My mind now turns to stories of bodies changed
Into new forms.
Ovid (2010: 5)

Gender is a site of cultural translation.
Judith Butler (2000a: 753)

Abstract: The essay outlines a “critical genealogy” of the notion of resemblance which structures the hierarchical relationship between the impeccable Original (Man, the source text) and its ultimately imperfect, failed copy (woman, translation). I examine the analogy between translation and the female that has prevailed in modern scholarship, and reveal its other, subversive side. The displacement of meanings in this repetitive analogy clarifies the relationship between the source and the target text in the light of the Butlerian notion of “critical mimesis”: a subversive play of meanings that takes place in the performative continuum of cultural translation.

Keywords: Aristotle, Judith Butler, translation as imitation, translation as mimétisme, gender (in) translation, cultural translation

Meanders of power

Since the 1970s there have been numerous discussions on such issues as ideologization of translation, its political aspects and cultural invisibility of translators. The starting point for a reflection highlighting the ideologica-
ly invested position of translators would obviously be polystem theory that shed light on the mechanisms of translation manipulation that goes beyond its purely linguistic dimension (if there is any such thing at all; Wallace 2002: 65–74). Since then the attention of both translation scholars and practitioners has been directed not only towards the techné but also towards the épistémè of the “manual control” of the text by the translator, who, like Odysseus, has to meander between the Charybdis of political (in)correctness and the Scylla of the culturally grounded lack of accord (or perhaps concord) on the part of the readers. This gave rise to the interest in such issues as power relations in translation as well as the linguistic, cultural, and gender identity of translators.

If we follow Michel Foucault and claim in our own right that “translation is the discourse of power!”, we will obtain a concise albeit somewhat simplified version of the basic axiom invoked by the intellectual ferment forming within the field of Translation Studies once questions about the “lost in translation” appeared: both female translators and authors that had either been trimmed into the canon or removed from it altogether. As a result, partly or completely forgotten female authors and translators have been gradually introduced into the system of cultural circulation, but, what is equally important, there have been diverse critical attempts at re-reading the texts already existing in translation. The main goal of such interpretive endeavours would be to bring to the fore their deliberate omissions, errors and de-viations, whose direct cause was the manipulation of the text in order to strengthen the dominant patriarchal code.

The significance of translation is not limited here to an allegorical sign of equality made between woman and translation; the very existence of that sign is first and foremost the evidence of prevalent essentionalist conceptions of both female nature and the nature of translation. This analogy

2 The best known example of a translation deliberately smoothing out a nonconformist text is obviously the 1952 English version of Simone de Beauvoir’s Le deuxième sexe, from which its translator, Howard Parshley, deleted the names of women in power, lesbian themes and the descriptions of harsh reality that women had to struggle with. See Simons (1999: 61–71).
3 I.e. bons mots on the mutual exclusiveness of beauty and faithfulness; I discuss the source of the metaphor linking women and translation in the sections below. The sexist overtones of that metaphor are succinctly described by Louise von Flotow, who claims: “translation has long served as a trope to describe what women do when they enter the public sphere: they translate their private language, their specifically female forms of discourse (...) into some form of the dominant patriarchal code” (1997: 12). See also Chamberlain (1988: 454–472).
will be the object of my scrutiny, critical reflection and transformation in the following sections. The influence of translation should nonetheless be considered 1. on the diachronic plane, where attention should be given to uncovering the historical importance of translating in female writing,⁴ and consequently, to the reworking and deconstruction of the existing canons 2. on the synchronic plane, where it should concentrate on working out of such modes of reading that would allow for “a transfer of reality into a new context”;⁵ construction of meanings eluding the dominant linguistic code so suffused with patriarchal ideology that it becomes almost transparent; construction of such an identity in language and through it that would allow one to express oneself. All that should be undertaken with one aim in mind: so that women can speak with their own voice, not only in defence of their dignity, originality and creative freedom they have been refused for so long, but also so that they can manifest them. To quote the Canadian translator Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, who provides the following explanation for her translatory choices: “no act of writing or translation is neutral” (qtd after von Flotow 1997: 27), therefore one should use “every possible feminist translation strategy to make the feminine visible in language. Because making the feminine visible in language means making women seen and heard in the real world. Which is what feminism is all about” (von Flotow 1997: 29).

We can elaborate on feminist translation strategies that allow translators to actively construe the sense of the text on equal footing with the author: supplementing, describing translator’s ideas in a preface and in footnotes, “hijacking” the translation from the author, etc.,⁶ but what is important for the purposes of the present study is the premise on which all of these strategies are grounded: the basic notion of dehierarchisation of the author/translator power relations and giving both of them an equal right to speak in their own voice – which obviously is a literal trans-fer into the discourse of

⁴ Historically speaking, it has been a widespread belief that translation was the only form of expression in which women could realize their writerly potential, as they were not able to enjoy the “privileges of full authorship” (Simon 1996: 39), but e.g. Sherry Simon claims that this kind of activity could indeed have an emancipatory character (1996: 36–46).

⁵ Which according to Mellissa Wallace is what the feminist discourse in translation is about (2002: 70).

⁶ For details about the practical application of the particular feminist translation strategies, see e.g. Luise von Flotow (1991: 69–84).
meaning and absolute political engagement are the primary characteristics of feminist translation. Should we punish it for them? Why? Because it can be beautiful and it abounds in bodily metaphors? Because instead of masking it un masks its ideological footing? Because it is to be understood as a performative act, an instantiation of Butlerian critical mimesis that does not fall into the trap of Aristotelian resemblance but engages it in a play which uncovers its discriminatory presuppositions? I am not Odysseus, who would meander between those monsters of excess, sacrificing a number of faithful companions on the way. Before I cast my critical judgement on a translation work and start to discipline and punish, I will try to question the assumptions I have cherished so far. I will make an effort and strive to understand translatory monsters, and then I may end up liberating Charybdis and falling in love with Scylla.

trans. Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik

Bibliography


23 Or perhaps rather monsters created by hegemonic jealousy, as they were “bodies changed / Into new forms” by male envy / envy for a man Ovid (2010: 5).


Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik is a translator and Ph.D. candidate at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland. Her interests include medieval and renaissance studies, medievalism as well as literary theory. She is working on two Ph.D. projects: “Anatomy of Monstrosity: From Grendel to Blade” and “Women, Violence and Poetics of Revenge in Renaissance England.” She has contributed to a feminist anthology Teorie wywrotowe (Subversive Theories; forthcoming 2013) and to the international project “Shakespeare in Central Europe” (Bratislava).