The Thimble and the Needle
Translating La Maison de Claudine

Carol Mastrangelo Bové

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1 This essay examines the translation of Colette’s autobiographical novel, La Maison de Claudine, in an attempt to illuminate a text whose fuller meaning would otherwise remain unexplained and even distorted. One of the translator’s biggest challenges is the chapter entitled “Mode de Paris” and its context including especially the penultimate episode on her daughter, Bel-Gazou. In “Mode de Paris”, Marcel, a handsome young actor, part of a traveling Parisian troupe, seduces the townspeople into learning how to embroider. Recreating the text in English demands that one hears the author’s voice in its complexity, including the sexuality that lies at the heart of Colette’s writing and its mixture of sexual codes. A bisexual and partly unconscious discourse shapes her style and poses a special problem for the translator.

2 The theory underlying my close reading of Colette’s La Maison de Claudine—a reading that shapes my translation choices here—is psychoanalytic in the broad sense that, writing in the wake of Sigmund Freud’s discovery of the unconscious, one listens to the underlying patterns and the overall emotional content of the writing to become aware of latent meanings and memories connected to childhood. While connecting the language to universal desire, to the desire for the same sex (a universality problematic for many scholars of gender today), this reading also analyzes the historical characteristics of the text, that is, of its unconscious language, in order to appreciate the specificity of Colette’s thought and her unique talent. The essay examines the homosexual code operating in France in the 1920’s within and outside of literary texts.

3 Another theoretical assumption underlying the interpretation and translation of Colette here, and this is one of the principal issues raised by the essays in this collection, is that it is possible for the critic of literary translation to separate what appears inseparable, that is to say the “real” and “fictional” in language. Weaving non-literary and literary language into a single text with a synchronic structure, that is, a text whose elements are considered spatially, often in an overlapping pattern, is arguably what is most
fundamental in a novelist’s and translator’s craft. In Colette, the non-literary, precise vocabulary of bisexuality meshes with the lexicon of autobiographical fiction with admirable coherence.

The name choice, Marcel, for the handsome gay actor playing a central role in the story, is not insignificant given the existence of Proust, that master of the mixing of sexual codes in France of the 1920’s. Translation studies have yet to examine in a thorough manner the grafting of the language of homosexuality into literature in the English versions of his influential novel, À la recherche du temps perdu. In Proust’s novel, as in Colette’s—and there is reason to believe he was an influence on her—one hears a bisexual voice, for example, in the narrator’s many identifications with female or feminized characters. One of the most obvious examples of this voice in Proust, supported by his biography, is the character of Albertine, created in part out of his relationship to his chauffeur-secretary-companion, Albert. In chapters on Proust and Kristeva in my book, Literature and Politics in Julia Kristeva, I demonstrate that these identifications are part of his rejection of one form of a Symbolist aesthetic, salon society, and more generally of French rationalism and the patriarchal model on which it is based (Bové, 2006: 27-62). This rejection is in part unconscious as I show in analyzing the hidden identifications with the servant, Françoise, and the paleographer, Saniette. The Recherche, I argue, gives shape to the rhythmic life of the psyche and the body via these identifications, as it articulates a semiotic discourse with links to the mother.

Sigmund Freud and the psychoanalytic writers his work inspired, including Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, provide ample evidence of a language different from, and / or overlapping, literary language, of a latent language with a vocabulary and grammar of its own, as one observes in Proust and Colette. In The Language of Psychoanalysis, Laplanche and Pontalis have documented a lexicon they employ as analysts studying the unconscious and also a vocabulary connoting the unconscious used in the everyday world. Colette seems to have employed both, incorporating these languages in her text. The translator needs to hear these tongues in order to understand and recreate the force and complexity of Colette’s writing as the living out of her bisexuality in its historical conditions, especially the linguistic resources of French in the 1920’s which both enable and limit her work. Her thought displays at times remarkable parallels to Freud’s groundbreaking work: Colette, in fact, talks about bisexuality in women twenty-three years before Freud’s Female Sexuality where he described woman’s psyche as more frequently bisexual than man’s though he recognizes bisexual dispositions in everyone. There is evidence to believe, as Julia Kristeva has stated (2002: 351), that Colette’s conviction concerning women and bisexuality is stronger than Freud’s in that she is convinced that all women are bisexual. Jerry Flieger finds that this conviction is stronger yet, stating that Colette believes all, male and female, are bisexual (1992: 127), a belief that is implied in my translation here of parts of the novel, especially of the passage on “l’instinct le plus majestueux” (CO: 1082) discussed below.

In recreating the hybrid original, I will translate key passages in the novel considered as a grafting of the “real” and partly latent language of bisexuality into autobiographical fiction. These excerpts are from 1) the episode in which the châtelain returns home to find his wife and other townspeople including many men engaged in embroidering sessions with the seductive young actor and 2) the penultimate chapter, “La Couseuse” (“The Seamstress”), focusing on Bel-Gazou.
One reads these episodes within an autobiography that is both “real” and “fictional” in another way as well. The linear story (“real”) of a mother’s life and her apparently heterosexual daughter’s coming-of-age alternates with a synchronic Modernist narrative (“fictional”) with multiple Sidonies, Colettes, and Bel-Gazous, many of them imaginary and at least one of them bisexual.

Feeling that she no longer deserves the world her mother created—or more precisely, its memory—the narrator lovingly describes her as an intelligent, strong-willed, honest, and generous woman devoted to her family, dogs, cats, and books. The daughter tells the story of her mother’s life from her marriage to the Burgundian property-owner who took her away from her bohemian parents living in Belgium, through his death and her second marriage to Captain Colette, and finally, to her mother’s death.

A critique of heterosexuality and a desire for a person of the same sex or for a gay person of the opposite sex—and here I am referring to unconscious desire—underlies the discourse from the beginning, with the mother as the earliest object of desire, for example, in episodes from the first half of the novel including “Où sont les enfants?” (“Where are the Children?”) and “La Petite” (“The Little One”). Colette opens the novel with her mother’s voice, “Où sont les enfants?”, representing a pleasurable and protective home which arouses a sense of guilt in the narrator because, in growing up and becoming part of Parisian life, she has become less like her mother, and also because of the incestuous component in the narrator’s longings. This component makes its presence felt in the voice permeating the novel, linking the mother to Marcel and Bel-Gazou as I will show.

“La Petite” introduces the mother and her thimble, illuminated in the window of her home, making clear that she embodies what is most critical to the narrator / daughter’s sense of who she is. In this episode, she casts off the mediocre thoughts and behavior of her Thursday gang of girls—they are freed from school and spend the day in noisy, senseless play—as she approaches her home and prepares to greet her mother. The chapter on Marcel, along with the late chapter on Bel-Gazou, are other essential elements in the novel that use the image of sewing and the sound of the voice to connect the three characters to the narrator and shape the image of one woman, the mother. The portrait of Marcel in particular appears to be only somewhat connected to the story in that he is part of the daughter / narrator’s life in the Burgundian village, Saint-Sauveur, for a brief time. An examination of the translation of Colette’s unconscious longings illuminates these episodes much of whose meaning would otherwise remain disconnected and unexplained. In this context, the mother functions as an object of desire enabling Colette to raise the question of how to live one’s sexuality in 1923, a question with ethical implications that continues to resonate to this day given the persistence of homophobia in many countries including France and the United States. I am arguing that a bisexual code, including especially references to sewing and the female voice, poses a perplexing problem for the translator both to hear it in French and to find an analogous vocabulary in English. Pleasure, fear, a violation of the norms, lying, silence, guilt (as in the narrator’s pervasive sense that she no longer deserves the world that her mother represents) and aggression are among the characteristics it brings to her fiction.

For a translator working from French to English, one example in particular stands out in an examination of the vocabulary of homosexuality in the chapter “Mode de Paris”. Entitling the chapter “À la mode de Paris” in English conveys the appetite, not for “pie à la mode”, as we say in the US for a popular dessert, pie topped with ice cream, but for the
handsome actor who dominates the episode. Enid McLeod and Una Vicenzo Troubridge, who translated the novel in 1956, use the title “The Rage of Paris”, choosing a colloquial version that has become rarer though it does connote the angry châtelain’s homophobia. Andrew Brown’s recent translation in 2006 chooses the innocuous “Paris Fashions”?. The prominent example occurs when the innkeeper, in gossiping with the young notary’s wife, states “Une vraie fée!” (CO: 1022), in reference to Marcel as the creator of a finely embroidered piano cloth. Was the word fée used for gay men in 1924? Dictionaries such as the Trésor de la langue française do not include this usage. The Oxford English Dictionary, however, does derive the word fairy from the Old French faerie, faierie, feerie, fay and fay. The expression mains de fée or doigts de fée, often used to refer to a woman who sews well—and this appears in Proust (1954 [1920]: 215) corroborates the conclusion that fée could have referred to a gay man.

The previous translators have omitted the word, probably because they thought it was not used in that sense or, if it was, that it conveyed a negative connotation that was not appropriate in the episode. They have used like an angel (MLT: 82) which, while often female, seems inappropriate for behavior which is not usually described as angelic, or he’s so talented (AB: 76) which is genderless. The French reads:

« […] Je verse le lait chaud de M. D’Avricourt et j’inscris la commande… Oui, madame, il loge ici… Ah ! madame, on ne dirait jamais un comédien ! Une voix comme une jeune fille… Et sitôt sa promenade faite après le déjeuner, il rentre dans sa chambre et il prend son ouvrage. » « Son ouvrage ? » « Il brode, madame ! Une vraie fée ! Il finit un dessus de piano au passé, on l’exposerait ! Ma fille a relevé le dessin… » (CO: 1022)

Given the centrality of bisexuality in the novel as a whole and the humorous, affectionate caricature of the gay actor here, a better translation would be:

“[…] I’ll pour Monsieur d’Avricourt’s hot milk and I’ll write up the order… Yes, madame, he’s staying here… Oh, madame, you’d never think he was an actor! He has the voice of a young girl… And as soon as his walk is over after lunch, he goes back to his room and takes up his work.” “His work?” “He does embroidery, madame! He’s a real fairy with a magic wand! He finished a piano cloth in satin stitch that you could put on display! My daughter copied the design…”

Marcel’s handling of a sword and an imaginary sheath for a sword, his antelope- and gazelle-like eyes and their thick lashes, and especially, his embroidering and female voice (CO: 1022-1023), are examples of a predominantly non-literary bisexual language in the chapter “Mode de Paris”. In the underlying coherence of the novel considered synchronically, this language voices Colette’s unconscious desire. French and English are similar in referring to the deer family in order to evoke a woman’s beauty, especially her eyes. The translators use gazelle or antelope when Colette does. These choices are rare in current English usage, compared to their counterparts in French:

[...] la châtelaine félicita publiquement, après le spectacle, M. Marcel d’Avricourt, grand premier rôle, un long jeune homme agréable, qui maniait l’épée comme une badine et voilait, sous des cils touffus, de beaux yeux d’antilope. (CO: 1022)

For this reason, the frequently used doe eyes would be more appropriate here:

[...] after the play, the chatelaine congratulated M. Marcel Avricourt, the principal player, tall, friendly, and young, who handled his sword as beautifully as if it were a riding whip and whose lovely doe eyes were veiled by thick lashes.
Beyond her mention of his abundant, long lashes, the narrator refers to Marcel’s hidden eyes in the passage on his discretion in averting his gaze while distributing holy water to blushing young women.

The look or gaze has become a key word in literary and film studies of sexuality including, for example, Flaubert’s references to Emma’s eyes and Laura Mulvey’s theory (the “male gaze”). While the topic has not emerged very much to my knowledge in translation and gay studies, it is probable that Colette is expressing a preference here for averting one’s gaze as a mode of homosexual seduction over using the gaze as a heterosexual form of appropriation.

The young notary’s wife, the narrator tells us, n’avait pas froid aux yeux (CO: 1022). McLeod and Troubridge write was by no means shy (MLT: 81); Brown chooses was no wallflower (AB: 76). Colette’s mention of the eyes here in describing the wife is significant because Marcel’s veil of thick lashes and his averted gaze are part of the seductive behavior attracting the woman in question: the young notary’s wife had an eye for handsome men is for this reason closer to the original.

The translations miss other opportunities to recreate the erotic play of the eyes in the early description of Marcel, ironically enough, distributing holy water to the girls. Colette tells us that M. D’Avricourt... s’éloignait sans lever les yeux sur leur émoi (CO: 1022). The translation [He] withdrew without so much as a glance at their emotion (MLT: 81) recreates the averted gaze while Brown’s translation does not: [He] strode off without paying the least attention to their excitement (AB: 76).

When Marcel is caught “in flagrante delicto”—the châtelain returns to find the men of the village embroidering and the women emitting sighs which offer incense and praise to the “high priest” arousing their transport—, Colette again points out that his gaze is not directed at them: son regard oriental ne s’abaissait point sur elles (CO: 1023). The translation his oriental gaze did not look down at them fits into the context of the averted gaze as a seductive behavior. As in the holy water episode, Colette uses Catholic ritual, including its stimulation of the senses, both for irony and to add intensity via the erotic play of the eyes. The translators have chosen a version which might be fitting if one were rendering only the line itself but which is at odds with a Marcel who is not otherwise arrogant in the context: his oriental gaze did not deign to lower itself to them (AB: 78); upon whom his Oriental eyes disdained to rest (MLT: 83).

The difficulty of recreating La Maison de Claudine in English—and this is true for Proust as well—may be that this discourse is not primarily a fictional tongue but instead part of the “real” terminology used by a subculture and therefore unfamiliar to the translator whose expertise may lie primarily in literary texts, whose native language may not be French, and whose sexuality is heterosexual (though there is reason to believe that Troubridge was gay).

The two existing translations read the text well as a gripping memory of a mother’s life but do not adequately render the sexuality of the original for the reasons I have demonstrated. Doris Lessing herself makes virtually no reference to sexuality in her foreword to the 2006 translation probably because of both the inadequacy of the translation and the fact that she has not read the French. She sees the text primarily as an idealized memory of childhood rather than as the conflicted voice of a bisexual woman. Brown’s introduction also sanitizes the text, emphasizing its propriety and
taboos. He makes only passing references to androgyyny and incest as if they were not central here.

23 Julia Kristeva, writing eloquently on Colette’s bisexual voice and recent developments in psychoanalysis, connects her writing to an increasingly open language of sexuality in customs, law, and human freedoms. Implicitly raising the ethical issue of homophobia, she sees Colette forging a new language that enables human beings to progress beyond bisexuality as a pathology to bisexuality as part of a creative endeavor that is specifically human (Kristeva, 2002: 229-232).

24 Flieger’s Colette and the Fantom Subject of Autobiography also recognizes the central place of bisexuality in the novelist’s aesthetic. Her book points out many connections between La Maison de Claudine and psychoanalytic theory. Jacques Dupont’s textual analysis of references to the body in Colette’s writing provides additional examples of the presence of the unconscious in the novel though his Physique de Colette is not psychoanalytic. He notices in particular the ways in which a) the mother’s voice permeates her work and b) teeth like little swords become signs of feminized sexuality, including its aggression (Dupont, 2003: 179, 194). References to the voice, teeth, swords, and needles in La Maison de Claudine produce an overlapping of Marcel, the mother, and the daughter in the récit. Colette associates the mother’s voice, for instance, with that of Bel-Gazou who creates an imaginary song in the hazel-nut. Both voices, now long gone, are much regretted in the resonating and sensual conclusion of the novel. Marcel’s voice too is “like a young girl’s”, bizarre and uncomfortable when one praises his embroidery, and often characterized by crystalline laughter and sharp clucking sounds (“comme une jeune fille […] fit deux ou trois petits cris bizarres et jeta quelques mots embarrassés […] [pousse], parmi les éclats cristallins de son rire, de petits gloussements aigus” [CO: 1022-1023]). It comes to be connected to the mother’s to the extent that he, like the mother, is an object of desire for the narrator. Associated, like both mother and daughter, with swords and especially, a sword-like needle, he is an obvious signifier of homosexuality. Within the underlying coherence of the novel, he is part of the repressed.

25 An examination of translations of passages from “La Couseuse” provides examples critical to an understanding of Colette’s unconscious desire. Here, the narrator describes her misgivings about teaching her daughter to sew. While sewing is a defining activity for the beloved mother and the attractive Marcel and implicitly conveys sexual activity and appeal in the novel overall, it is more problematic in the daughter. One can imagine that the narrator, given her awareness of the dangers implicit in bourgeois notions of femininity, might well be wary of encouraging Bel-Gazou to sew. The narrator states, however, that she has misgivings not because of the stereotype that a girl must sew but because her daughter is silent and has the opportunity to think while sewing—behavior otherwise highly prized in Colette. Here the daughter thinks and asks questions about when a man might put his arm around a woman and the mother is forced to admit that “it depends”. The French reads:

Mal nouveau ? Fléau que je n’avais point prévu ? Assise dans une combe d’herbe, ou à demi enterrée dans le sable chaud et le regard perdu sur la mer, je sais bien qu’elle pense. Elle pense « à gros bouillons » lorsqu’elle écoute, avec une fausse discrétion bien apprise, des répliques jetées imprudemment en pont par-dessus sa tête. Mais il semble qu’avec le jeu de l’aiguille elle ait justement découvert le moyen de descendre, point à point, piqûre à piqûre, un chemin de risques et de tentations. Silence… Le bras armé du dard d’acier va et vient… Rien n’arrête la petite
exploratrice effrénée. À quel moment faut-il que je lance le « hep ! » qui coupe brutalement l’élan ? (CO: 1081)

26 Andrew Brown’s *She thinks with effervescent speed when she is listening* (AB: 155) for *Elle pense « à gros bouillons », lorsqu’elle écoute* creatively renders Bel-Gazou’s vitality and is appropriate given her name, though it suggests superficiality. *Her thoughts boil over while she listens* would more effectively use a liquid image to convey the sexuality developing in the serious young thinker.

27 The translators, however, have missed an opportunity to render a sexual connotation that is present in the passage and in the novel as a whole: *prick by prick* for *piqûre à piqûre* (CO: 1081). McLeod and Troubridge (MLT: 137) as well as Brown (AB: 155) choose *point by point*. In addition, retaining *I* as the subject of the third sentence here, as does Brown but not McLeod and Troubridge, conveys better the identification of the narrator with her daughter:

> Is this a new evil? A plague that I never anticipated? I know very well that she’s thinking, seated on a patch of grass or half-buried in the hot sand, the gaze far away, looking at the sea. Her thoughts boil over while she listens, with a feigned discretion she has learned, to remarks as they are carelessly tossed off above her head. But it seems that with the play of the needle, she has in fact discovered a way to progress down the path of danger and temptation, stitch by stitch, prick by prick. Silence. The arm bearing the dart comes and goes… Nothing stops the frenetic little explorer. When shall I let go with “Stop!” and cut off the flow of energy with one blow?

28 Colette suggests here that sewing, like sexuality, and maternal authority, can take many forms. She includes an ironic reference to the dynamic Philoméne de Watteville, from Balzac’s *Albert Savarus*, who destroys the brilliant career of her unfaithful lover by revealing his treachery using instruments normally associated with the most stereotypical of women, the needle and embroidered canvas.

29 It is ironic but not surprising that the male images of “the prick” and “the sword” are used to convey lesbian desire. The choice of these images enables Colette to speak more broadly of homosexuality by combining “male” and “female” icons. The latter include “the thimble” and “the home” itself (whether “Claudine’s” in the French title and in Brown’s and King’s translations, or “My Mother’s” in McLeod and Troubridge’s which is more appropriate given that Claudine is never mentioned in the novel). The needle in itself illustrates the combination of male and female icons particularly well to the extent that it is male because sword- and phallus-like but female because of its link to sewing.

30 An example from the same chapter on Bel-Gazou makes clear the challenge which psychoanalytic terminology poses. Here the daughter asks questions about when a man might put his arm around a woman and the mother is forced to admit that “it depends.” In reflecting on her daughter’s increasing sexual awareness in the chapter’s moving conclusion, the narrator refers to *l’instinct le plus majestueux et le plus trouble* (CO: 1082) / *that most majestic and most disturbing of instincts* (MLT: 138) / *that most majestic and murky of all instincts* (AB: 157). In the context of Colette’s novel in which social forces and political issues are at stake in the depiction of sexuality—I am thinking, for example, of the châtelain’s banishing the actors from the town—*pulsion* and *drive* would be words in French and English respectively that are more precise than her choice of instinct. The meaning of the latter word, retained in both translations, is more biological in both languages. Laplanche and Pontalis discuss the greater precision of *pulsion* and *drive* in their discussion of French and English translations of Freud’s German *trieb* in their entry
on “instinct / drive” (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973: 216n). The effort to translate Colette more adequately into English leads to the unexpected discovery that she herself may have chosen the less appropriate word to convey “that most majestic and troubling of drives.”

31 In conclusion, the bisexual voice in Colette’s writing poses a challenging but not insurmountable problem for the translator, a dilemma whose ethical implications are significant given that contemporary societies continue to label this language perverse. A close reading of La Maison de Claudine demonstrates how extensively and fundamentally the language is at play in the folds of her novel including both its linear narrative of a young girl approaching an adulthood bent on shaping a single sexual identity and its pervasive incestuous longing for a loving creative mother.

32 Recreating the text in English means first attending to the allusive components—sewing, guilt, fairy, eyes, voice, for example—of a perplexing dazzling discourse that is real and fictional, in an attempt to give new life to the original text.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Versions of La Maison de Claudine


Works Cited

NOTES

1. While psychoanalytic approaches have long been part of the study of such fiction, they have not often been considered in translation studies and to my knowledge never in discussions of English versions of *La Maison de Claudine*.

2. The following abbreviations will be used to refer to the corpus texts:


3. My essay does not discuss in any detail the 1937 translation by Charles King (see the bibliography) based on an early version of the manuscript that is radically different from the one Colette intended.

4. Based on a reference in the OED, I suspect that the word *fée* may have referred to a gay man but I have not been able to confirm this in dictionaries and correspondence. The OED refers to the derivation of *fairy* from French and links *fairy* in the sense of “homosexual” to participation in European gatherings where knitting is one of the activities.

5. One of Flieger’s conclusions—not surprising given society’s view of it as pathological—is that bisexuality is dangerous and problematic for the psyche in Colette’s writing especially in her analysis of “les dames de Llangollen” in *En pays connu* (Flieger, 1992: 128).

6. Carmen Boustani has also written well on the importance of the voice in Colette. Her *Écriture-corps chez Colette* demonstrates that Colette shapes the many female and feminized figures, including her mother, Marcel, and Bel-Gazou into one woman, with the mother’s voice a life-affirming force (“pulsion de vie”) (Boustani, 2002: 230).

7. The description of the frenetic daughter is a splendid example of Colette’s insight “When my body thinks... all my flesh has a soul” (*Retreat from Love*). This appears as the epigraph to Judith Thurman’s biography of Colette, 1999, *Secrets of the Flesh*, New York, Knopf.

ABSTRACTS

This essay examines the translation of Colette’s autobiographical novel, *La Maison de Claudine*, in an attempt to illuminate a text whose meaning would otherwise remain unexplained and even distorted. The two existing translations, Enid McLeod and Una Vicenzo Troubridge’s in 1956 and Andrew Brown’s in 2006, read the novel well as a gripping memory of a mother’s life but do not adequately render the sexuality of the original which is both intense and repressed. Doris Lessing makes virtually no reference to sexuality in her foreword to the 2006 translation. Brown’s introduction also sanitizes the text, emphasizing its taboos and propriety. The sexual code in two chapters in particular poses a challenge for the translator: “Mode de Paris” in which the châtelain returns home to find his wife and other townspeople including many men engaged in an embroidering session led by a seductive young actor, and “La Couseuse” which presents the narrator’s daughter, Bel-Gazou, sewing and asking questions about when a man might put his arm around a woman. Revealing the connections to universal human desire latent in Colette’s writing, the translator at
the same time must attend to what is often thought to be lacking in psychoanalytic writing, the historical characteristics of the text, in this case the homosexual code operating in France in the 1920’s. The article sees Colette forging a new literary language that enables human beings to go beyond bisexuality as pathology to bisexuality as part of a creative endeavor that is specifically human.


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AUTHOR

CAROL MASTRANGELO BOVÉ