Contested Gender in Translation: Intersectionality and Metamorphics

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The concepts “intersectionality” from sociology, and “metramorphics” from psychoanalysis are important in discussions of gender in these fields, yet they have hardly appeared in academic work linking gender and translation. How might they prove useful? The following is an exploration of this question.

I begin with a personal experience, work I published in 1991, while still a student. The article entitled “Feminist Translation: Contexts, Practices, Theories” appeared in a Canadian translation studies journal, and was concerned with the strategies deployed by English language translators in Canada to render experimental feminist texts from Quebec. It opened with a famous line from contemporary Quebec writer, Nicole Brossard: “ce soir j’entre dans l’histoire sans relever ma jupe”, a statement made by the figure of a woman writer in the feminist play *La Nef des sorcières*. This figure expresses itself as a literary creator, self-consciously acquiring a public voice and persona in the process, *without lifting up her skirt*, i.e. without playing a traditional role of sex object. Two English-Canadian translations for this text read as follows: “Tonight I am entering history without lifting up my skirt” and “Tonight I am entering history without opening my legs” (qtd in Flotow, 1991: 69).

The difference between them was striking, surprising, funny—and also quite political—with the second one “without opening my legs” very much a sign of the times. It overtranslated—sexualizing the remark much more than the original; it was shocking (when compared with the source text), and perhaps all the more appropriate for theatre where the language passes by quickly—and shock tactics may be useful. It also reflected, or “translated” other aspects of the source text, I thought, and especially, the source culture
—Quebec—where feminist writing was developing increasingly creative and radical tendencies over the course of the late 1970s and 1980s.

4 The English translators working with such Quebec texts devised their own experimental linguistic strategies to deal with the language experiments they faced, strategies that I labeled as “feminist”—though they can, in fact, be found in many other translation situations. I detailed them as follows, with examples from my corpus of experimental Quebec work:

5 – supplementing: which calls for interventionist moves on the part of the translator to compensate losses, and is sometimes referred to as textual exhibitionism;
6 – prefacing and footnoting: where the translator plays a didactic role, both explaining the intentions of the source text and outlining her own strategies;
7 – hijacking: where the translator appropriates the original text, and uses it for her own purposes or intentions.

8 The last category—hijacking—became the most exciting and controversial, especially as my text on these practices moved abroad, into other linguistic and cultural locales, where readers responded from their own particular perspectives.

9 The many different reactions and interpretations this article garnered now strike me as an example of the micro-cosmopolitan operating within the macro-cosmopolitan (Cronin, 2006)—the local within, and perhaps “hijacked” by, the global. The work came out of a very particular cultural and political moment, a micro-cosmopolitan moment so to speak, yet its title “Feminist Translation” did not clearly specify this moment. Instead it implied wider, more global, applications. And although most of the text samples, writers, and translators that were cited were specific to the Canadian context, it was often read as being applicable to very different situations—in Spain, or France, or China. The “made in Canada” aspect disappeared, and feminist strategies and initiatives described in the particular Canadian location moved into the global arena.

The micro-cosmopolitan and intersectionality

10 Since then, the importance and validity of the micro-cosmopolitan aspects of translation and translation studies (Cronin, 2006: 6ff) within and in counterpoint to the macro-cosmopolitan have been theorized as a dimension that “situates diversity, difference, exchange at the micro-levels of society” (ibid.: 16). Micro-cosmopolitan approaches focus on cultural specificity and diversity, and their value, in even the smallest community, exploring how these qualities are part of multiple human identities, also found in translation, and worthy of translation studies. Micro- and macro-cosmopolitan theory pays attention to complexities, transcending nation/state boundaries, permitting mediation between the local and the global, and situating translation in these complex landscapes; more importantly for my purposes here, it is anti-essentialist—free of any “fixed, permanent, all-encompassing notion of belonging or being” (ibid.: 20), concerned with the particular and its connections to the global.

11 In the social sciences, this diverse and changeable aspect of the local has long been discussed in terms of “intersections”, a way to account for the many different factors that impinge upon identities and experiences. Intersections have to do with the many social, personal and political elements that affect a person; they mitigate the notion of one
gender identity, and also of gender as a single important identity factor. In the early 1980s women of colour in the United States began to devise micro-cosmopolitan ways to study women’s lives and situations, reacting against the notion that all women suffered the same kinds of inequities—which had so far been described largely from the perspective of white women’s experiences. They saw and studied “intersections”—the meeting points of any number of factors that combine to make life more difficult for some people than for others. The idea was that gender is just one such factor, which is always intersected by others. These include racial difference, ethnic difference, religion, age, class, and sexual orientation. The term “intersectionality” was coined (Crenshaw, 1989: 139) to address this confluence of discriminatory elements.

In work on gender and feminist approaches to translation, some of the lessons learnt from the work around intersectionality are visible in postcolonial writing on translation. Spivak’s warnings against “convenient” translations, produced without real understanding of the source materials and their cultural history, derive from this focus on the particular. They signal the danger of generalizing about other cultures from one, powerful (in recent years, Anglo-American) perspective, and counsel respect and even “love” for that other text. Similarly, a current project on “women and translation” is closely geared to the “micro/macro-cosmopolitan” intersectional approach: under the umbrella term “women” it incorporates diverse research—on specific women translators working at specific historical moments (for example, in contemporary Catalonia, and in 19th century Russia), on modern chick-lit, such as Bridget Jones’s Diary, and its adaptation into film that is then dubbed into French, on examinations of the translation problems around the word “gender” itself, and on translations of texts by women writers done at different historical moments—for example, Sei Shônagan’s Pillow Book translated for almost a thousand years. These very different studies examine numerous intersections, not only in the source cultures but also in the intercultural movement of translation as texts surge forth into multiple areas of reception they were not necessarily destined for. And yet, the studies are bound together and rendered coherent by the broad macro-cosmopolitan organizational concept: “women and translation”.

When such broader perspectives of post-colonialism, gender, ethics, or nationalism, among others, are deployed as organizing principles, the danger of generalizations looms large. The question is how to move from particular case studies to the more general or universal; how can the individual case with all its intersections be made meaningful and applicable at a macro-cosmopolitan level. And on the other hand, how useful is it to produce small case studies, and align all their little differences, without abstracting broader concepts and applications from them? For gender and the issue of intersectionality, it makes sense to look at recent work from the social sciences on “multiple inequalities.”

In an essay entitled “Some Reflections on Gender and Politics” (Scott, 1999), Joan Wallach Scott considers two related problems: on the one hand the tendency in English common parlance to make no difference between the terms “sex” and “gender”; for most people, there are two types of humans: women and men, with women seen as being somehow related and belonging to a specific group and men belonging to the other group, and in every culture, myths and fantasies derive from and drive this division. On the other hand, there are the obvious issues of intersectionality—the recognition of the minute but important differences between individual members of these two groups. Yet, while “specific readings of particular instances” (ibid.: 73) are important, Scott reminds us that
these readings need to be informed by theory or theories; and for her, the most
important 20th century theories in the realm of gender and human sexuality have been
psychoanalytical, involving an examination of the human psyche and its production/
perception of sexual difference through the unconscious.

The 20th century study of the psyche has led to the exploration of humans’ unconscious,
and of unconscious desires, which are often expressed in symbolic form: in so-called
Freudian slips, fantasies, dreams, jokes, myths, with the most primary of these being
fantasies that “relate to problems of origin, the origin of the individual, the origin of
sexuality, the origin of the difference between the sexes” (ibid.: 75). Psychoanalytic theory
thus posits sexuality and sexual difference/gender as central to human pre-occupations
and to myth-making. It studies the fantasies around these pre-occupations and their
presence in all aspects of life, including translation.

While Scott takes into account the importance of “intersectionality”—in real life (as Freud
did too)—she implies that sexuality and sexual difference, usually melded in the term
gender (at least in English), is what drives the human unconscious, what preoccupies
humans’ minds, feeds their myths and fantasies, and seeps into their social organization,
politics, and power structures. The one, primal, enormous focus is sexual. Intersections
are interesting, important—but actually, details that inform the larger picture.

Metramorphosis and translation

In translation studies, the 17th century French expression “les belles infidèles” evokes the
focus on sexuality and sexual difference that is so particular to the human unconscious.
Indeed, the fantasized, sexualized aspects of translation and of the discourse about
translation are no great secret (Chamberlain, 2004 [2000]). In the Western European
traditions, translation has often been aligned with the reproductive roles of women in
patriarchal society, and expressed through the use of metaphors casting translation in
terms of patriarchal familial relations, feminizing translation, and rendering it a female
activity that needs to be watched over and controlled (by the male translator, editor,
writer) in order to ensure the paternity of the text and the quality of the mother-tongue,
or the female modesty and “honour” of the translation, to prevent translations becoming
mongrels/bastards (Blendlinge), with no clear/clean bloodlines (Schleiermacher, 2004
[2000]). Chamberlain shows that much of the metaphorical and myth-making discourse
around translation has regularly mobilized ancient, misogynist metaphors and fantasies
about women’s sexuality, reflecting primal fantasies of origin linked to sexuality and
human re-production. This has, in turn, and especially over the past ten years, triggered
thinking about other images of women in translation as well as attempts to rewrite them
and unleash the power of the feminine in the realm of translation.

Karlin Littau (2000) considers a specific mythical female figure often evoked in discourses
about translation: the figure of Pandora, whose story has been re-written and re-
fantasized many times in the past. In ancient Greek mythology, Pandora is Mother Earth
—and she holds a horn of plenty in her arms—the symbol of fertility. In later Greek
rewritings, she is created by Zeus to avenge the gods and the box or container or jar she
holds in her hands and opens without permission releases all the evils of the world—including linguistic difference. For this reason, Pandora figures in metaphors and
symbols of translation: she is presented as a femme fatale, whose beauty, charms and
seductiveness bring about the downfall of man (as well as intercultural understanding
and communication), and her “box” [according to Littau] represents nothing other than the female body, the threats and allures of her sexuality.

Littau reconsiders and rewrites this traditional view of Pandora, focusing instead on the older form, the Mother Earth figure, and brings in the deconstructive psychoanalytic work of Luce Irigaray. Irigaray’s theorizing is based on women’s sexuality, women’s psyches, women’s multiplicity as traits that offset the tendency toward the separateness and glory of the “one”, a tendency promulgated by centuries of Western philosophy: one approach to life (dominated by the authority of the male), one language, one dominant meaning, one good translation—predicated, as Littau says, on the “repression of foreignness or the insistence on sameness” (Littau, 2000: 25). This tendency Luce Irigaray has termed “hom(me)ology”, and she sees it as the aim of Western philosophy: i.e. the quest for sameness, the return of the same—the return of the same as the return to man.

In counterpoint, the focus on Pandora, the Earth Mother within the purview of Irigaray’s feminist psychoanalysis, presents this fantastical mythical figure as one that stands for generative activity, fruitfulness, multiplicity, creativity and productivity. Pandoran views of translation reverse or exploit the fantasies about origin and sexuality differently: here, the originary female figure is the reference for seriality in translation; there is always another translation, a proliferation of versions and texts, a proliferation of meanings—more, not less.

Most recently, the work of another psychoanalyst, Bracha Ettinger, has also proven useful for a broader gendered understanding of translation. In some ways her ideas participate in the “fruitfulness” of the figure of Pandora. Ettinger views the Phallus, and the rule of separateness/uniqueness this has privileged as a figment of male fantasies, the masculine imagination, driven by the will to separate from the mother and affirm this separateness. In her work, separateness is very tenuous; and her focus is not on clearly defined borders or frontiers. It is on thresholds [“seuils”], places through which movement and communication occur, and on interdependence. She posits the relationship with the unknown or the foreign as a matrixial relationship, or a metramorphic activity.

In regard to translation, such a relationship moves beyond the idealist metaphoric approach to translation, where texts are separate entities (i.e. defined by clear borders) and one version supposedly replaces the other. It also moves beyond the more realist metonymic view of translation—where a translation only ever presents a part of the original that then stands for the whole. Ettinger’s metamorphosis applied to translation brings in the female/maternal element that is excised from conventional psychoanalytic thought. It brings in the “mater”, the “matrice” [“womb”], the “matrix” (all conglomerated in the prefix “metra”) and adds this to the notion of “morphheus” which, in Greek refers to form, and changing forms. Ettinger writes:

We are caught in an axiom of equivalence. The Phallus is the value inherited from one signifier to another, each, on top of that, anaphorical to the signifier of a lost unity. So the magic circle is complete. So the Phallus appropriates all.

But the Symbolic is larger than the Phallus!
-Add metamorphoses to metaphors and metonymies.
-Open up a space between Symbol and Phallus (in a psychoanalytic sense). Matrix is in this space: Symbol minus (-) Phallus. (Ettinger, 1993: 50-51)
Thinking beyond the domineering Phallus and incorporating the feminine matrix, Ettinger writes about the space of the late pre-natal matrixial relations between mother and child/children where dependency is an ethical value, which is, in turn, useful for theorizing translation. As one commentator says “this focus on dependency and interrelatedness reveals our multiple dependencies and the connectedness underlying the fictions of absolute autonomy” (Shread, 2008: 234, citing Michael Cronin). Theorizing and deploying the matrixial and metramorphic paradigm evokes a feminine Symbolic that welcomes and accepts difference rather than replacing it. Ettinger insists:

Matrix gives meaning to the real which is otherwise unthinkable. [...] Matrix. The non-rejection of unknown and unassimilated non-I(s) is an unconscious side of the feminine ab-ovo. Matrix: dynamic and temporary assemblage created by non-rejection, without absorption, repeal or fusion. (Ettinger, 1993: 45-46)

As critic Rosi Huhn summarizes:

In contrast to metamorphosis, [...] the new forms and shapes of the metramorphosis do not send [...] each of the preceding ones into oblivion or eliminate it, but lets it shine through the transparency, disarranges and leads to an existence of multitude rather than unity. (Huhn, 1993, in Shread, 2005: 224)

Here, Ettinger’s emphasis on “non-rejection of unknown non-I(s)” and assemblages created “without absorption, repeal or fusion” and Huhn’s comments on the nature of preceding forms “shining through” the new forms in which they are presented resonate with recent concerns of translation and translation studies: the problem of recognizing alterity, of validating and somehow incorporating and reflecting otherness in the translated text, all the while not eliminating or “appropriating” it.

From this perspective, translation as a metramorphic activity enables signification within a relationship that transgresses the usual construction of tight subject boundaries. Here, several comes before the one, as in the late pre-natal relationship, where “a structure of severality precedes individual consciousness” (Shread, 2008: 221), and the term matrix shifts the associations of “the womb as a passive receptacle to that of an active border space, transformed by a co-emerging I and an unknown non-I” (ibid.).

The applications to translation and translation studies are manifold, and clearly related to the seriality, indeed, the infinity, of translation already suggested by Pandora. First and foremost, the translational relation is seen as one of encounter, exchange, and mutual transformation rather than assimilation, displacement, or rejection. Then, the more nuanced approach to the Other, to the unknown, and to difference offers a theoretical view of the matrix as a place where meaning is generated rather than foreclosed, transferred rather than buried. This promotes a view of translation as generative, as a labour that, like all such work and contrary to any notions of solitary grandeur, is dependent upon and in conversation with its environment, all the while exerting an influence on it as well. It is not a labour that must end in the deterioration, dereliction, or final replacement of the original. Instead, it evokes a very broad view of a generative, female component in human enterprise and activity, long decried as “merely reproductive”, yet theorized today as highly creative, productive, generative and based
on interdependence, tolerance of difference, and communication. Finally, to return to Scott and her discussion of gender/sexual difference as the central human focus, we can choose to view Ettinger and other feminist/womanist psychoanalytical approaches as the broad macro-cosmopolitan space within which details of intersectionality unfold—and which these details may then slowly transform.

Intersectionality and metramorphosis: concepts from two very different fields, both applied to gender. Intersectionality highlights the everyday, the political, the contextual and is part of the micro-cosmopolitan; metramorphosis—deriving from the severality of late pre-natal pregnancy—is located beyond the everyday in the mythical, the symbolic—the primal condition of interdependency, communication, co-habitation and tolerance of difference: the “non-rejection of the unknown non-I”. In my view, the broader, generous aspects of the concept of metramorphics provide a rich site for a gendered understanding of translation, an understanding that incorporates a part of every human experience. For translation, which must always come to grips with difference, intersectionality points up these differences while metramorphics provides a fertile, productive and relational foundation to accommodate them. This connection may have been the intuitive basis of my early work on “feminist translation” when the very particular situation in Quebec was catapulted into international feminism.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


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NOTES

1. Women and Translation, 2009 (forthcoming), Luise von Flotow and Jose Santaemilia (eds), Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press.

2. Scott looks at a dictionary definition to argue that little difference if any is made between sex and gender—i.e. the terms are used interchangeably, and some would doubtless say, simplistically. In Canada, the term “gender” seems to be preferred to “sex” in official documents and announcements. Is it more polite?

3. Scott shows that Freud clearly links gender/sex and politics (i.e. intersectionality) when he discusses the many different ways of living out human sexuality on the one hand, and the social requirement, made in the name of the reproduction of the species, that “there shall be a single kind of sexual life for everyone” (Scott, 1999: 74). This requirement, he says is the “source of serious injustice”, i.e. the source of the politics of gender.

4. Schleiermacher’s use of the term “Blendlinge” and its translation as “bastards” (by Andre Lefevere) is discussed by Chamberlain as one of the many examples of “patriarchal” concerns around sexuality driving translation theories, i.e. the parallel drawn between translations and children produced out of wedlock. Anthony Pym’s “Schleiermacher and the Problem of Blendlinge ” (1995, Translation and Literature vol.4, n° 1, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, p. 5-30) also addresses the problem of “Blendlinge”—mixed blood children, mestizos, mongrels—that in Schleiermacher’s view, the translator is loath to produce as the mother-tongue is bent out of shape to accommodate the demands of the source language.

5. A neologism that brings together and resonates with the terms “meta”, “mater”, and “morpheus”: “Ettinger’s neologism combines a play on “meta” and an evocation of “mater”, mother or womb, with “morphe”, Greek for “form”, linked also to Morpheus, the Greek God of sleep and dreams. The term refers to processes that do not involve single unities acting through the condensation of metaphor or the displacement of metonymy; instead they provoke changes that mutually alter the meaning they create without supplanting or deferring the signifier.” (Shread, 2005: 8)
Intersectionality and metramorphics, concepts that are being used in sociology and psychoanalysis respectively, with regard to questions about gender, have not yet had much exposure in translation studies. This is an examination of how they might prove applicable.

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