

Gender and Queer Identities in Translation

From Sappho to present feminist and lesbian writers: translating the past and retranslating the future

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‘You may forget but
let me tell you
this: someone in
some future time
will think of us’

Sappho

‘No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
our animal passion rooted in the city.’

— Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*

Commenting on this epigraph by Sappho and this poem by Adrienne Rich may be the most poignant way of introducing the concepts of queer identities in translation and the powerful manipulative instrument of translation itself: these works provide examples of how gender and gender inequalities can be disguised and revealed in translation, and the way in which the silence and invisibility of women can be imposed or rejected through translation itself. Indeed, they mean that no work of literature, no part of patriarchal culture, has taken into account the possibility of two women together, and that there are no models or guides for this task.

As it is widely known, most of the past and current research regarding gender and translation has an overt feminist bias. However, there is currently a conscious move towards widening the scope and also including research into how other gender(ed) and sexual identities – such as homosexual and transgender – in writing are constructed and performed through translation (Chamberlain 1988; von Flotow 2007). This work on gender and translation has developed out of my interests in exploring feminist and especially lesbian-related issues in translation, due to the fact that language is not only a tool for communication but also a manipulative instrument – this approach being part of the more general turn towards cultural and sociological perspectives on translation itself. In this paper I will first briefly re-trace the ‘gender paradigm’ and issues in translation studies, describing how this first paradigm has been shaped by feminist movements and gender equality struggles over the years. I will then proceed to the very focus, widely framing and analysing the so-called second paradigm of gender and queer/lesbian writing and translation in past and present translation theories and criticism (von Flotow, 1999) - namely the new reflection on showing, changing, and naming

queer identities in translation - and in doing so I will refer to some purposely ‘mistranslated’ lesbian voices. From this debate, the following questions arise: How is gender¹ constructed and reinforced through lesbian and feminist language and translation? How are an individual’s consciousness and identity represented through them? Which criticisms arise?

Transcultural and translingual developments in Gender Studies and its various offshoots since the 1970s have implicated translation in every aspect of text production and reception, and have enormously expanded the thinking about and research on translation and gender. More recently, ideas about gender instability have added new dimensions to the discussions, and undermined the categories 'man' and 'woman' on which earlier debates were founded. Judith Butler argues that gender, like sexuality, is not an essential truth derived from the body's materiality but rather a regulatory fiction: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990, p. 33). Queer as well as gay and lesbian studies, concerned with other gender identities and in particular with individual choice in these matters, have taken debates into other, though not necessarily new, areas (von Flotow, 2007: 92). The powerful influence of language on applying and enforcing a society's notions about gender, gender expectations and gendered behaviour, and on producing, creating and manipulating texts in translation, created two major paradigms in Translation Studies from the late 1970s onwards.

The first and second paradigms: feminist translation and queer translation

The *first paradigm* reflects the conventional assumption that there are individuals in society and culture identified as women or men, and who, because of this identification and self-identification, are perceived and treated differently, with the ‘female’ individuals usually occupying a subordinate position. This first perspective in translation explores the notion of gender as a set of characteristics and behaviours imposed by society, as a construct that forms an individual and according to which that individual identifies due to the artificial behavioural stereotypes that come with gender conditioning. As Simone de Beauvoir stated, '*on ne nait pas femme, on le devient*' ('one is not born a woman, one becomes one') (Beauvoir, 1949) and this implies that gender imprints the dominant cultural expectations upon the male-sexed or female-sexed individual. Work in translation studies carried out under this first paradigm tends to subscribe to ideas derived from feminist theories and practices and thus focuses on women as a special minority group within 'patriarchal' society that has been subject to usually biased treatment, including within the area of translation. There is an analogy between ‘women’ and ‘translation’ on the basis of them being conceived from the same dimension: the historical position of women’s inferiority and their involvement in translation studies has indeed been analysed by Lori Chamberlain as the ‘feminization of translation’ (1988). Women, as translation, have been historically devalued as weak and unstable in a gendered cultural system which privileges the patriarchal – and thus active and

¹ It needs to be stressed that here the term ‘gender’ reflects and refers to the sociocultural construction of both female and male sexes, according to the development of the term in the early ‘70s by the feminist movements.

strong – construct of authorship, while translation was regarded as a typically feminine and inferior activity of passive repetition and re-production, rather than production: writing is active and thus masculine, translating is passive and reproductive and so feminine. Indeed, feminist criticism of the mainstream 'patriarchal' language that imposes gender restrictions through language, and feminist ideas about women's agency, activism and production soon created practice out of theories: the feminist influence on translation is thus most readily visible in the metatexts – the statements, the theoretical writings, prefaces and footnotes that have been added to works published. In these texts there is a noticeable trend in the developing sense of self exhibited by translators, increasingly aware that their identities as gendered rewriters enter into their work. With regard to this point, this feminist approach to applied translation has been defined 'womanhandling the text' (Godard, 1990), and explores the visible presence of feminist and female translators as active agents behind the translated texts in order to overrule the traditional view of translators as 'invisible'. This approach, as articulated in Gideon Toury's work, provides evidence supporting the claim that translation and especially gendered translations are not a mere reproduction of the source text, but rather a creative process intertwined with intercultural, identity constraints that entail complex negotiations and an active presence of translators, tearing apart their 'invisibility cloak'. Nevertheless, it is not this aspect – although fundamental in revising gender and identities in translation studies – which is of most interest here. Feminist translation theories, in fact, serve as well to revise the current argumentation of what it means to translate gender and identities, along with the associated strategies put into practice.

The *second paradigm* defined by von Flotow (1999) can be seen to interact with the second definition of gender and is often 'aligned with gay or lesbian identities/interests' (idem), questioning aspects of traditional gender characteristics and identity. The second paradigm derives from the relatively new idea that the diversity of sexual orientation and gender is too wide: therefore it would be meaningless to identify anyone as primarily male or female, since so many other factors come into play. Still in development, this paradigm focuses on gender as a discursive and contingent act, and on its performative aspects. The idea that a translation, too, is a performance causes a certain tentative overlap between gender and translation in this second paradigm, where gender issues are often aligned with gay and lesbian identities and queer theories, and the translation analyses tend to deal with works in which traditional ideas about two genders are called into question (von Flotow, 2007: 93-94). Representations of diverse sexual identities and communities in and across cultures take many configurations, and translation is most certainly a very powerful one. Certainly, men and women whose sexualities do not fit the heteronormative mainstream culture share some of the multiplicities regarding their characterization in translation. However, precisely because they represent such specific and diverse subcultures, the representation of lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and other sexualities in translation demands their own separate study. But what is 'queer translation'? Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer', then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative.² Though queer has certainly been

² David Halperin (1997-02-06), *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, Oxford University Press, p. 62.

used in ‘deconstructing the categories, oppositions and equations that sustain [sexual identities]’, Annamarie Jagose (1996) points out that ‘it evades programmatic description, because it is differently valued in different contexts’. I would like here to use the term as a descriptor for a translation project, one that is *anti-homophobic* in motivation and practice, and *destabilising* and *historicising* of gender, sex, and sexuality norms.

From Sappho to Quebeckers writers: feminist and lesbians in re-engendered translation

The idea of ‘manipulation’ is close to the phenomenon of translation – both *manipulare* and *translatare* share a common lexical ground: an (artful) adaptation, change, transformation, transmission, and in some sense the two terms are quasi synonyms, which are also associated with transgression, perversion or subversion (Santaemilia 2005). In fact, it seems that ‘all translation implies a degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose’ (Hermans 1985: 11). It is the case to briefly refer to the term ‘les belles infidèles’, an adage introduced by the French rhetorician Ménage (1613-1692), declaring that translations, like women, must be either beautiful and/or faithful. Both translation and gender studies are giving a new gist to the investigation of sexual and gendered identities, along with the notion of manipulation of literary texts to ‘rewrite’ others’ lives. It is true that gender in translation makes possible phenomena such as the rewriting and retranslating of literary works, sexual choices, attitudes and lifestyles through the lenses of morality. The two terms - translation and gender – are filled with ideological and critical meaning, along with a projection and/or rejection of individual and collective identities, and they have become the site of discourse discussion of such themes.

It is a long journey to juxtapose and compare a number of translations of one particular text and female author in order to understand the gender, queer, ideological and contextual influences that have rendered translations different. The issue of gender and queer identity has, in the past, widely motivated many translators in changing or hiding the queer features of literary works of art - this manipulation is linked to the redefinition of identities and reality through literary traditions - and the following examples will serve to highlight the importance of gender and queer awareness in translation criticism in reshaping past translations and moving towards a future of gender equality. This brief examination takes some female authors as its subjects: first Sappho and Simone de Beauvoir, then it analyses the voice of present translators who stand up for a lesbian and feminist re-translation movement, such as de Lotbinière-Harwood’s translation of Nicole Brossard’s works. Gender and queer interest in these authors is no coincidence: though their texts lie about 2000 years apart, they speak in strong, individual voices that clearly produce expressions of love, sexual arousal, anger, gender and queer identity from a woman’s perspective, and from women to women.

Lauded throughout classical antiquity as the ‘Tenth Muse’ and greatest poet alongside Homer, Sappho is believed to have lived on the Greek island of Lesbos sometime around 600 BC. Only with the recovery and translation of certain ancient texts, such as the famous

and much-admired Fragment 31 ('He seems to me equal to the gods') bits and pieces of her poetic corpus have been gradually reassembled. The salvage operation has continued ever since, with several Sapphic fragments reappearing only in this century. And indeed as more poem fragments surfaced - many addressed to beautiful girls and suffused with cryptic erotic fervour - she came to be regarded indisputably as a lover of women. Though she seems to be lost due to the scarceness of remaining poetic production, some translations of her poems highlight the gap between translations seeking to hide the queer character of her production, and new, revised 'lesbian' (or rather faithful to the original source text) translations - and therefore can serve well as an example. As Prins (1999) claims, 'Sappho had become a highly overdetermined and contradictory trope within 19th-century discourses of gender, sexuality, poetics and politics', and as her remarks suggest, the topic of Sappho's 19th-century reception is multifaceted enough to allow for intense meditation on a host of crucial lesbian translation issues. Symptomatically, as Rayor (1991) shows, past translations have rewritten Sappho's works in a heterosexualized form. The much-translated (and notoriously strange) Fragment 31 - quoted below in Anne Carson's closely literal modern version - comes in for particular attention:

He seems to me equal to the gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing - oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, a moment, then no speaking

is left in me

no: tongue breaks, and thin
fire is racing under skin

and in eyes no sight and drumming

fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking

grips me all, greener than grass

I am and dead - or almost

I seem to me.

Confronted with this mutilated utterance, many translators tried to hide the homoerotic tension conveyed – the poet seems to address a young woman with whom she is infatuated. One example of revisionism, John Hall of Durham’s translation of 1652, begins

He that sits next to thee now and hears
Thy charming voyce, to me appears
Beauteous as any Deity

That rules the skie.

How did his pleasing glances dart
Sweet languors to my ravish’d heart
At the first sight though so prevailed
That my voyce fail’d.

This heterosexualized translation of Fragment 31 transforms Sappho’s feeling into the expression of a man love-struck by a woman, explained by the change of pronouns such as ‘How did *his* pleasing glances dart / Sweet languors to my ravish’d heart’ precisely so as to disguise the female object of the speaker’s yearning. Ironically, this ‘break in voice’ in Fragment 31 is due to an unconventional, if not taboo, lesbian love relationship – the woman’s attack of jealousy occurs because a man is close to the woman she loves – and it is translated in such a way that demonstrated women’s conventional silence: Prins concludes ‘Sappho survives as a text never quite sublimated into voice: a corpus used for, and ab-used by, translation’ (1999: 66). And, indeed, in his theoretical reflections on translation, Walter Benjamin defines translation as a form of trans-living, a survival or ‘living on’ within an original text that is manifested in its translations (1996); he emphasized how translation may give up the original and allow it to survive in another form. The relationship between translating and trans-living is poignant with regard to queer translation: Sappho survives, in different ways, as the product of disguising or revealing translations.

The English translation of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe* (*The Second Sex*) has given rise to a good range of gender and lesbian-conscious translation criticism, and it has been defined as the ‘feminist bible’ (von Flotow, 2007: 49), an epithet that overstated its influence in gender inquiry in the XX century. Criticisms of her works’ translation into English are primarily based on unmarked deletions of more than ten per cent of the original manuscript published in French in 1949; large sections of women’s names and women’s achievements in history, literature, science and so on have been completely removed by the translator’s hand (Simons, 1983). Similarly, the translation deletes references to cultural taboos such as lesbian relationships, and to unwelcomed realities of lesbian love. The translator, Parshley, was badgered to condense, simplify or directly eliminate the above-mentioned issues in order to ‘lighten the burden for the American reader’ (Knopf quoted in von Flotow, 1999: 50). Keefe’s (1994) analysis of omissions and modifications in translations reveals that these were often concerned with sensitive and controversial matters

of gender ideology and strategy. But when thinking of what queer translation might produce, the history of Canadian feminist translators might be even more instructive – per lesbian translation’s explicitly anti-homophobic, thus interventionist, goal. Feminist translation in English Canada emerged in the 1980s as a response to avant-garde work by Quebecker radical feminist writers in the 70s and 80s. Based on the postulate that ‘language is power’, Nicole Brossard and other members of this movement sought to dismantle the patriarchy embedded in the written word through a highly experimental, difficult, modernist style. To translate these works into English, feminist translators had to match the innovations of the source-text authors: ‘they [...] had to go beyond translation to supplement their work, making up for the differences between various patriarchal languages by employing wordplay, grammatical dislocations and syntactic subversion in other places in their texts’. It goes without saying that these translators were in part motivated by the desire to build transcultural bridges between women. Applied to heterosexual and queer source texts, these practices can constitute a productive example of queer translations. The contexts and forms of oppression are obviously different, and so of necessity queer translation in practice will take a different shape, but feminist subversion gives us a good starting point for inverting the hidden power relations of heterosexism by revealing and underscoring it through techniques borrowed from feminists. A queer translation, following queer-theoretical approaches, would use these tools in an anti-homophobic optic to destabilise and denaturalise gender and sex norms. Understood in this way, queer translation is, perhaps above all else, a literary expedient that explores the parameters of queer experience in order to validate an identity position and create an interactional space for the formulation and reception of queer voices through language. Translation as an activity — and translated texts as products — operate with the textual elaboration of this identity position, either to introduce it as an innovative device in the target cultural polysystem or to modify (heighten or attenuate) it for the target reader as a consequence of the target cultural pressures to which he or she is subject (Harvey, 2000). Viewed in this manner, the presence of translated texts that project in their subject matter the existence of queer communities are crucial to both internal queer identity formation and imagined queer community projection. I believe this practice would encounter a double process described by Keith Harvey in his essay ‘Gay community, gay identity and the translated text’. By rendering homophobia startlingly clear in a source text and appending an anti-oppressive paratext, inversion would transmogrify a homophobic work into a sort of *queered* work. Released into the target culture, the translation would work on the imagination of the queer target reader, enabling ‘*internal identity formation*’ at the same time as it opens a space for ‘*imagined community projection*’ (Harvey 2000: 147; italics his). Harvey argues that ‘the presence of translatedness in a target culture provides readers who are working at a skew with dominant culture norms the space in which their difference can be worked out as a positive cultural attribute’ (2000: 159). The translatedness – or supplement – allows the queer reader to imagine a transnational community, even if that imagination is not anchored in reality. Though the term ‘queer’ does have an anti-identity component, the word retains the anti-assimilationist, fiercely identitarian force it had when first reclaimed. Even if ‘queer’ ‘can’t be made to signify monolithically’, it retains its status

as a form of identity: and while in his essay, Harvey only considers ‘gay writing,’ *i.e.* texts by ‘gay’ authors, I am positing that even a homophobic text, successfully ‘inverted’, would encounter this queering translation process.

Shifting from rendering homophobia or inverting the gender in a specific translated text, Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood translated numerous texts by/about some of the most important Canadian female authors and artists, and her book *The Body Bilingual: translation as a re-writing in the feminine* provides an excellent framework for re-translations of lesbian texts. Her translation of the feminist and lesbian, Quebecer writer Nicole Brossard’s *Le Désert Mauve* (Mauve Desert) serves as a perfect example - Brossard creates texts that are radical in their approach to gender, sexuality, and literary convention as well. De Lotbinière-Harwood focuses, in her translation, on female gender-marking expression, responding to Brossard’s own female-gender marking of the text, and translates them into English:

My translation spells ‘author’: ‘auther’, as a way of rendering the feminized *auteure* pioneered and widely used by Québec feminists: and renders the beautiful *amante*, lesbian lover, by ‘shelove’. To further eroticize the foreign tongue, ‘dawn’, a feminine noun in French, is referred to as ‘she’ in the sentence: ‘Dawn attracts, this is certain, dawn fascinates. She is at the edge of night, at the edge of the soul a quiet certitude, an appeasement of the eyes smitten with changes and utopias.’

By being gender-specific about the characters’ interpersonal relations in a way English grammar does not normally allow, these feminization strategies make it possible for target-language readers to identify the lesbian in the text.

(de Lotbinière-Harwood 1995: 162)

Although this kind of translation surely allows a lesbian audience to identify the inner lesbian character of such texts, they are not immune from criticism, especially in the above-mentioned Québécoise and Canadian context: Robyn Gillam (1995) criticizes the elitism and cultural inappropriateness in English translations of – again - works by Nicole Brossard. It is argued that some translations complicate an already difficult source text by expanding on complex wordplay and by privileging phonetic associations rather than actual meaning (cited in von Flotow, 1997: 80). An example may be seen in the following extract of *Under Tongue* (1987), the translation by de Lotbinière-Harwood of Brossard’s *Sous la langue* (1987):

Fricatelle ruisselle
essentielle aime-t-
elle dans le touche à
tout qui arrondit les
seins la rondeur

Does she frictional she fluvial she
essential does she in the all-
embracing touch that rounds the
breasts loves the mouths’ soft
roundness or the effect undressing

douces des bouches her.
ou l'effet qui la
déshabille ?

(Brossard, 1987)

(de Lotbinière-Harwood, 1987)

Not only Quebecker writers and translators provide an interesting framework to analyse gender in translation. Another poignant example can be found in Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, who tackles the thorny problem of translating the American feminist, lesbian, and poetess Adrienne Rich's 'Twenty-One Love Poems' into Spanish. "Twenty-one Love Poems" especially challenges dominant cultural values and discourse while it exemplifies the internally dialogic, self-reflexive motion of Rich's poems. These short poems concern a relationship between two women which prospers but later disintegrates, a love made possible and impossible by the forces 'within us and against us, against us and within us.' In breaking silences about lesbian sexuality, it not only resists being co-opted into the heterosexual cultural system it challenges but also resists being systematized even within the structure of 'Twenty-one Love Poems.' By dialogically resonating or "floating" as a detached signifier of desire throughout the entire collection, the poem keeps the collection from being facily subsumed into a heterosexual system or being received as a mere trope of that system. Yet, again, the twenty-one poems rely on the readers' recognizing the ideologies associated with heterosexuality and conventional ways of reading against which these love poems position themselves (Templeton 1994). Since Rich's is homosexual poetry, written by a woman to another woman, the translator is faced with the added difficulty of translating into a language that marks grammatical gender. Diaz-Diocaretz also notes the constraints posed by different social conventions:

To use the masculine for the adjective '*juntos*' (together) would be a common, grammatically legitimate way to indicate the duality... but... to leave this form would be a displacement of reference... As a translator who is aware of the moral and social tradition and conventions in the Hispanic culture as a whole, in the context of my own horizon of prospective readers, to use the adjective in the feminine plural (*juntas*) would be more than daring.

Again, lesbian issues within the translated text have to be dealt with in relation to the social expectations of the audience-world outside the text. The task of the translator is further complicated by Rich's own views on how her poetry should be read, arguing that to remove the signs of lesbian love embedded in the text is an act of patriarchal imperialism. Diaz-Diocaretz describes herself as a translator 'torn between the poet's message... and the constraints that limit the accepted norms and conventions of a woman's poetic voice within the Hispanic literary tradition': But it is important to notice that Diaz-Diocaretz translating feelings as they develop in a lesbian relationship with grammar gender-markers becomes a way of escaping the 'silence and lies' which heretofore governed not only women's love for

women, but also denies the invisibility of translators, whilst highlighting their being active in the translational process.

Conclusions

Translation is planned rewriting. It produces an inevitably different version of the original text, prepared under specific conditions, to reach a specific audience. For these reasons translation represents one of the most privileged tools for the negotiation and reproduction of gender and identities. It evokes the current discursive conflict between female and male, between gender normativity and queer identities, and performativity. Despite a substantial body of work on queer and lesbian translation and re-writing still being produced, its existence defies the current scholarly position on gender in and through translation. The entry of gender into translation theory, moreover, deals with the renewed perspective of translation as a 'rewriting process' for a critical framing of gender, queer notions and identities.

Feminist translations foregrounded female subjectivity, dealing with the process of re-writing and re-translating, and thus manipulating texts in what has been defined 'womanhandling', which is at odds with the established dominant theory of translation as faithful and invisible. Faced with texts which themselves challenge the way in which meaning is formed, the translator is increasingly aware of her role in determining meaning, and in rendering it. De Lotbinière-Harwood particularly emphasizes the translations which re-gender the language, in response to provocative Quebecker feminist and lesbian writers' works and their gender-conscious writing. The examples discussed – from Ancient Greek epigrams to contemporary literary works - focus on re-gender in translation, in grammatical gender and naming and in the inversion of the original gender to re-establish the positionality with socially-accepted gender norms. These perceptions of the active nature of translation and translators form a renewed sense of agency, which cannot be understood as that of a free and unfettered writing/translating subject, but rather it must be understood in relation to the various identities and contexts through which the translating subject defines – or translates – itself. Far from being passive, feminist and lesbian writers and translators enunciate and perpetrate their position and acknowledge their interventionism in translation, giving meaning to the shift between original text and translation. The idea of translation as manipulative highlights the translating process, a process which necessarily affects identity and which starts with identity. There is still an urge to rediscover female texts and translations to be more aware of the fluidity of meaning and identity, but above all to examine the complex workings of language and gender towards renovated gender equality through translation.

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