

**ACROSS BOUNDARIES: TRANSLATING GENDER IN THE PROSE OF  
IWASIÓW, TOKARCZUK AND FILIPIAK**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of three chapters: 1) a theoretical introduction to the translated texts appearing in chapter two, employing feminist theory for literary analysis, 2) three short stories translated from Polish into English— Inga Iwasiow's "Śmierć i życie," Olga Tokarczuk's "Życzenie Sabiny," and Izabela Filipiak's "Nic się nie stało," and 3) a discussion of the problems encountered in the translation process and the solutions reached, as well as an overview of the translation theories chosen to guide the decisions.

In the first chapter I provide a historical background of Polish women's literature, explaining that feminist writing has only been acceptable in Poland as long as it has been link to patriotic causes. I discuss the post-1989 revolution in Polish literature, which has seen a great proliferation of non-patriotic feminist literature, not without a resistance from critics and readers alike. I analyze the short stories through the lens of the analytical category of gender, which allows me to make meaning of their feminist agenda.

Chapter two contains my English translations of the short stories, namely "Death and life," "Sabina's wish," and "It's no big deal."

Chapter three provides an overview of the translation theories that have guided me in my work, and an explanation of how they have been helpful. I present a theoretical background to the concept of gender, and discuss its pervasive grammaticalization in Polish, which is almost completely absent in English. Before introducing translation theory, I talk about the perils of literary mistranslation, the possibility of which makes theory useful. Apart from discussing traditional translation models, I also provide an overview of the theory of feminist translation, which I found to be particularly helpful as

a framework for translating feminist stories. I conclude with a discussion of the problems I have encountered in my translation process and the solutions I have reached.

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## **CHAPTER I: A THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction**

This thesis looks at gender issues through the lens of language in a comparative perspective. While it is generally acknowledged that literary translation is an inherently difficult task, not a whole lot has been written on the particular difficulty of translating works that exploit the language-specific cultural construction of gender, and the few works<sup>1</sup> that discuss these issues do not address the context of Slavic languages at all. In this thesis, I plan to explore how gender-specific language complicates the translator's task, specifically as it relates to translating from Polish into English.

The short stories I have selected have been written by Polish women writers of the 60s generation. They depict the modern lives of women in contemporary Poland. Gender plays an important role in all three stories, and consequently I look at all three through the prism of feminist theory to provide a theoretical grounding for my discussion. I look at my own translation work through the framework of translation studies as a guiding theoretical framework. My project is framed by a discussion of broader literature on literary translation.

### **Historical background of Polish women's literature**

The work of Iwasiów, Tokarczuk and Filipiak and cannot be properly understood without an appreciation of the historical situation that has shaped Polish life and literature in the past several centuries, and the historical context of Polish feminism. The development of feminism in Poland is intimately tied to the country's turbulent political

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<sup>1</sup> See Luise von Flotow's *Translation and Gender: Translating in the 'Era of Feminism'* and Sherry Simon's *Gender in Translation. Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*.

history. Poland had lost independence in 1772, after its lands were partitioned by Prussia, Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and regained it at the end of the First World War for a brief period of twenty-one years, after which it was again partitioned by Hitler and Stalin in the first days of the Second World War. After the Second World War the country became a Soviet satellite until 1989, when the Solidarity movement's pressure on the government led to free elections and the return of democracy. The patriotic struggle for the country's political independence was the primary theme of political life for many generations. Not surprisingly, it took precedence over any civil rights movements.

Ever since feminism first took root in Poland at the beginning of the 19th century with the "Entuzjastki" movement led by Narcyza Żmichowska, women were faced by the dilemma of having to choose between fighting for Polish independence, which would require solidarity with men, and fighting for gender equality, which would potentially require alienation from men and from the common national cause and therefore endanger Polish national survival, threatened at the time by assimilationist policies of the occupying Empires. The main task of literature and its main theme became the preservation of Polish culture in captivity, and a struggle to educate an enlightened society that could take upon itself the fight for freedom and form a strong and independent political state. Women played an important part in the struggle for independence by ensuring the survival of Polish culture and language in the home, and by raising patriotic sons. The public sphere thus entered the home and enabled women to be vocal in the political domain, making the society at large open and receptive to women's writing, as long as it was related to the patriotic agenda. In the 19th century, progressive writers such as Maria Konopnicka and Eliza Orzeszkowa actively propagated the ideas of

women's rights and emancipation—they “advocated women's intellectual development and stressed their right to individual fulfillment” (Fidelis 110). Polish women during that time “aimed at expanding their activities without ... openly challenging traditional social institutions and mores” (Fidelis 109). It is also important to emphasize that “women in Eastern Europe have often found themselves under double subjection, as women and as imperial subjects” (Fidelis 109). In the end, patriotic duties dominated their agendas and Polish women, whether conservative or liberal, “adjusted their ideas to national goals and abstained from establishing separate women's organizations or formulating a distinct feminist agenda” (Fidelis 108). Konopnicka and Orzeszkowa were consequently not seen as feminists.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, there had been important exceptions. One such exception was the writer Narcyza Żmichowska, founder of the first Polish suffrage movement “Entuzjastki” (enthusiasts), who dissociated herself from the patriotic discourse. Discussing Żmichowska's work, Grażyna Borkowska points out that the writer's critical strategy can be likened to “the strategy of a bee”<sup>3</sup> (“Strategia” 79). Żmichowska's multiple criticisms of the conventional patriarchal model of femininity, which saw women only as dutiful mothers and wives, Borkowska likens to the painful stings of a bee. Unfortunately, she points out, the stings kill the bee itself—the activities of Żmichowska and of women like her were met with a strong opposition from the traditional society. And not only that - their feminism often resulted in personal trouble and misfortune. As illustrated by Krystyna Kłosińska in her article “Kobieta autorka” (the female author), women authors in the nineteenth century risked ridicule and contempt; and women's writing was seen by

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<sup>2</sup> “sufrażystki” or “emancypantki” in Polish at that time

<sup>3</sup> “strategia pszczoły”

many not only as incompetent and inferior, but also as harmful to literature and to society at large. Women who wrote within the discourse of patriotism were the only female writers whose work was seen as acceptable.

In the period between the wars, when the regaining of independence put an end to patriotic struggles, Polish women writers began to explore feminine experience in more depth, while remaining faithful to the patriotic cause. In fact, women's prose dominated Polish literature at that time.<sup>4</sup> Themes of unhappy marriage, female sexuality, motherhood and abortion were explored by master novelists such as Maria Kuncewiczowa and Zofia Nałkowska. After 1945, however, the political reality of another loss of independence again overshadowed feminist literary ambitions, and the communist myth of gender equality certainly contributed to their demise.

In the Polish tradition, writers are the conscience of the nation, and they have traditionally taken upon themselves the task of bearing witness to history and the atrocities committed in the twentieth century by totalitarian regimes not only against the Polish nation, but against humanity.<sup>5</sup> After 1945, once again Poland falls victim to an empire and history makes it necessary for women to stand in with men in a common political and historical experience. The struggle for democracy and freedom of speech precedes any other civil rights movements, and the discourse of nation and history that writers engage with excludes gender.

The best literary example of this phenomenon in the second half of the twentieth century is the poetry of Wisława Szymborska, who, while exploring the complexities of the historical experience and often writing from the feminine perspective, is far from

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<sup>4</sup> See Kazimierz Wyka's *Pogranicze powieści*.

<sup>5</sup> See Czesław Miłosz's *The Witness of Poetry*.



feminist poetry. In a poem entitled “Nothing happens twice”<sup>6</sup> she writes about the opposite sexes: “we’re as different as two drops of crystal water”<sup>7</sup> (28, my translation). Although Szymborska’s poetic persona recognizes history itself as a patriarchal narrative, she does not engage in feminist discourse. Instead, Szymborska uses poetry to create a faithful representation of women’s reality and to document women’s experience in history. Szymborska’s “poetic persona defines herself most of all as a human being who cannot be categorized exclusively or even primarily along gender/sex lines (Karwowska 319). Consequently, “the female ‘I’ in Szymborska’s poems is primarily a human being, a person not categorized by sex or gender (Karwowska 321).

After 1989, when Poland once again became independent and democratic, writers no longer had to participate in the struggle for national independence. Communist censorship ceased. As a result, Polish literature has seen an explosion of women’s writing with definite feminist agendas (often encountering hostile responses from Polish readership and critics). In what is now commonly referred to as a literary revolution, women writers once again took the lead in exploring new themes and experimenting with new stylistic forms.

In a recent article, Małgorzata Anna Packalen has provided an insightful discussion of the resistance of Polish readers and critics to the new women’s writing. She points out that the “natural” role of a Polish woman has been traditionally seen to be determined by her “biological mission” of pregnancy and motherhood (158).<sup>8</sup> The uniquely Polish Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary—fully approved by the papacy—is greatly responsible for maintaining this traditional role in the culture at large.

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<sup>6</sup> “Nic dwa razy”

<sup>7</sup> “różnimy się od siebie/ jak dwie krople czystej wody”

<sup>8</sup> “biologiczne posłannictwo”

Women are expected to find fulfillment in the service to their children and to the nation, and this attitude is reflected in Polish literature, which demonizes women who attempt to escape the bind of patriarchal oppression. Women's issues explored in the new women's writing, argues Packalen, boldly break existing cultural rules and taboos. Feminist women's literature of the last three decades has therefore met with great opposition and even contempt from Polish critics.

### **Contemporary Polish women's literature**

The three writers who are the focus of this thesis, namely Inga Iwasiów, Olga Tokarczuk and Izabela Filipiak, are all part of this revolution. All three were born in the early sixties, and started publishing after 1989. They are known as the writers of the 60s generation. Tokarczuk holds a Master's degree in psychology from Wrocław University, and has published five novels and three collections of short stories. Iwasiów holds a PhD in feminist theory and literary criticism from the University of Szczecin where she is currently Professor of Literature, and apart from scholarly publications, she has published two collections of poetry and two short story collections. Filipiak holds a PhD in gender studies from Warsaw University, and has published ten books to date, including a novel and a collection of short stories.

When discussing contemporary Polish women's literature, it is important to emphasize that the era of feminism that began in North America in the late 1960s and impacted the academic and public life of the entire "free world" never occurred in Poland. A silent gap exists between the interwar generation of women writers who wrote of feminine experience, albeit in the patriotic context, and the current women writers of

the 60s generation. The latter are working within an interrupted literary tradition, heirs of a cultural inheritance that lacks continuity. Feminism is not yet seen in Poland as a valid political movement. Lacking a modern Polish feminist model, the writers draw influence from Western feminisms. Some are emigrants, such as Izabela Filipiak, who currently lives in the States, and all are well-traveled and fascinated by the varied cultures of the world. Some, for example Iwasiów and Tokarczuk, are deeply interested in Polish borderlands, such as Pomerania and Silesia, which historically have been cultural mosaics, allowing harmonious co-existence of various nationalities. Identifying themselves as feminists, they are engaged in a ground-breaking work of introducing modern feminist ideas into mainstream Polish cultural life, employing new experimental literary style and experimenting with language. As happened in the seventies with the radical writing of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva's in French, these three Polish writers are engaged in the exploration of new ground in the Polish language. Their literary goal is to create a new space in literature to speak of women's experience. In the West, women's movement has often focused on the problems of language—and such is the case with the Polish women writers of the 60s generation. They often play with Polish grammar and syntax in an attempt to get beyond the constraints of patriarchal language.

As Grażyna Borkowska has discussed, contemporary young Polish women authors are “consciously shaping their writing outside of community-centered thought ... [and] outside of their closest literary traditions”<sup>9</sup> (“Proza kobieca” 57). They are upsetting the traditional connection in Polish literature between talent and the duty to engage in

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<sup>9</sup> “świadomie kształtują swe pisarstwo poza myśleniem wspólnotowym ... poza najbliższą tradycją literacką”

matters of “absolute importance,”<sup>10</sup> such as God and history (“Proza kobieca” 57). These observations all apply to Tokarczuk, Filipiak and Iwasiów. They are not engaged in the discourse of patriotism. While sharing some common literary goals, however, the three writers give a good representation of the depth and breadth of contemporary Polish feminist literature. They are very different feminists—their writing, therefore, reflects very different feminist agendas.

### **Feminism and the concept of gender**

Inga Iwasiów’s feminism can be said to be the most academic of the three. As an active professor and a publishing literary scholar, she is very much aware of recent developments in literary theory, and often exploits them in her stories, often in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. Theoretical feminist thought is often embedded in her creative writing, sometimes in a very obvious way. A feminist literary critic and a feminist writer, Iwasiów is positioned at a very fascinating meeting point of theory and praxis, bringing to life in her own prose and poetry the theories she studies as a scholar.

Olga Tokarczuk is the most accomplished and recognized of the three, immensely popular with both critics and readers. She is attentive to language, and her prose is full of playful undermining of the phallogocentrism of the Polish culture. With significant artistic skill, she carefully crafts an innovative poetic language to tell of women’s experiences. Unfortunately, Tokarczuk’s Polish readership has failed to understand or even recognize her efforts so far, and her feminist agenda is often overlooked. Perhaps Polish readership is not entirely ready to “get the message.”

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<sup>10</sup> “wagi absolutnej”

Izabela Filipiak's writing is highly political and often perceived by critics and readers alike as controversial and even distasteful. Her 1995 novel *Absolutna Amnezja* (absolute amnesia) has been recognized by Maria Janion, one of the most prominent and important Polish literary critics, as one of the best recent Polish novels, and yet it has not been well received at large. Male critics have dismissed as "menstrual literature"<sup>11</sup> (Packalen 162). *Absolutna Amnezja* well illustrates Filipiak's political stance: it is the story of the coming of age of a girl—told with multiple references to the myth of Iphigenia—whose well-being is sacrificed for the sacrosanct interests of the nation. Filipiak, in an unsubtle way, rejects the predominance of patriotic goals over the goal of women's liberation. Her lack of subtlety, unbecoming for a "lady," is certainly one of the reasons why her work has outraged certain critics.

It is through the focus on the female gender that the writers try to build a new feminine narration. The stories deal with a diverse spectrum of women's experiences, such as pregnancy, motherhood, spouse abuse, poverty and breast cancer. The writers talk about women's experiences in a gender-determined world with the goal to reveal and legitimize women's voices which are absent in the patriarchal discourse dominating Polish literature. Their aim is to break the hegemony of patriarchy by deconstructing its language. In line with western feminist work, which has traditionally tried to find new ways to write about the female body, without objectifying it or subjugating it to patriarchal norms, the three short stories offer a refusal to have the female body function only as an object. In line also with the western feminist examination of language, the use of language itself plays a very important role in these stories—each writer employs it differently, but all try to exploit it and "bend it" to illustrate specifically feminine

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<sup>11</sup> "literatura menstrualna"

experiences of her subjects. Theirs is a language which questions the conventional categories of patriarchy and creates a linguistic space in which it becomes possible to tell the story of the Other.

Looking at these stories as primarily women's literature and analyzing them mostly through the lens of gender might seem like a totalizing and essentialist approach. However, it is legitimized by the feminist agenda of the writers themselves, whose overall literary goal is to introduce the very concept of gender to their readership. The Polish culture at large, partly because of its lack of a "feminist revolution" as discussed above, does not distinguish between sex and gender (or the categories of "female" and "feminine" for that matter).<sup>12</sup> Traditional gender roles, so firmly established throughout history, relegate women to the roles of mothers and the preservers of culture as opposed to its active creators, and are today fiercely defended by the conservative political elite and the Catholic church. The classification of the three short stories as women's literature allows to valorize them and to properly position the three women writers and their work in an oppressive patriarchal tradition in order to highlight their struggle against an unfavorable political, cultural and socio-economical situation of Polish women. Of course, it is not the only possible classification category, and it certainly does not exclude other classification possibilities. Likewise, the category of gender allows to analyze the three stories with a focus on their central message of the specificity of women's experience in a patriarchal society. The analytical category of gender is particularly useful for the scope of this project and certainly the most in line with the stories' feminist agenda, but it does not necessarily deny the possibility of other interpretive possibilities.

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<sup>12</sup> See Toril Moi's discussion of "female" and "feminine" in her article „Feminist, Female, Feminine.”

The work of writers such as Iwasiów, Tokarczuk and Filipiak is currently of great interest to Western feminists—there exists a great receptivity, in the academia as well as in the general public interested in women's literature, to feminist perspectives from other parts of the world, such as Eastern Europe. A strong publishing market exists for literature which explores these perspectives. While searching for stories to translate for this project, I wanted to compile a selection as diverse as possible to offer a broad scope of Polish women's writing. In my translations, I wanted to present a Polish feminist perspective that would be of interest to North American readership. My goal while translating the writers' work was to convey the stories' great literary value while transmitting their feminist message, with the aim of having the stories published in the North American market.

Let's now turn to the stories.

## **CHAPTER II: THE TRANSLATIONS**

### **“Death and life” by Inga Iwasiów**

My translation of “Death and life” has been removed because of copyright restrictions. “Death and life” tells the story of a woman whose sister, Janka, is diagnosed with breast cancer. Janka chooses to undergo complete mastectomy, although the option of partial mastectomy to save the breasts is viable. The protagonist, while reflecting on her sister’s shocking choice, recollects her experiences at the bedside of their dying mother.

### **“Sabina’s wish” by Olga Tokarczuk**

My translation of “Sabina’s wish” has been removed because of copyright restrictions. “Sabina’s wish” tells the story of Sabina, a pregnant cleaning woman who works for Dr. M. and his wife. Sabina is abused by her husband and craves affection from the only people whom she finds unthreatening—little girls. When asked by Mrs. M. what she would like for a parting gift, Sabina tells of her desire to be a pretend doll for Mrs. M.’s small daughter. Although Dr. M. laughs at Sabina’s wish, Mrs. M. is very moved by Sabina’s longing for affection, and complies with her wish.

### **“It’s no big deal” by Izabela Filipiak**

My translation of “It’s no big deal” has been removed because of copyright restrictions. “It’s no big deal” tells the story of Anna, who marries for money and whose husband abuses her mentally and physically. The abuse shatters Anna’s psyche as she tries to free herself from it.



### CHAPTER III: TRANSLATION THEORY AND THE PROCESS OF TRANSLATION

#### The analytical category of gender

The notion of gender developed in Western Europe and North America during the 1960s as a result of the second-wave feminists' need to conceptualize women's socially constructed roles and identities. It was understood that, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, "one is not born, but becomes a woman" (249). Gender became a tool that allowed feminists to theorize women's and men's sexual socialization and to explain how 'woman' and 'man' are socially constructed. The concept became a starting point for investigating women's experience in patriarchal societies in an effort to examine the hierarchy of patriarchy.

However, it should be said that currently there is no agreement among theorists on the meaning of the concept of gender. It has remained a contentious and troubling concept for feminists and post-feminists as well. Judith Butler, in her celebrated book *Gender Trouble*, has ventured to further complicate the meaning of gender, highlighting the fact that "contemporary feminist debates over the meanings of gender lead time and again to a certain sense of trouble" (ix). Butler argues that even a person's sex, traditionally recognized in feminist thought as a biological given as opposed to gender which is socially constructed, is hardly a given since it can only be perceived and experienced according to one's socialization. Committed to queer theory and a critique of "compulsory heterosexuality," Butler speaks against "the binary frame for thinking about gender"(ix-x).

Complicating the meaning of gender in a most interesting fashion, Monique Wittig, who has rejected heterosexuality and the consequent binary identification

possibilities, has argued that lesbians are not women. “Man” and “woman” are “political categories,” which demarcate the exploiter and the exploited in a system of patriarchal economical relations (2017): “what makes a woman is a specific social relation to man ... a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation” (2020).

However, such debates are far from the current Polish feminist thought. The concept of gender, as traditionally understood, remains a relatively new concept not only in mainstream culture, but also in the academia. Therefore for the purpose of this project, I will employ the traditional understanding of gender as a culturally shaped binary structure corresponding to the two sexes, while keeping in mind the historical and cultural contingencies that have shaped its discourse in both Poland and North America.

### **Gender gramaticalization**

Gender’s gramaticalization in language can reveal a great deal about the way a culture constructs and perceives the binary of gender. Polish exhibits an extreme grammaticalization of gender. Altogether, Polish has five grammatical genders, with two further subgenders. It distinguishes three genders in the singular: masculine, feminine and neuter. Gender in the language is primarily grammatical rather than natural, because in the case of objects or abstract ideas it’s a grammatical distinction rather than a natural fact. In the case of animate entities, in most cases lexical choices reflect natural distinctions, and so *dziewczyna* (girl) is feminine and *chłopak* (boy) is masculine etc. Besides, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, numerals and verbs in the conditional, past and some forms of the future tense are all inflected for gender in Polish. The gender of a noun

can usually be distinguished by its last letter. In the nominative case, masculine nouns end in a consonant (for example *stół*—table), feminine in *a* or *i* (for example *szafa*—closet) and neuter in *o*, *e* or *ę* (for example *krzesło*—chair). Gender is therefore an audible characteristic of the language. There are two genders in the plural: virile and non-virile. The virile contains male persons only, and the nonvirile contains everything else, that is female persons as well as objects and abstract ideas.

Although English for the most part lacks pervasive gender grammaticalization, it exhibits what has been termed “natural” gender, defined by Sherry Simon as a “gender [that] is attributed not by form but by meaning” (17). Simon has pointed out that in English “gender differences ... exercise a powerful imaginary role,” even though the language has “only ‘natural’ and not ‘grammatical’ gender” (18). She has discussed an experiment conducted by Deborah Cameron to demonstrate the workings of “natural” gender. The participants were given pairs of words, such as knife/fork, salt/pepper and vanilla/chocolate, and asked which word of each pair they would describe as feminine and which as masculine. Interestingly, they had no difficulty in performing this task, and almost unanimously agreed on the classification. Knife, pepper and chocolate were assigned the masculine gender, while fork, salt and vanilla the feminine one. The experiment indicates that the concepts of “masculine” and “feminine” “are associated with corresponding contrasts such as strong/weak, active/passive” and that “gender is relational, and is in fact an extension of the binary, oppositional structure that pervades all our thinking” (18). Simon concludes that “[d]espite the absence of a strict version of grammatical gender, gender distinctions continue to operate massively through the English language” (19). Even when an English noun is neutral, points out Simon, it can

have a gender charge. English is only apparently gender-neutral—in fact, its “apparent gender neutrality ... is constantly belied by the identification of the species (mankind) with the male of the species” (19). Simon concludes that the English lack of grammatical gender “seems to be adequately compensated for by the presence of ‘psychological’ or ‘metaphorical’ gender” (19). Although the concept of ‘natural,’ ‘psychological’ or ‘metaphorical’ gender is highly speculative, the above experiment illustrates to what a great extent phallogocentrism shapes our thinking.

### **Feminist investigation of gender in language**

An important part of the feminist project is a thorough investigation of the manifestation of gender in language. Louis von Flotow distinguishes two different approaches to issues of women and language—reformist, which viewed “conventional language as a symptom of the society that spawned it, accepting it as conceivably reformable, if good intentions prevailed,” and led to the attempts to create non-sexist language such as, for example, gender-free job designations (8-9). The radical approach posited women as “excluded, insulted or trivialized by conventional patriarchal language” and viewed such language as an instrument of women’s oppression and therefore highly dangerous and manipulative (9).

Scholars such as Hélène Cixous attempted to provide a solution for the embeddedness of the hierarchy of patriarchy in language and an answer to the question of how women’s reality could be spoken of. Influenced by the post-structuralist philosophy of Jacques Derrida, she has argued that the binaries of the Western cultural system, which provide the basic structures of language, align all the valued concepts with the male, and

that the female is consequently repressed in language — language does not account for women's experiences. Women must therefore create their own writing in a uniquely feminine language—*écriture féminine*. *Écriture féminine* commands women to shatter those binaries and speak with their own voices by breaking with conventions of masculinist language and “sweeping away syntax,” that is by breaking away from the linear and orderly characteristics of masculine discourse (2049). Cixous attempted to define a new literary form that would allow women to express their uniquely feminine experience and escape the treacherous entrapment of a masculinist language. Luce Irigaray, another French scholar, has put it succinctly: “Si nous continuons à nous parler le même langage, nous allons reproduire la même histoire.” (If we continue to speak the same language, we will reproduce the same history) (205).

The non-linguistic aspects of *Écriture féminine* parallel Julia Kristeva's theory of the “semiotic” dimension of language. Kristeva's “semiotic” is another example of an attempt to define a language that can speak for/about women. Her “semiotic” is defined as “the precondition for language even though it depends on language, and which suffers and takes pleasures in an other logic, complementary to the logic of linguistic signs imposed and consolidated by paternal laws” (95). Whereas the symbolic dimension of language is systematic, rule-bound, tied to social order and associated with syntax and grammar, the semiotic dimension is represented by the rhythmic and tonal aspects of language and connected to the feminine in general, to what is unintelligible and unsignifiable. It is an emotional force, tied to our instincts, which exists in the gaps, silences, spaces and rhythms of language, rather than in the denotative meanings of

words. And what is most important, the semiotic's creative impulses can disrupt the patriarchal order.

A feminist investigation of patriarchy as encoded in the Polish language has not occurred in Poland until after 1989. The first literary work that attempted to do this was Olga Tokarczuk's acclaimed 1994 novel *Dom dzienny, dom nocny* (translated into English by Antonia Lloyd-Jones as *House of Day, House of Night*, and published by London's Granta).

In the novel, Tokarczuk invents space for a female wisdom which transcends the phallogocentric binaries of male/female and reality/dream. The text's subject matter is largely the life of women—female friendship and women's daily occupations. Her feminist agenda is to legitimize imagination and the wisdom of women, and to reject patriarchal reason as a valid principle for explaining and understanding the world. In her play with the phallogocentric binaries, Tokarczuk can be said to follow the precepts of Cixousian *écriture féminine*. Her text lacks a plot or a linear progression of events. Because reality intermingles with dreams and imagination, it is often impossible to tell where reality ends and the dream world begins, and so the reader is faced with mysterious events that follow no seeming logic as dreams become the legitimate extension of reality. Although it is important to note that feminist writers are not the only ones to use such narrative techniques, Tokarczuk employs them with the specific goal of expressing the feminine experience in a patriarchal world. However, the novel lacks an overt message about language's gendered and sexist bias—Tokarczuk plays with language in very subtle ways. Like Cixous, Tokarczuk believes that her foremost task is to reveal the flaws that exist in language. She writes: "Na najważniejsze rzeczy i tak brakuje słów" ("there

are no words for the most important things anyway,” my translation) (244). Her text is full of play with the grammatical gender of the Polish language which traditionally privileges the male over the female. She plays with the gender bias of Polish by exposing serious gaps that exist in it. The diction of *Dom dzienny, dom nocny* includes an unusually large amount of words that are grammatically feminine, resulting in a language that can be described as matriarchal.<sup>1</sup> She invents words, such as *grzybość*, or mushroomness, constructed to be grammatically feminine, for concepts that seem not to exist in Polish—*grzybość*, as the poisonous mushrooms themselves, embodies the fluidity of the concepts of life and death. She points out that there is no feminine equivalent of the masculine *mędrzec* (sage or wise man), or of the masculine virtue of *męstwo* (manhood that is also courage and bravery, similar but not equivalent to the English concept of virility).

Unfortunately, upon closer analysis, the English translation (published by London's Granta) omits most of Tokarczuk challenges to the patriarchal structures of the Polish language and thus fails to faithfully reproduce the essence of her literary effort. The translation does not convey the feminist import of Tokarczuk's novel and accordingly has not been received as a translation of a feminist work. The feminist message of *Dom dzienny, dom nocny* has been largely lost in translation. The translation is therefore of little interest to Anglophone readership interested in feminist literature, and of no value to scholars studying Eastern European feminist perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> I'm grateful for this insight to Dr. Bożena Karwowska.

## The perils of literary mistranslation

Literary mistranslation is not a recent or rare phenomenon, and serves as a warning to all translators. In *Dissemination* Jacques Derrida has demonstrated how traditional translations of Plato's *Phaedrus* have split the concept of *pharmakon*, which in Greek means both "cure" and "poison," into an either/or idea, translating it into "remedy" or "poison," depending on apparent context. Derrida has revealed how the translators' misguided efforts to fit everything into binary oppositions flattened a multidimensional and self-contradictory concept to conform to the binary patterns of Western thought. Derrida argues that these translations have cancelled out "the resources of ambiguity" present in Plato's text, and have made the understanding of context "more difficult, if not impossible" (1848). As a result, "any leaning toward the magic virtues of a force whose effects are hard to master" is excluded from the text (1848). The dangerous flattening of *pharmakon* has played a crucial role in the reception of Plato's dialogues—they essentially have been mistranslated and misunderstood.

Paula Gunn Allen, who has studied the effects of cultural expectations on the practice of literary translation, has likewise established that translations are routinely marked by cultural prejudice. In a book entitled *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, she has demonstrated how an English translation of the Keres First Nations' traditional oral myth of nature's rebirth reduced it to a racist and patriarchal narrative of male competition. The myth of Kochinnenako—or Yellow woman, named so for her association with the life-sustaining staple of corn—represents the transformation of winter into summer through the agency of a woman. The English translation was produced by a translator whose Eurocentric and androcentric



assumptions made it impossible for him to note and account for the female power represented in the myth. The central role played by women in the life of the tribe is thus simply dismissed. "When the patriarchal paradigm that characterizes western thinking is applied to gynocentric tribal modes," writes Allen, "it transforms the ideas ... into something that is not only unrecongizable ... but entirely incongruent with their philosophies" (223). Allen argues that the translator's cultural bias "inevitably shapes his or her perception of materials being translated," and it is language that "embodies the unspoken assumptions and orientations of the culture it belongs to" (225). Therefore, argues Allen, "while the problem is one of translation, it is not simply one of word equivalence" since concepts implicit in a Native language are often not at all implicit in English (225).

Both Derrida and Allen employ literary theory — deconstruction and feminist theory, respectively — to analyze the perils of literary mistranslation. Derrida's and Allen's insights demonstrate how invaluable theory can be for the analysis of literary mistranslation. And the mistranslation of Tokarczuk's novel illustrates how critically important the awareness of gender and feminist thought can be to a successful translation. It's only fitting, then, that both post-structuralism/deconstruction and feminist thought should have had an enormous impact on translation practice

### **The impact of feminist thought on translation**

Louis von Flotow distinguishes three main aspects of the impact of feminist thought on translation in Western Europe and North America. First, "translators have sought out contemporary women's writing in order to translate it into their own cultures"

(14). Numerous women's publishing houses were established to meet this goal (for example, The Women's Press in London). Second, since feminists have revealed language to be a political tool, translators have had to "face issues of [their] intervention and censorship in translation," and decide to what extent their role should be overtly political (14). And third, the corpus of 'lost' works that have been translated as a result of interest in important past writers means that translators working on these 'new' texts have had to move "well beyond traditional bounds of translation and incorporate annotation and criticism" (14).

Von Flotow also notes that the influence of feminist thought on translation has meant that translators increasingly exhibit "a developing sense of self" (35). Introductions, comments and explanations of their work are not uncommon. They are also "writing scholarly essays and 'workshop reports' that draw attention to the work of translators and the historical, literary and biographical research that often accompanies a translated text" (35). The traditional idea of an invisible translator is being questioned, challenged and often rejected. Women translators are extricating themselves from the traditional ideal of submission to the source text. Von Flotow notes:

With gender viewed as an integral factor in textual production, attention has increasingly focused on politically aware and sometimes politically engaged translators, who are conscious of their influence on the text and may seek to impose it overtly. (35)

## The metaphors of translation

Feminist thought has also focused on the conventional metaphors of translation. The traditional adage *les belles infidèles*, (meant to imply that if translations, like women, are beautiful, then they are probably also, like beautiful women, unfaithful) used to describe translation first in eighteenth century France, has been challenged by feminist theorists. Lori Chamberlain has explained how the metaphors of translation have borrowed from the power relations between the sexes and gender stereotypes. Devaluation of translation, she has argued, can be linked to the devaluation of women. Patriarchal metaphors of translation can be linked to male control of female sexuality, parallel to the control of the target text by the translator. In the West, translating was traditionally seen as a subservient “female” role. The history of the entanglement of women’s issues and translation is a long and fascinating one. “On the one hand, translation was the means through which women, beginning in the European Middle Ages ... 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” (Simon 2).

Lori Chamberlain draws the parallel between the sexualization of translation, especially as it concerns the issues of fidelity, and patriarchal institution of marriage:

Fidelity is defined by an implicit contract between translation (as woman) and original (as husband, father, or author). However, the infamous ‘double standard’ operates here as it might have in traditional marriages: the ‘unfaithful’

wife/translation is publicly tried for crimes the husband/original is by law incapable of committing. (58)

Translation is thus traditionally gendered by the language of paternalism. The fundamental problem of translation was the regulation of “legitimate sexual (authorial) relationships and their progeny” (60). Chamberlain concludes that the “metaphorics of translation reveals both an anxiety about the myths of paternity (or authorship and authority) and a profound ambivalence about the role of maternity—ranging from the condemnation of *les belles infideles* to the adulation accorded to the ‘mother tongue’” (63). The power of the translator, who takes authority over the text, is “figured as a male privilege exercised in family and state political arenas” (64). Chamberlain argues that “what must be subverted is the process by which translation complies with gender constructs” (72).

It is no wonder then that feminists have tried to rethink the entire tradition of translation and provide a different strategy for conceptualizing the relationship between the source and target texts. The feminist theory of translation provides such a restructured translation model. But first, let’s discuss traditional translation models.

### **Traditional translation models and the cultural turn in translation studies**

Andre Lefevere and Susan Bassnett classify traditional translation models into three types. The first is the Jerome Model, named so after Saint Jerome (331-420 AD), who set translation standards in the West until the nineteenth century. Its basic principle is the principle of near-perfect equivalence—a “text ... needs to be transposed into another language ... as faithfully as possible” (2). A translation’s faithfulness is “insured

by good dictionaries,” and since anybody literate knows how to use a good dictionary, anyone who can do so can be a translator (2). This model, explain the scholars,

is characterized by the presence of a central, sacred text, that of the Bible, which must be translated with the utmost fidelity, and the early ideal of that fidelity was the interlinear translation, in which one word would match another, indeed, in which the translated word would be written under the word it was supposed to translate. (2)

Although it was an ideal impossible to achieve, the Jerome Model haunted translators over the centuries. Thankfully, since the Bible’s influence as a sacred text has decreased, “translation has been able to move away from the increasingly sterile ‘faithful/free’ opposition” (3). Unlike in the Jerome Model, today equivalence “is no longer seen as the mechanical matching of words in dictionaries, but rather as a strategic choice made by translators” (3). Translators have since realized the critical importance of context, such as history and culture, in all matters of translation, and this realization has influenced how we think about the issue of faithfulness today.

The second model discussed by Bassnett and Lefevere is “the Horace Model,” which takes its name from the Roman poet Horace (65 BC-8 BC). Horace’s main principle for translation is to be faithful not to a text, but to his customers. The translator has to negotiate between the source and target language and the sponsoring patron. Negotiation, then, is the central concept of this model, and “it militates heavily against the kind of faithfulness associated with equivalence” (4). Bassnett and Lefevere point out that the Horatian model does not have a sacred text, but, interestingly, it has a privileged language—Latin. “This implies,” they note, “that negotiation is, in the end, always

slanted toward the privileged language, and that the negotiation does not take place on absolutely equal terms” (4). They draw a parallel between Latin in the Roman Empire and English today, and argue “that translations into English, particularly from third world languages, are almost invariably slanted towards English,” which means that “everything foreign and exotic is standardized” (4).<sup>2</sup>

The Schleiermacher model, the third translation model discussed by Bassnett and Lefevere, is based on translation principles Friedrich Schleiermacher had outlined in his essay “On the Different Ways of Translating.” Schleiermacher believed that translations from foreign languages into German should be made to read foreign. The character of the original text should never be leveled in the target language. This model “emphasizes the importance of ‘foreignizing’ translation” and denies the target language its privileged position, thus preserving the alterity of the source text (8).

Bassnett and Lefevere argue that there’s a place for all three models in translation today, and that they should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Whereas the Jerome Model might be useful for conceptualizing the translation of car manuals or pharmaceutical texts, the juxtaposition of the Horace and Schleiermacher models in literary translation can help us to ask fundamental questions “that deal with the relative power and prestige of cultures, with matters of dominance, submission, and resistance” (8).

These traditional translation models, however, assume that translation is simply an exchange between two languages. This assumption has been challenged by the so called “cultural turn in translation studies,” a description Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere gave to the most recent trend in translation in their 1990 book *Translation*,

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<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth look at this problem, see my discussion of Gayatri Spivak’s “The Politics of Translation” on page 34.

*History and Culture*. The two scholars assert that translation is today seen, as it should be, as an intercultural rather than an interlinguistic exchange.

### **The impact of post-structuralism and deconstruction on translation theory**

In the twentieth century, deconstructive and post-structuralist thought has challenged the privileged position of the source text and the originality of the author and greatly impacted existing translation theories.

Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault have both challenged fundamental assumptions of literary criticism by questioning the traditional concept of the literary author. Barthes in “The Death of the Author” and Foucault in “What is an Author?” critique and question the traditional concepts of author and authorship by drawing on Saucerian linguistics to destabilize literary meaning. The two thinkers argue that the author is a product of the text rather than the other way around. For both thinkers, the author is a cultural construction situated in a specific time and place.

Barthes argues that a disconnection between the author and writing occurs because the narration is an act which is purely symbolic in that it does not act directly on reality but is found “outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself” (1466). He points out that concept of the author is a modern concept, a legacy of the Enlightenment and humanism as well as the “culmination of capitalist ideology” (1466). But our thinking about literature is mistakenly “centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes ... [and] his passions” (1466). However, writing can only be “disentangled” instead of being “deciphered”—its structure can be “run” (like the thread of a stocking) ... but there is nothing beneath: ... [it] ceaselessly posits meaning” while

ceaselessly evaporating it (1469). But this impossibility of absolute interpretation is liberating since it means that the author cannot impose any limits on the text by furnishing it with a “final signified” (1469). The birth of this reader, concludes Barthes, must come “at the cost of the death of the Author” (1470). To Barthes, the author is primarily a myth—an ideological concept linked to the ideas of the Enlightenment, humanism and capitalism, which greatly limits interpretive possibilities of the reader.

Foucault takes the proposition of the death of the author one step further, asking what an author is in the first place, and thus, in a question that already strips the author of the mark of individuality by using “what” instead of “who,” takes a position that allows him to argue against the stability of the concept by fully interrogating its weaknesses. Foucault argues that the author can be defined as “a function of discourse” (1628). The author-function is not universal but always situated in a specific time and place: it did not exist, for example, in medieval Europe for folk tales. The author-function is very much a construction which emerges from our “projections ... of our way of handling texts” that varies “according to the period and the form of discourse concerned” (1629). In the same revolutionary manner that Saussure cut language loose from Logos, Barthes and Foucault cut literature loose from the Author.

Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction has set the stage for many of the concepts present in today’s theories of translation. In his seminal work *Of grammatology*, Derrida provides an incisive critique of the metaphysical tradition in Western philosophy, focusing on its main feature of logocentrism. He defines logocentrism as the privileging of *logos*, or a transcendental signified, as the ground for meaning. Derrida vehemently argues against the main claim of structuralist theory, which holds that language and



thought are shaped by universal structuring principles, or essences, common to all humanity. The history of metaphysics, argues Derrida, has always “assigned the origin of truth ... to the logos” (1822). In the West, logocentrism has controlled “the field of vision ... for a few millennia” (1824). But since there can be no transcendental signified, *text* is all that we can ever know—our knowledge is constructed of nothing but signs that function in differential relationships. Derrida asserts that fixed meaning is not possible because the differential network of linguistic signs lacks a grounding principle or a transcendental signified. We cannot go beyond language to experience full presence or a grounding essence that would anchor a stable, ultimate meaning. We do not have access to a reality that would be independent of language. We cannot make meaning “outside” of the process of signification—we cannot speak “outside” of language.

The theory of feminist translation, which I will discuss next, would not have been possible without the ground-breaking insights of post-structuralism and deconstruction. Feminist translators have seized Derrida’s point that the opposition between signifier and signified makes any sort of transparency of language impossible.

### **The theory of feminist translation**

The theory of feminist translation has developed out of the alliance between feminist thought and the field of translation studies, both of which have emerged during 1970s and since then gained significant academic recognition. Simon points out:

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 questions of universal standards of meaning and value. (8)

Harish Trivedi distinguishes three distinct events in the span of the twentieth century that are historically important for the boom in Translation Studies in the Anglophone world: the concerted effort of translating nineteenth-century masters of Russian fiction into English at the beginning of the century, and the translation of works from Latin America and then the Eastern European countries under Soviet control in the 1970s and 1980s. These new bodies of literature in English translation were so shocking and exciting that they caused a literary sensation and inspired a deep interest in the theory and practice of translation.

The inaugurating work of translation studies was a book under the very title *Translation Studies*, published by Susan Bassnett. As with women's studies, translation studies now have journals exclusively devoted to the discipline (i.e. *The Translator*), and even their own publishing house (St Jerome Publishing).

The theory of feminist translation first emerged in Quebec. We owe it to the pioneering work by a group of Canadian women translators. Perhaps the clearest delineation of the theory is Barbara Godard's 1990 essay "Theorizing Feminist Discourse/Translation." Feminist translation emerged so strongly in Quebec because French Canadian writers, in the words of Godard, see "parallels between the colonized position of Québec and the linguistic alienation of women" (87). Godard claims that for feminist translators translation, "in its figurative meanings of transcoding and transformation, is a topos in feminist discourse used by women writers to evoke the difficulty of breaking out of silence in order to communicate new insights into women's

experiences and their relation to language” (89). In fact, Godard argues that all feminist discourse is translation in two ways: “as notation of ... codes from what has been hitherto... a muted discourse” or in fact completely silenced, and “as repetition and consequent displacement of the dominant discourse” (90). In such theory of feminist translation, translation “is production, not reproduction,” since “[p]retensions to the production of a singular truth and meaning are suspended” — “this is at odds with the long dominant theory of translation as equivalence grounded in a poetics of transparency” (90). The theory sees feminist discourse as “[a] palimpsest working on problematic notions of identity, dependency and equivalence” (90). “The possibility of future feminist intervention,” argues Godard, echoing Cixous, “requires an ironic manipulation of the semiotics of ... [linguistic] production” (88).

Godard has proposed that women translators should in fact usurp the source text and “woman-handle” it. Godard has theorized feminist translation as a ‘transformance,’ a term she coined to emphasize “the focus on the process of constructing meaning in the activity of transformation, a mode of performance” (90). She believes that the target text should perform what the source text does in the culture it was written for.

Feminist translation insists that translation is not a copy but “a creative utterance” (91). The feminist translator must “creatively intervene[e]” in decoding and re-encoding meaning (91). The translated text becomes “a text in its own right so that the traditional boundary setup to separate original works from their translations collapses” (93). In the final paragraph of her essay, Godard provides a brief manifesto of feminist translation practice:

The feminist translator, affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing, flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text. *Womanhandling* the text in translation would involve the replacement of the modest, self-effacing translator. Taking her place would be an active participant in the creation of meaning ... The feminist translator immodestly flaunts her signature in italics, in footnotes—even in a preface. (94)

Louise von Flotow, another feminist translator as well as a scholar of translation studies, describes three major techniques used by feminist translators: supplementing, prefacing and footnoting, and „hijacking.” Supplementing is an interventionist technique which allows the translator to compensate for language differences, such as untranslatable wordplays. Prefacing and footnoting are used to explain the intention of the original text as well as describe the translator’s own translation strategies. “Hijacking” refers to the controversial technique of inserting a feminist agenda into a text where there is none. Although supplementing, and prefacing and footnoting are not techniques used exclusively by feminist translators, “hijacking” certainly is.

Louise von Flotow claims that in translation, “cultural and contextual differences impose themselves, making *difference*, and not equivalence, the constant of translation” (40-41). She argues that translation is “planned rewriting,” and that it “produces a deliberately and inevitably different version of an already existing text—prepared under specific conditions, to reach a specific readership” (40).

In the words of Sherry Simon, “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” (1). Further, “[f]or 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” (2).

Discussing the conventional view of translation, Simon explains:

Each polar meaning in the translating process is construed as an absolute, and meaning is transposed from one pole to the other. But the fixity implied in the oppositions between languages, between original/copy, author/translator, and, by analogy, male/female, cannot be absolute; these terms are rather to be placed on a continuum where each can be considered in relative terms. (12)

Echoing Bassnett and Lefevere, Simon argues that “feminist writing and translation practice come together in framing all writing as re-writing, all writing as involving a rhetoricity in which subjectivity is at work” (28). Further:

What feminist theory highlights is a renewed sense of agency in translation. This agency cannot be understood as that of a free and unfettered writing subject. Rather, this agency must be understood in relation to the various sites through which the translating subject defines itself. (29)

### **The theory of feminist translation in practice**

So what does the theory of feminist translation mean in practice? Sherry Simon in “Gender in Translation” discusses Howard Scott’s English translation of Louky Bersianik’s novel *L’Eugélonne*, which demonstrates that gender differences of one language can be creatively transferred to another. Bersianik’s novel exposes the role that

the French language plays in women's oppression through, among other things, grammatical gender-marking. Simon explains that Scott's role as a translator was not to "provide an erudite explanation of sexism in the French language for the English-speaking reader, but to provide an equivalent political message" (31). Scott takes advantage of the fact that both in French and English the masculine is accepted as the norm, and transfers the French problem of having the verb always in the masculine form for a noun phrase, which includes even the smallest masculine element (even as minimal as the male cat in "three hundred women and one cat") into the English problem of the exclusive use of the masculine pronoun *he*. Scott shows that the persistent identification of the species (mankind) with the male in English makes Bersianik's critique of language equally pertinent to English readers.

Simon also discusses Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood's translations of Louky Bersianik, which successfully transfer French gender differences into English analogies. De Lotbinière-Harwood's translation practice "aims to make the feminine visible in language so that women are seen and heard in the world," and thus to expose the fact that English is not a gender-neutral language (31). Lotbinière-Harwood takes advantage of the fact that English uses the masculine pronoun "he" and the generic noun "man" as universals. She sees her translation practice as a political activity which aims to make language speak for women. Simon explains:

When Louky Bersianik asks 'Quel est le féminin de garçon? C'est garce!' ('What is the feminine of boy? It's slut!', *garce* not really being the feminine form of *garçon* but a derogatory term meaning 'slut' or 'whore'), de Lotbinière-Harwood translates: 'What's the feminine of dog? It's bitch.' (31)

Both Scott and de Lotbinière-Harwood are engaging in feminist translation by actively participating in the process of meaning production to subvert the dominant discourse of the target language. The feminist project of translation, argues Simon, “finds its most felicitous applications ... in regard to texts which themselves constitute innovative writing practices” (32). Feminist translation as a set of principles guiding translation practice emphasizes the authority of the translator and “implies extending and developing the intention of the original text” (32).

### **Criticisms of feminist translation**

Criticisms of the theory and practice of feminist translation have come from a wide range of theorists. One of the most scathing critiques has been voiced by Gayatri Spivak in “The Politics of Translation,” where she discusses how third-world literature becomes an easy target for Western translators’ homogenizing efforts analogous to the old colonial policies.

Spivak, who identifies herself as both a feminist and a post-colonialist translator, has warned especially against the dangers of “feminist” translation that is at risk of reproducing the traditional structures of colonialism. In her essay, she proposes that “the task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency” (177). The translator must pay attention to the rhetoricity of the source language, since “[t]here is a way in which the rhetorical nature of every language disrupts its logical systematicity” (178). First and foremost, the translator must be “in love” with the source text (178). She warns that if the rhetoricity of the source language is not firmly grasped, “a species of neo-colonialist construction of the non-western scene is afoot”

(179). She criticizes the majority of translations of third-world women's texts because their translators often fail to "engage with, or care insufficiently for, the rhetoricity of the original" (179). The democratic feminist ideal of bringing third-world texts into English is thus all too often compromised. The translation by someone who cannot intimately engage with the source language can be marred by orientalism. Further:

In the act of wholesale translation into English there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest. This happens when all the literature of the Third World gets translated into a sort of with-it translateese, so that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan. (180)

Translation, proposes Spivak, "is the most intimate act of reading" (181). The translator, therefore, has to become an intimate reader in order to "surrender to the text" and respond to its special call (181). If a translator wants to show solidarity with the women of the source tongue, her first responsibility is to learn it so well that she will be able to talk in it about the most intimate matters. The intimacy of cultural translation, posits Spivak, demands such deep knowledge. Commitment to "correct cultural politics" is sometimes simply not enough (184). Spivak cautions:

The status of the [source] language in the world is what one must consider when teasing out the politics of translation ... It is only in the hegemonic languages that the benevolent do not take the limits of their own often uninstructed good will into account. (189)

Another important critique of feminist translation criticizes the practice for what it sees as essentialization of gender and reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Pilar Godayol



has presented an argument for this case in a recent essay entitled "Frontera Spaces: Translating as/like a Woman." She has also provided an insightful summary of the debate on whether feminist translation theory can ever have a strong theoretical foundation: The theory and practice of translating as/like a woman, being a political and social discourse that criticizes and subverts the patriarchal practices which render women invisible, assumes a feminine subjectivity ... However, despite sharing a common politics of identity, the different feminisms, among them those in the field of translation, interpret and express feminine subjectivity ... in different ways. Similarly, they also differ in their definitions of their universal categories, such as 'women,' 'identity,' 'gender,' 'sex,' 'experience,' and 'history.' As a result, some translators, like Lori Chamberlain (1988) and Amy Kaminsky (1993), suggest that these are unstable starting points for developing either a theory or a practice of translation ... [and] cast doubt on the possibility of building a feminist theory of translation given the contingency and mobility of its universal categories. (11)

If we had a stable subject upon which the social and political theory, "such as the practice of translating as/like a woman," could rest, argues Godayol, the debate regarding the construction of the subject itself would come to a close (11). Godayol insists that we should see the practice of translating as/like a woman not "as a utopian or chimerical space of political and social emancipation," but rather "as a borderland in which identity and textuality are constantly re(written) from a point of view of ... negotiation" (13).

Indeed, I would argue that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism can be very useful here. "Essentializing" can be a conscious political

strategy that can allow to theorize action for social change while keeping the debate on the so called “universal categories” open.

### **The theoretical approach of this thesis**

I have been helped in my own translation work by the above research on the various developments in translation studies and the theory of feminist translation as a guiding theoretical framework. The broad literature on literary translation has made me a more aware and capable translator, conscious of my agency but also of the responsibility that comes with it. I have been very mindful of the possibility of mistranslation, and very much aware of the failed attempt at an English translation of Tokarczuk’s *Dom dzienny, dom nocny*. I have therefore studied the historical and literary background of my writers, as well as today’s literary milieu of women writing in Poland. I have also been in personal contact with the writers, clarifying points confusing for me in their texts. I have carefully studied the western influences that have had a great bearing on the three writers’ work, in particular western feminist thought. I have been very much aware of my agency and responsibility as a translator. I have been mindful of the writers’ intent to create a new narration in the Polish language—a narration which would make possible to tell the story of women’s experience.

I have been also very much aware of the fact that I’m translating into a dominant language, for an audience which is culturally dominant. I didn’t want to make any compromises that would alter the meaning of the original stories or make them easier to understand in English at the expense of their artistic integrity. In agreement with the Schleiermacher model, I have tried to give my translations a view into another language

and a view of the different perspective on the world that that language facilitates. While I have stayed away from overt “foreignization” of English, I have tried to preserve some of the untranslatable Polish flavour of the original stories. For example, I have kept “wilkolak” —which Filipak believes is the Slavic version of vampire—untranslated, and explained that it is a type of werewolf. I have also left the names of Polish deodorants and supermarkets untranslated.

I have read the three stories employing the analytical category of gender as my primary lens through which I made meaning of the authors’ intent. As I’ve discussed in the first chapter, the concept of gender is a concept still very foreign to Polish readership. A person’s sex and the associated gender role tend to be seen as one and the same. In their stories, Iwasiów, Tokarczuk and Filipiak tease apart the fabric of the female gender to reveal the socialization process that produces a “woman.” They refuse to look at women’s bodies through the male gaze. “Death and life” presents Janka as a woman who does not hesitate to undergo a complete mastectomy when diagnosed with breast cancer, even though a partial mastectomy would have been possible. Janka refuses to risk her life in order to save a part of her body that the male gaze requires to make her “complete” and “desirable.” Her sister, representing a woman who has integrated the male gaze as her own, sees Janka as mutilated, but Janka sees her body on her own terms, and paradoxically greets her life without breasts as a new and better life, a life in which she will be able to engage in athletic pursuits with greater ease.

“Sabina’s wish” also presents a woman protagonist whose body is not objectified but in fact portrayed as exploited by others—in her hard physical work both in and outside of the home, in her multiple pregnancies, and in the abuse she suffers from her

husband. In patriarchy, if we define it with Monique Wittig<sup>3</sup> as an economical system in which women are an underclass exploited by men, a woman's body is not her own possession—accordingly, Sabina's body does not belong to her. As a result, she is so alienated from her own body that she sees it as a foreign object which must be "put into" clothing every morning and simply forgotten. The only time she actually feels in connection with her body is when she imagines unthreatening, girly caresses falling on her in a "rain of tiny touches." Tokarczuk presents an unconventional view of the pregnant female body, which is traditionally seen by the male gaze as monstrous and even diseased. Instead, Sabina's pregnancies are hardly a cause for concern: "[s]he never feels nauseous, she's never dizzy or moody, she never has any cravings ..., [s]he doesn't gain or lose much weight." Apart from creating a new representation of the pregnant female body, Tokarczuk valorizes girlhood and qualities associated with girlhood. Kazia and her friends, as opposed to Sabina's rowdy boys, symbolize to Sabina desirable grace and affection—she sees them as "[l]ittle angels, quails, spring catkins, downy poplar seeds."

"It's no big deal," a story not about affection but sexual violence, is the most innovative of the three in how it presents the concept of gender. Anna's marriage for financial reasons and her subsequent succumbing to sexual abuse paints a picture of women's socialization to victimhood. Anna as a victim seems to willingly accept her role, having been socialized to cooperate with the authority of the male figure—whether it be a father or husband. Her final rebellion against the perpetrator, although seemingly a hopeful gesture of rebellion, destroys not only him but also her already shattered psyche.

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<sup>3</sup> See Wittig's essay "One is Not Born a Woman."

## **Problems and solutions**

Translation of experimental and innovative writing poses some interesting technical challenges. I have had to develop my own creative methods to transmit wordplay and fragmented syntax. At certain moments my work ceased to be the work of translation and became the work of a creative writer, as I had to invent ways to make up for the differences between Polish and English. A particular challenge was the search for parallels in English of particular Polish statements, especially colloquial expressions. For example, the Polish “*nic się nie stało*,” literally “nothing has happened,” only roughly corresponds to “it’s no big deal,” but in the context of the story, it seems to work well. The feminist theory of translation has helped me to think about translation in a way that was useful in overcoming many of these problems.

“Death and Life” by Inga Iwasiów, although written in almost pedestrian prose when compared to the other two stories, was perhaps the most difficult to translate. Iwasiów’s tendency to use long and rather convoluted sentences made possible in Polish by extensive grammatical inflection, added immediacy to the story but posed serious technical challenges. In many cases, I had no choice but to break up the sentences in English to preserve clarity. Iwasiów’s frequent use of feminine pronouns (i.e. “ona”) made translating into English a challenge as well. The protagonist’s sister, Janka, is the only named person in the story, whereas the protagonist and her mother remain nameless and are referred to only by pronouns. In Polish, the heavy pronoun inflection makes it clear which pronoun refers to whom, but in English “she,” rarely inflected, can leave the meaning of the pronoun ambiguous. I had to sometimes interject “Janka,” “sister” or “mother” to make the meaning clear.

Gender in my English translations is communicated through pronouns (i.e. “she” and “he”) and gender-marked words which indicate familial relations, such as “mother,” “daughter,” “sister” and “husband.” In “Death and Life” the protagonist’s gender is communicated in the first sentence (“her husband and she”) both in English in Polish. In “Sabina’s Wish” it is communicated in the first sentence, both in English in Polish, by identifying her by the Latin-derived female name of Sabina. “It’s no big deal,” however, that is my English version of “Nic się nie stało,” fails to identify the protagonist as female until the eighth paragraph, when the protagonist introduces the man who will become their husband. Even at this point, however, we cannot be one hundred percent sure of the protagonist’s gender—the marriage in question could theoretically be a same-sex marriage. It is only in paragraph twelve that the protagonist is positively identified by the Latin-derived female name of Anna. In Polish, the inflexion of the past tense for gender helps to identify the protagonist as female already in the second sentence. The English translation is therefore a lot more ambiguous.

“It’s no big deal,” the most innovative of the three stories, presented a narrative of fractured syntax and broken sentence structure. I have faithfully preserved Filipiak’s chaotic use of tense, which unexpectedly switches from the present to the past and back to the present again, and her equally chaotic use of the point of view, which switches back and forth between first and third person. In certain places, however, I have italicized sentences for the sake of clarity. The story’s unusual mix of terror, humour and grotesque made it a creatively challenging translation.

Class has presented an interesting translation problem in the case of “Sabina’s wish.” The doctor’s wife, whose first name is Jola, is referred to in Polish as “Pani Jola,”

a semi-formal honorific. Translating “Pani Jola” simply as “Jola” would have certainly removed the distance (partly created by class) that is clearly present in Polish. Although the story ends in a utopian vision of women’s inter-class solidarity, Tokarczuk addresses gender issues as deeply connected with class, and I wanted to preserve the distance. I have therefore opted to address the doctor’s wife as Mrs. M., adding an additional mark of patriarchy in English with the conventional married woman designation of “Mrs.”

I have approached the translation of these stories with the critical question of Andre Lefevere in mind: “who rewrites, why, under what circumstances, for which audience?” (*Manipulation* 7). I have been very conscious of the context of my translations and deeply aware that there can be no “innocent” translation. As Lefevere and Bassnett have attested:

“Translation, like all (re)writings is never innocent. There is always a context in which the translation takes place, always a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed. Translation involves so much more than simple engagement of an individual with a printed page and bilingual dictionary” (“Proust’s Grandmother” 11).

This thesis had first started with the idea of translating a small selection of Polish short stories by women writers. Bearing the mistranslation of Tokarczuk’s novel in mind, I have searched for theories that would help me approach my translation project with an awareness of potential issues. Like Spivak, I wanted to become “an intimate reader” of my writers, and my research on the historical background of Polish women’s literature has provided me with the context necessary to understand the writers’ rhetoricity. My goal was to find a theoretical approach that would allow me to convey the stories’

feminist message without compromising their literary value. Following the intent of the original texts, I have strived to subvert the patriarchal discourse of English, and the theory of feminist translation has greatly helped me to theorize such subversion. I have learned that translation theory can be of great value to the practicing translator, as it has allowed me to think deeply about my creative options as well as responsibilities. Of course, I have selected and translated the stories with the goal of reaching a specific readership in North America, but I have strived not to compromise the literary quality or the message of the source texts. I can only hope that I have succeeded.



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