translation STUDIES

Gender in Translation

Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission

Sherry Simon

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Preface and acknowledgments

This book had two different moments of origin. One was relatively recent; it came with my realization that identity politics mattered for translation, and that this encounter had yet to be fully explored. A whole range of issues seemed to be waiting for examination, and an inquiry overdue.

The other beginning dates back some ten years, and takes place on another scene. This was the moment when the idea of feminist translation first emerged, in the specific context of the Canadian cultural dialogue.

There is a special satisfaction in being able to identify the precise moment at which a new idea or intellectual project came into being. The initial impulse for this book came, then, from a panel discussion on "feminist poetics" that I helped to organize in 1986 for a conference on literary translation. Putting together this panel was easy: Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, Barbara Godard and Kathy Mezei had all written innovative texts about translation as a feminist practice. They were all active critics and translators of Quebec avant-garde feminist writing. But it was only as our discussions came to an end that we realized that something new had emerged. A practice we could call Canadian feminist translation had come into existence.

During the late 1970s and 1980s the work of translation in Canada was nourished by a remarkable conjunction of elements. A strong movement of French-language feminist experimental writing in Quebec stimulated the desire to promote – and to theorize – activities of literary mediation, and made feminist translators active players in the literary and cultural field. As a new variation in the dialogue between Quebec and English Canada, feminist translation reactivated the political concerns of this cultural exchange. But it

transformed them as well, stimulating innovative creative practices and opening up new territories of border writing. Translation became a vital site of cultural production.

While this book goes beyond the Canadian experience to open onto the widest issues of gender in translation, its perspective is marked by this initial context. Translation is considered as a mode of *engagement* with literature, as a kind of literary activism. What will be emphasized is the way in which translators contribute to cultural debates and create new lines of cultural communication. Translators are necessarily involved in a politics of transmission, in perpetuating or contesting the values which sustain our literary culture.

Identity issues, including gender, have become a crucial factor in our understanding of culture today. The relevance of gender questions for translation was first articulated in terms of emotional affinities. The discussions I heard on the subject were intensely personal accounts of the way the identity and motivations of translators affect the work they do. Women translators wondered why they were working on texts which suddenly seemed alien to them, texts whose premises they could not share. At the same time, women were discovering feminist writing with which they felt intense affinities.

These individual reactions reflected a widespread intellectual preoccupation with identity and language. They meshed with other attempts to rethink the fit between social and literary values. It is hardly a coincidence that the period which saw the development of feminist and then gender studies also witnessed a remarkable growth in translation studies. The entry of gender into translation theory has a lot to do with the renewed prestige of translation as "re-writing" and as a bulwark against the unbridled forces of globalization, just as it shows the importance for all the social and human sciences of a critical reframing of gender, identity and subject-positions within language.

Most important, however, has been the decisive impact of feminism, as a political and literary movement, on translation theory and practice. Much of this book is concerned with tracing out the vectors of this influence, as it has disturbed established lines of transmission and rerouted the flow of literary traffic. Feminism has been responsible for creating new intellectual and cultural communities, just as it injected new ideological tensions into longstanding practices like Bible translation. It should be stressed, however, that it is not the gendered identity of the translator as such which influences the politics of transmission as much as the *project* which the translator is

promoting. Feminism, in its diverse forms, has become the powerful basis of many such projects.

While the encounter between gender and translation studies was predictable, translation studies have been somewhat slow in fully negotiating the "cultural turn" announced in the mid-1980s. They have only begun to engage with the complexity of identity, including gender. The aim of this book is therefore double: to cast the widest net around issues of gender in translation; and, through gender, to move translation studies closer to a cultural studies framework.

What does it mean to position translation within cultural studies? It means, principally, that the terms "culture," "identity" and "gender" are not taken for granted but are themselves the object of inquiry. They are no longer self-explanatory notions which can be used unquestioningly. "Culture," for instance, has often been used in translation studies as if it referred to an obvious and unproblematic reality. In fact, "culture" is one of the most embattled and ambiguous notions in contemporary thought, the site of much stimulating debate. Translation studies have much to gain from these debates, just as they can bring an important linguistic dimension to them.

The challenge of writing this book was to begin the process of disciplinary hybridization that I am calling for. I would be pleased to feel that this work might convince non-translators that translation involves more than narrow, technical issues, and that it will alert translation theorists to the range of issues suggested by gender.

This book owes a great deal to the enthusiasm and research skills of Anke Rohde. Her help was invaluable to me and I am confident that she will broaden and enrich a field of study which is barely introduced in this book. It is in large part due to the help of Anke, and of Sarah Hall at Routledge, that the manuscript could negotiate its way between London, Montreal and Bangalore, India – where I was on leave – to make it to publication on time. I am grateful to André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett for their initial encouragement. Very warm thanks are due to Barbara Godard, Judith Woodsworth, Lucille Nelson and André Lefevere for their expeditious and useful readings of the manuscript. The General Research Fund of Concordia University and a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada provided much-appreciated support for this work. I must especially acknowledge, however, the work of the translators and theoreticians who are at the origin of this book:

Barbara Godard, Luise von Flotow, Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood and Kathy Mezei.

I have been stimulated by the warm response of students to this topic. Taken together, translation and gender seem to offer a particularly attractive matrix through which to investigate issues of identity in language.

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Chapter 1

Taking gendered positions in translation theory

Because they are necessarily "defective," all translations are "reputed females." In this neat equation, John Florio (1603) summarizes a heritage of double inferiority. Translators and women have historically been the weaker figures in their respective hierarchies: translators are handmaidens to authors, women inferior to men. This forced partnership finds contemporary resonance in Nicole Ward Jouve's statement that the translator occupies a "(culturally speaking) female position" (Jouve 1991: 47). And Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood's echoing self-definition: "I am a translation because I am a woman" (de Lotbinière-Harwood 1991: 95).

Whether affirmed or denounced, the femininity of translation is a persistent historical trope. "Woman" and "translator" have been relegated to the same position of discursive inferiority. The hierarchical authority of the original over the reproduction is linked with imagery of masculine and feminine; the original is considered the strong generative male, the translation the weaker and derivative female. We are not surprised to learn that the language used to describe translating dips liberally into the vocabulary of sexism, drawing on images of dominance and inferiority, fidelity and libertinage. The most persistent of these expressions, "les belles infidèles," has for centuries encouraged an attitude of suspicion toward the seemly but wayward translation.

Feminist translation theory aims to identify and critique the tangle of concepts which relegates both women and translation to the bottom of the social and literary ladder. To do so, it must investigate the processes through which translation has come to be "feminized," and attempt to trouble the structures of authority which have maintained this association.

What indeed are the processes through which translation maintains and activates gender constructs? To begin to answer this question, I have chosen to move along a number of planes. First, conceptual: how have the sites of translation theory been implicitly gendered and how can this theory be transformed? This is the task of the introductory chapter, which brings together the work of theorists who seek to disturb the clichéd language used to describe translation, and to replace it with terms which convey the active play of identities within translation practice. They do so through their understanding of the performative, and not simply representational, nature of language. Feminist translation thus reframes the question of "fidelity," which has played like a stultifying refrain through the history of translation. For feminist translation, fidelity is to be directed toward neither the author nor the reader, but toward the writing project – a project in which both writer and translator participate.

Gender difference has been played out not only in the metaphors describing translation, but in actual practices of translation, in the specific social and historical forms through which women have understood and enacted their writing activities. How has this relationship between social and writing roles been articulated (Chapter Two)? On the one hand, translation was the means through which women, beginning in the European Middle Ages, particularly, were able to gain access to the world of letters. Long excluded from the privileges of authorship, women turned to translation as a permissible form of public expression. Translation continued to serve as a kind of writer's apprenticeship for women into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (George Eliot was first known as the "translatress of Strauss," before she was known as a novelist.) In addition, translation was an important part of the social movements in which women participated, such as the fight against slavery. First-wave feminism was closely associated with this movement. Women have translated in order to build communication networks in the service of progressive political agendas and in the creative renewal of literary traditions. The great works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French, Russian and German modernism were translated in part by women who made translation an expression of their political convictions. They believed, as Madame de Staël had so clearly stated, that movements of literary exchange are vital to the democratic life of any nation.

There is an intrinsic interest in unearthing the neglected intellectual and literary work of women: in bringing to light the strong figure of the "translatress" Aphra Behn, in making heard Madame de Staël's ringing appeal to translation as a cure for the ills of sclerotic literatures, in remembering the remarkable creative accomplishments of Constance Garnett and Jean Starr Untermeyer. The goal of this initial survey, however, is not so much to construct an archive as to suggest the kinds of interrelations upon which such genealogies might be built. Rather than provide a simple listing of women translators, this overview seeks to highlight a number of moments when translation became a strong mode of expression for women. These moments show to what extent the role of the translator meshes with social values, and how positions in the social hierarchy are reflected in the literary field.

"The location and organization of difference are crucial to a culture's self-representation and its distribution of power," observes Mary Poovey (Poovey 1988: 199). A mapping of some of the points of interdependence between the literary and social fields illustrates indeed how differences are "organized" through various levels of society. One particularly striking example of such literary and social imbrication is the way translation offered itself as a means of expression for women during the English Renaissance, when the world of letters was otherwise closed to them. Women were encouraged to translate religious texts when they were forbidden from undertaking any other kind of public writing activity. Women were able to use this very limited point of entry for significant ends (Krontiris 1992). This example highlights the way in which the social values of writing roles are intensely contextual, expressing the very specific lines of tension which traverse gendered positions at a given moment.

In what ways have women interpreted their role as translators? Feelings of aggressive rivalry or affectionate fusion have often been evoked to describe the closeness which translators feel for the texts they are working on – and, by extension, their authors. These feelings can be exacerbated when differences of gender are also involved, and when the translation work involves contact between the two writers. While some feminist translators have suggested that they might best deal with the discomforts of a negative legacy by ensuring that women's texts are translated only by women translators, men's by men, this solution could not be a long-term one.[1] As Lori Chamberlain argues,

> one of the challenges for feminist translators is to move beyond questions of the sex of the author and translator. Working within the conventional hierarchies . . . the female translator of a female author's text and the male translator of a male author's text will be bound by the same power relations: what must be subverted is the process by which translation complies with gender constructs.
> (Chamberlain 1992: 72)

The creative discomforts of working relationships have been described with considerable wit by major translators of the twentieth century, Jean Starr Untermeyer, Willa Muir, Helen Lowe-Porter and Suzanne Levine. Beyond their anecdotal interest, and their value as chronicles of the translation process, these accounts show in what ways gender difference has been present – in sometimes productive, sometimes insidious, ways – in the activity of language transfer.

Two especially important areas involving feminist theory and translation are reserved for special examination in this book. The first is the transatlantic displacement of the writings of the French feminists, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, into the Anglo-American intellectual world (Chapter Three). This exchange brings into light the network of tensions which are so characteristic of our current intellectual context: the conflictual pulls between internationalist feminist solidarity and national affiliations, the deconstructive drive toward attenuation of authorship and the continuing structures of textual authority, the fading of disciplinary borders and their continual reappearance. The "taming" of French feminist theory in the Anglo-American context came about through the gradual interpenetration of philosophical systems, on the one hand the speculative Continental tradition and on the other the more empirical Anglo-American tradition; this process of accommodation was facilitated by various levels and procedures of mediation: commentary, interpretation and translation.

The transatlantic passage of French feminist thought brought about effects of distortion and appropriation. These effects inevitably accompany any important movement of ideas; they result from the diversity of interests and desires which commands the exchange, and from the reformulation and renewals demanded of the target language. The distortion effects of the exchange are perhaps best witnessed in the reception given to the work of Hélène Cixous,

which was until recently interpreted on the basis of a very narrow sampling.

The second case study examines contemporary feminist biblical translation (Chapter Four). What is particularly striking about the feminist intervention in this area is that it does not consider itself, nor is it often considered to be, an aberration in a seamless tradition. Rather, feminism appears as yet another social and ideological stance from which Bible translation can be undertaken – a new face in a long line of competing figures going back to the Septuagint. The debates over feminist and inclusive-language interpretations of the Bible enhance our understanding of translation as a substantial interpretative move, at the same time as they draw attention to the conflictual implications of gendered language. While there are strong and powerful voices calling for inclusive-language versions of the Bible (resulting in the 1995 publication by Oxford University Press of an inclusive-language version of the New Testament and Psalms), there are equally insistent voices – among feminists – calling for more historically anchored versions. As is often the case with the Bible, the interaction between dogma and meaning becomes particularly intense. The long history of the Bible magnifies the importance of translation issues, showing them to be ideologically saturated. In contrast to most other areas of cultural transmission, where translation is so often treated as a mechanical act, biblical scholarship has always recognized that translation carries with it both the dangers and the promises of interpretation.

In both the transportation of French feminism and new projects of Bible translation there is a particularly revealing conjunction of gender and language issues. Consciously feminist principles are invoked in the choice and manner of the texts translated. These connections allow us to see how translation frames and directs ongoing processes of intellectual transmission. The links of mediation are not automatic; they are not imposed or organized by some dispassionate cultural authority. Rather, translators are involved in the materials through which they work; they are fully invested in the process of transfer.

The final chapter explores the forms which an alliance between translation studies and cultural studies could take. Following recent feminist theory, this section projects gender onto the larger canvas of cultural identity issues. Gender is an element of identity and experience which, like other cultural identities, takes form through social consciousness. The work of theorist Gayatri Spivak, in particular,

works as a pivot, engaging the practice of translation with postcolonial theory. Like Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak challenges the meaning of translation within a universe of shifting borders, emphasizing the powers of translation to define and articulate otherness. Postcolonial theory, like the writing of women who invoke the transformatory potential of translation (such as Nicole Brossard, Eva Hoffman, Christine Brooke-Rose), questions the borders between nations and languages.

Each of the chapters investigates one area of the interplay between gender and translation, but makes no claim to exhaust this area. That most of the translators discussed wrote in English is a sign of the preliminary nature of this research.[2] While the first and last chapters are largely theoretical in nature, the three middle chapters are intended as case studies which will hopefully provide material useful for continued research in these areas. Whether the complicities between gender and translation become the basis of a consciously transformative project (as in feminist translation theory and practice) or whether they emerge out of social positions and networks, investigation of the interplay between them leads to unexpected views of otherwise familiar terrain.

A final preliminary remark must be made concerning the meaning of the term gender. Judith Butler opens her attempt to "trouble" the meaning of gender in something of an irreverent tone:

> Contemporary feminist debates over the meanings of gender lead time and again to a certain sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism. Perhaps trouble need not carry such a negative valence.
>
> (Butler 1990: ix)

She argues that the search for definition should be abandoned in favor of genealogical critique:

> A genealogical critique refuses to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view; rather, genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin. . . . Precisely because "female" no longer appears to be a stable notion, its meaning as troubled and unfixed as "woman,"

> and because both terms gain their troubled significations only as relational terms, this inquiry takes as its focus gender and the relational analysis it suggests.
>
> (ibid.: xi)

Gender, therefore, is never a primary identity emerging out of the depths of the self, but a discursive construction enunciated at multiple sites. In the context of this particular study, the historical variability of discourses of gender must be emphasized. Although Aphra Behn and Barbara Godard both use prefaces to draw attention to their identity as women translators, the import of that identity is vastly different in each case. While Behn points to her gender to apologize for her lack of a classical education and her ignorance in scientific matters, Barbara Godard emphasizes the ways in which her understanding of the creative project of the author animates her own work.

The ways in which translators draw attention to their identities as women – or more specifically as feminists – are highlighted here in order to explain the affinities or frustrations they feel in their translation work, and in order to elucidate texts which themselves exploit the resources of grammatical gender for imaginative or political purposes. Gender is not always a relevant factor in translation. There are no *a priori* characteristics which would make women either more or less competent at their task. Where identity enters into play is the point at which the translator transforms the fact of gender into a social or literary project.[3]

GENDER IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

Some of the most exciting developments in translation studies since the 1980s have been part of what has been called "the cultural turn." The turn to culture implies adding an important dimension to translation studies. Instead of asking the traditional question which has preoccupied translation theorists – "how should we translate, what is a correct translation?" – the emphasis is placed on a descriptive approach: "what do translations do, how do they circulate in the world and elicit response?" This shift emphasizes the reality of translations as documents which exist materially and move about, add to our store of knowledge, and contribute to ongoing changes in esthetics.

More importantly, it allows us to understand translations as being related in organic ways to other modes of communication, and to see translations as writing practices fully informed by the tensions that traverse all cultural representation. That is, it defines translation as a process of mediation which does not stand above ideology but works through it.

This turn in translation studies prepared the terrain for a fruitful encounter with feminist thought. Feminism has been one of the most potent forms of cultural identity to take on linguistic and social expression over the last decades. "*La libération des femmes passe par le langage*" was a familiar rallying call of the 1970s: women's liberation must first be a liberation of/from language. Through the work of feminist scholars over the last twenty to thirty years, there has emerged a clear sense of language as a site of contested meanings, as an arena in which subjects test and prove themselves. And so it is hardly surprising that translation studies should be nourished in important ways by feminist thought.

The consequences for translation have been various and decisive. Over the years, the critique of sexism in language has moved from a largely corrective and action-oriented attention to vocabulary (as we see in the work of Louky Bersianik or Mary Daly) to a broader examination of the symbolic power of the feminine in language. Attention has shifted from critical analysis of a single linguistic code (English, French) to the conceptual terms regulating the intervention of individual and collective subjects within speech and writing.

The alliance between translation studies and feminism therefore emerged out of a common intellectual and institutional context. As fields of inquiry which emerged during the 1970s and gained increasing institutional recognition through the 1980s, translation studies and feminist thought are similarly grounded in the dynamics of a period which gave strong prominence to language. Translation studies have been impelled by many of the concerns central to feminism: the distrust of traditional hierarchies and gendered roles, deep suspicion of rules defining fidelity, and the questioning of universal standards of meaning and value. Both feminism and translation are concerned by the way "secondariness" comes to be defined and canonized; both are tools for a critical understanding of difference as it is represented in language. The most compelling questions for both fields remain: how are social, sexual and historical differences expressed in language and how can these differences be