Further, she posits the imperialist “Anglo-American compulsion to unify and homogenize the ‘French’, thus denying them any individuality” (*ibid.*: 214) as a major factor in this development. Her focus is not on the individual texts and translations, it is on the selection, categorization and misrepresentation of certain French writers as ‘feminists’ to the exclusion of many others by the powerful academic machine of Anglo-American feminisms.

A similar problematic is expressed, less categorically, by Beverley Allen who calls for “transculturative” procedures in transferring/ translating Italian feminist thinking into Anglo-American circles. She denies “the presumed innocence, this air of immunity that surrounds translation” (Allen 1999: 2) and points out that the fact of translation makes possible and encourages globalized readings, where cultural specificity is lost. In terms of Italian feminisms, the effect of translation could well be akin to the ‘common denominator’ images defined and rejected by the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, since they ignore the specificity of single, individual women. Allen notes a series of
other issues specific to Italian feminisms that require ‘transculturation’ beyond mere translation into English; these include references to abortion politics, gender as a linguistic category on the one hand, and on the other, gender as differently distributed across the sexes than in the USA, since, as Allen asserts, “dominant class males [in Italy] exhibit vastly more “feminine” characteristics in their self-presentation than is the case among their counterparts in the U.S” (ibid.: 8). Finally, she cites notions of ‘dual historical subjectivity’ as posited by Carla Lonzi, the theory and practice of affidamento, and the “differences between madre in Milan and mother in New York” (ibid.: 14) as concepts that could not be translated with impunity.

Allen’s careful assessment of the difficulties in transferring one form of Western feminism into another Western culture (Italian to Anglo-American) is matched by the critical work done on the German translations of American feminist Mary Daly (Flotow 1997), the American translation of Luce Irigaray (Godard 1991), and was foreshadowed by the work of Gayatri Spivak (1991) on the translation of ‘Third World’ women writers for feminist readers of the West. Spivak’s critique of ‘easy-reading’ renditions of this women’s writing is an indictment of Western imperialist manoeuving, which often misrepresents ‘Third World’ texts, “imagining that women automatically have something identifiable in common” (Spivak 1992: 190) and translates them for both ‘benevolent’ and highly personal reasons of prestige and publication.

4. Further Developments of the First Paradigm

The criticisms discussed above have doubtless been influential in producing a spate of ‘translation and gender’ articles that focus on the individual text, translator or author – carefully contextualizing the work and avoiding any globalizing comments. These include critical analyses of the English translations of Simone de Beauvoir (Cordero 1995, Alexander 1997, Flotow 2000a); a study of the “immasculation” of the work of Christine de Pisan in the early English versions of her texts (Chance
1998); a comparative study of two 16th century women translators' versions of Psalm 51 which shows how differences in age, rank and life experiences have affected their renderings (Hannay 1991); and a study of the work of anonymous Anglo-Norman women hagiographers as translators “who bring different kinds of subjectivity and historical experience to bear on the writing of hagiography” (Wogan-Browne 1994: 54). These and many other articles proceed from the first paradigm: the ‘conventional’ feminist view of female gender as a category that can in some respects be applied to all women, and its corollary that women are a special case in any society; they represent devalued difference in most existing socio-political systems.1

5. The Second Paradigm

A tentative move toward the second paradigm – gender as discursive, gestural performance – can be found in recent publications by two American translation scholars. These authors are reluctant to maintain the once close and rigid link between feminism and gender since “gender definitions are neither universal nor absolute manifestations of inherent differences but relatively local, constantly changing constructions contingent on multiple historical and cultural factors” (Maier and Massardier-Kenney 1996: 230). Gender characteristics and gendered behaviour, they write, “do not represent a fixed, seamless identity”, but are subject to many different influences, and can not be an element defined only by feminisms. Their views derive from and apply to translation some of the ideas of Judith Butler (1990) and others who theorize ‘conventional’ male/female gender-identity as “an illusion discursively maintained for the purpose of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (Butler 1990: 136). In this developing second paradigm, ‘conventional’ male/female gender is a production, a performance of “naturalized or essentialist gender

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1 This idea is also reflected in the inclusion of gender/feminism/translation studies references in the selective bibliography on “minority in translation” in the most recent issue of The Translator 4/2, 1998.
identities” (Butler 1990: 136) carried out for the purpose of maintaining hegemonic heterosexual culture. Alternative gender performances, as in drag or in the homosexual discourses establishing identity and community (Harvey 1999), reveal the “imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency” (Butler 1990: 137). These alternative gender performances undermine conventional gender stability and its ‘natural’ aspects through parody, theatricality and humour.

Such argumentation causes Maier and Massardier-Kenney to endorse the destabilizing effect that translation can have on the idea of “woman” as a secure base. Citing the following question/answer from a contemporary novel as exemplary of this new approach, “Woman or man?” “Neither... I’m a translator”, they seek to enlarge the boundaries of conventional definitions and discourses by new associations of gender and translation. Again, the argument favours recognizing differences – in genders and the meaning of gender in diverse situations and different cultures – and not imposing Anglo-American feminist or hegemonic conceptions of the term upon unsuspecting others. Maier has most recently gone so far as to suggest a ‘woman-interrogated’ approach to translation, which she explains as “an endeavour to work less from confidently held definitions than from a will to participate in re-definitions, to counter the restrictions of a gender-based identity by questioning gender as the most effective or the most appropriate point of departure for a translator’s practice” (Maier 1998: 102).

This may seem paramount to striking the first paradigm from translation studies – yet, as Maier explains, though gender (for her) is no longer a clearly identifiable or even important issue in the textual relations of translation, this contingency need not lead to a sense of impotence. Translation is always a representation, always a performance of another author’s work, and hence invested with power. Translators may choose to privilege women authors, say, or emphasize their own understanding of gender-related issues in a text, yet these are a selected, performative as-

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pect of the translation and do not represent intrinsic qualities – just as class distinctions or ethnicity might be. An example of such ‘customized’ performativity is noted in a recently published critique of the massive two-volume collection entitled *Women Writing in India* (S. Tharu and K. Lalita (eds) 1991/93). While the editors of the collection ostensibly focused on first paradigm gender in compiling the anthology, the critic, Harveen Sachdeva Mann (1994), criticizes this selection because it elides issues of class difference and ethnicity which she considers of much greater import. Similarly, Maier’s ‘woman-interrogated’ translation practice leads her to translate the subtitle of *Delirio y destino*, the philosophical writings of Maria Zambrano, ‘Veinte años en la vida de una española’ as “Twenty years in the life of a Spaniard”, deliberately eliding the fact that “una española” refers to a Spanish woman.3

Less tentative ideas about gender as contingent performativity are evident in translation studies focussing on gay writing and translation. Echoing the realization that there is no definition of woman that would hold within one culture or across diverse cultures, Keith Harvey’s recent work notes the “whole range of homosexual identities in French and English fiction” (Harvey 1998: 295) which must be taken into account in the translation and evaluation of ‘camp talk.’ There is no one homosexual identity; instead, diverse contexts produce diverse identities, and performances of these. Harvey argues that the camp style privileged by certain of these homosexual groups signifies “performance rather than existence” which leads to “a deliberately exaggerated reliance on questions of (self-) presentation” (*ibid.:* 304). He also describes 1990s queer theory notions of identity as a “pure effect of performance” (*ibid.:* 305). Under this ‘performance paradigm’, certain types of writing and speech, here ‘camp’, are “extrosexual performative gestures” (Harvey, citing Butler: 305)

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3 Interestingly, the published version of this subtitle reads “A Spaniard in her Twenties” (M. Zambrano, *Delirium and Destiny*, SUNY Press, Albany 1999, tr. Maier), thus maintaining, or returning to pre-feminist notions of the feminine being included in or connoted by masculine/neutral forms. Maier had surmised that the final version would eventually remain untranslated as “una española”, which might have avoided the problem (Maier 1998: 22fn).
that both denote and generate gay (self-) identificatory activity.

The translation of this marked language across cultural boundaries where other kinds of linguistic markers, or more importantly, socio-political contexts influence gay performativity, is Harvey’s concern. His analysis of the French translation of Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* and the English version of Tony Duvert’s *Paysage de fantaisie* allows him to demonstrate how certain norms of the homosexual sub-cultures within the translating cultures as well as its larger cultural context significantly influence performative aspects of the translated text. It is interesting that Harvey’s examples are all taken from dialogue, in which the theatricality, parody and humour of ‘camp’ – its discursive performativity – are privileged. While the French translator’s decision to considerably tone down the camp in Vidal’s text may derive from French homosexuals’ reluctance “to self-identify according to the variable of sexuality” (Harvey 1998: 311), and be an expression of their scepticism about the construction of a subcultural community that challenges and parodies heterosexual hegemony, the ‘gayed’ English version of Duvert reflects the self-confident existence of such a community in the Anglo-American sphere. In more recent work (2000), Harvey pays even closer attention to the existence and the influence of gay communities and identities in allowing and encouraging certain types of textual, translational “transformance”. It seems that only an intimate understanding of gender politics can explain the ‘becoming’ of a translated text.

6. To Conclude

While gender issues in translation are still very much relevant in translation studies, there have been interesting shifts in focus. The first paradigm, working from ‘conventional’ notions of gender, is still generating insightful and valuable critical analyses of

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4 Barbara Godard (1990) first applied this term to Canadian Nicole Bros- sard’s *Le desert mauve*, a fiction in which Brossard is translating herself. The term emphasizes “the work of translation, the focus on the process of constructing meaning in the activity of transformation, a mode of performance.”
women's writing in translation, its history and its reception, studies of the contemporary rewritings of certain authors and texts, and the contributions of women translators.\(^5\) The categories and certainties underlying this paradigm are, however, being undermined by the second ‘performativity’ paradigm, which though still concerned with gender issues, is underwriting work well beyond the conventional binary male/female pole. It combines the discursive performativity of diverse types of alternative (and conventional) genders with ideas about translation as performance—a combination that leads to textual transformance.

REFERENCES


\(^5\) The forthcoming Portraits de traductrices, ed. J. Delisle, University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, is a further manifestation of this paradigm.
Siwak E., 1998, "Rewriting Women’s Discourse across Cultures: Reception and Translation of Ingeborg Bachmann’s Prose in Poland and in the United States", PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.