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Luise Von Flotow (ed.), *Translating Women*

Karen Meschia



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REFERENCES

Luise Von Flotow (ed.), *Translating Women* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2011), 341 p, ISBN 978-0-7766-0727-6

- 1 Luise Von Flotow's latest publication comes fourteen years after her seminal *Translation and Gender*, and its title, explained in the opening words of her preface, "It is time to write about 'women and translation' again", announces the author's programmatic intent. In her introduction to the fifteen essays that make up the work, Von Flotow suggests that the new-found assertiveness and agency of feminist translators in the 1980s and 1990s has flagged somewhat over the last decade. The advent of queer theories and the questioning of stable sexual identities, whilst complexifying and enriching many areas of research, "seem[s] to have found less of an echo or application in translation studies" (3). She points out that this blurring of boundaries simultaneously precludes using identity as a basis for oppression yet undermines its potential as a source of collective political power, and yet there is a great deal of scope for examining the common ground between Butler's account of the performative, contingent aspects of gender identity construction and those involved in the translation process.
- 2 This idea of translation as a discursive performance enacting gender identity politics runs through the selection. The title, of course, reads several ways and the essays deal with men and women as translators of women and men in all combinations, although women's texts do predominate. The result is as delightfully intricate as the book's William Morris cover design, thanks to the variety of temporal and spatial settings involved. These take us from an eleventh-century Japanese account of court life, *The Pillow Book*, to an analysis

of twenty-first-century American “chick” literature; not chronologically, but with each essay echoing or expanding on themes present elsewhere.

- 3 Poetry features widely; almost half the essays deal either with poets in translation, such as James Underhill’s gender-based assessment of translations of Emily Dickenson, or with women poet-translators like Adrienne Rich and Karolina Pavlova, using translation to hone their art, or with translator-poets who integrate poetry into their work in different, strategic ways. This editorial choice is not accidental, foregrounding the subjective, creative dimension of linguistic and cultural transfers, seen always as contingent, negotiated, contested constructions, which, at best open up space for what Susan Bassnett calls “a form of meeting ... an encounter between writers” (72) and, one hopes, with readers, but which may also foreclose understanding, distort or dismember (hence Von Flotow’s aim to “re-member” Ulrike Meinhof’s writing).
- 4 Collectively, the essays engage with problematics familiar within translation studies: the translator’s ambiguous status, issues of “fidelity”, contextualisation, linguistic and cultural aporia, but here the gender perspective and the diverse typology of documents shed fresh light on old questions, drawing unexpected methodological parallels and offering new ways of seeing.
- 5 Several essays revisit the ways translation has historically offered empowerment to women otherwise excluded from artistic and cultural expression. Alison E Martin’s essay on botanical translation describes how a legitimate female authorial voice emerged in eighteenth-century Enlightenment Europe through such authoritative writing. Tom Dolak’s essay on nineteenth-century Russian poet Karolina Pavlova demonstrates simultaneously how her sex barred her from recognition in her own right whilst her prolific activity as a translator both endowed her with status and nourished her creativity. Rather different is the case of poet, novelist and essayist Helen Maria Williams, widely acknowledged in her own time. Anna Barker analyses her translation of *Paul et Virginie*, amended by eight of her own sonnets, as an individual, artistic response to an inextricable identity crisis when, after championing the French Revolution, she subsequently became *persona non grata*, threatened with imprisonment. This question of the translator’s personal involvement or empathy with their subject matter, which thus becomes a site for negotiating identity, recurs in several essays.
- 6 Two extreme examples are Madeleine Stratford’s and Kate Sturge’s essays on Susan Bassnett and Ruth Behar, both well-known figures in their fields and renowned for their innovative, experimental writing. Sturge’s methodological reflexion is enlightening, reiterating the common ground between translation proper and ethnological “cultural translation”, then underlining the subjective, fragmentary nature of the textual inscription that both ultimately involve. No coincidence that both essay titles are concerned with naming; it is the identity of the translator and the translated, and their consequent power relation, which is at stake.
- 7 As Stratford’s sub-title (“Susan Bassnett’s ‘Life Exchange’ with Alejandra Pizarnik”) indicates, Bassnett’s treatment of the Argentine poet’s work goes far beyond that of the “invisible” translator, making texts available to a new audience. In *Exchanging Lives—Poems and Translations* her name features alongside Pizarnik’s and in the poem “Sólo un nombre” , “Alejandra” actually becomes “Susanna”. This borderline position between personal creation and translation has been criticized, and Stratford suggests that the book is more about Bassnett’s work than that of Pizarnak, no longer alive to approve or contest this authorial position. Sturge’s “The Story of Ruth and Esperanza” raises similar issues.

Although insisting that Behar's chief concern in translating an obscure, illiterate Mexican woman's life story was precisely to redress an inherently unequal power relationship, Sturge finally wonders whether Behar's reflexive use of her personal biography does not ultimately overshadow Esperanza's.

- 8 If treading the fine line between authorial transparency and respect for the source text is difficult, several essays reveal the dangers of unacknowledged adaptations to the target culture, often carrying unspoken assumptions about the prevailing gender regime. Bella Brodski maps the terminological fortunes of "French theory" as it crossed the Atlantic. Ana Bogic recalls the circumstances of the first American translation of Beauvoir's *Deuxième sexe*, revealed by Toril Moi in a 2002 article as a "sorry mess" and relegating Beauvoir to secondary status in relation to Sartre by indiscriminate cuts in the philosophical content.
- 9 Two other essays, one on translations of American "chick" texts into French, the other on Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de sable*, translated into American, mirror each other interestingly. Anne-Lise Ferral demonstrates how French adaptations in subtitling *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal* produced a different construction of female sexuality based on a traditional, seductive, more passive role for women in France than the overt, aggressive sexuality displayed by the Americans. Conversely, Pascale Sardin criticizes Ben Jelloun's translator for eluding the linguistic problems raised by the author's skilful, ambiguous use of grammatical gender in his story of a girl raised as a boy: excessive cautiousness in neutralising gender references not only weakens the narrative drive butedulcorates the book's subversive potential.
- 10 Von Flotow's own contribution discusses translating Ulrike Meinhof's writings. In tackling the politically sensitive issue of rehabilitating a "gifted public intellectual" (148), now remembered only as a terrorist, she raises fundamental ethical questions about the translator's responsibility, whilst offering a convincing framework, articulating analogies between memory and translation, for approaching the latter both as process and product. The resulting text, she says, is "unavoidably marked by difference and history, as though read through a haze" (143). Von Flotow explicitly places this essay within a tradition of gender activism, citing other female reputations restored thanks to such scholarly memory work. This is the affirmative answer to her introductory questions as to the continuing relevance, for translation practices today, of gender identity politics.
- 11 In *Translation and Gender* Von Flotow regretted that translators' feminist commitment was often visible in their metatext, much less so in the textual product itself. Carolyn Shread returns to this critique in her insightful analysis of translating Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Les Rapaces*, thus bringing the reader full circle and offering new perspectives. She first draws on narrative theory to propose an alternative conceptualisation of identity, seen as a positioning around shared narratives rather than shared identity attributes, then argues that if feminism forms and informs translator and text, then a feminist translation may not carry clearly identifiable feminist markers, "yet it would not be the same translation without the reading, processing and writing of the feminist translator" (283). Reading this volume leaves us in no doubt of the continuing relevance and heuristic value of such an approach.

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Mots-clés: traduction, traductologie, féminisme

Keywords: translation, translation studies, feminism

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