

Negotiating the Difference between Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* and its Greek Translation

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This paper studies gender-related issues and concerns in the translation of Anglophone woman-oriented fiction into Greek. After a comparative analysis of a selected case study, namely Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* and its respective Greek translation, the role of translation in producing a text that subscribes to or highlights gender identities and undermines others is thoroughly examined. The methodology applied draws upon descriptive and systemic translation theorists, while it consists of description, ideological explanation and socio-cultural discussion of the effects that influence the production of the target text. The discussion concludes by analyzing the complexity of translation as an act of migration towards varied destinations and different audiences.

The dialectical relationship between translation and literature has caused endless discussions on what constitutes "literature" and "translation," and on what the exact relationship is between them. The very use of the terms "literature" and "translation" is symptomatic of the causal way in which the aforementioned notions have so far been taken for granted. Neither concept, however, is static or predictable. Literary translation is possible through its very impossibility: the "survival" of literature through translation becomes a reality when the multiplicity of the ST (systemic translation) encounters the Other and is negotiated into a new self. It becomes an "event" - to borrow Harvey's term - which has the potential to reveal challenges, transgressions and contradictions, between the target systemic configuration of values and the possibility of ideological novelty. This paper addresses a problem of ideological exchange, namely the translation of feminine novelistic voice from English to Greek, on the assumption that woman-oriented issues and concerns tend to be silenced or homogenized within the context of the Greek literary system.

The paper is structured in the following way: after an exploration of gender issues in translation and a reference to the symbolic representation of women in Greek literature, a comparative analysis of the source and target text versions of Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* is offered. Specifically, I will compare the source text and its Greek translation looking for shifts of the outward presentation and packaging of the translation. The tensions and strains present in the discourse constituted by the aforementioned elements of approach to the translated text are investigated, in order to examine the way that the receiving system has dealt with the feminist content of the text, and the manner in which translation practice reflects ideological issues and concerns in target versions of texts.

Translation and Feminism

The exploration of gender issues in translation from a feminist perspective has covered a wide variety of themes, such as gender and the metaphors of translation, women and translation through history, the translation of feminist writing, feminist translation strategies, and feminist translation theory. Feminist discourse and the translation of feminist writing have questioned the stereotypical politics of authority and originality. In the 1970s and early 1980s feminist writing was radical in the sense that it sought to subvert the conventional syntactic, semantic and lexical structure of patriarchal language - defined by von Flotow as "the language forged and used by the institutions in society largely ruled by men" (8) - since it was experimental and because it created new words, new spellings, new grammatical constructions, new images and metaphors.

The political underpinnings of "l'écriture au féminin" led to literary artifacts that were both creative and critical. A new fusion between the author and the critic/translator occurred that negated the original creativity of the former, as well as the neutrality of the latter. The writer and the critic/translator were "self-reflexively biased" and adopted a particular ideological point of view (88-90). The translators of experimental feminist writing used linguistic devices such as naming strategies and grammatical gender marking to highlight how gender is represented in and through language. Translation was perceived as a fruitful exchange of ideas operating through two different minds, each with its own approaches to language and its own politics (95).

Although it was not a case of experimental feminist writing, the translation of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* served as an example to emphasize the need for a co-operative translator. In the English translation of the text whole passages, quotations, and the names of seventy-eight women were left out

by the translator, Howard Parshley, in an attempt to undermine the historical account that supported Beauvoir's feminist theory (Saldanha 10). The negative impact of inappropriate translations such as Parshley's has generally been avoided in the English translations of contemporary feminist writing. The work of three French feminists, namely Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Helene Cixous had a great impact on Anglo-Saxon culture. The English literary system introduced French feminist theory and highlighted the linguistic aspects of patriarchy inherent in these texts. Cixous, for example, uses poetic language to elaborate her theoretical arguments. She states that:

writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural - hence political, typically masculine - economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction. (337)

The complexities of translating her writing have encouraged translators to comment extensively on their work. In contrast, Kristeva's writing has evoked relatively little commentary from translators. This is mainly attributed to the fact that Kristeva's work is not a "text" but simply expository prose (Simon 102). At the same time, Irigaray's distinct styles and performative tactics make it difficult for any reader to grasp the totality of her rhetoric. Her extreme attention on gender-related aspects of words and their etymological and philosophical histories demand an equally attentive translator, able to transfer the meaning of her writings to the target culture (Simon 105).

Despite the difficulties involved, the translators of feminist texts benefited from the theories which advocate that meaning is always re-created anew and reject the necessity to remain faithful to means of communication that limit the expression of certain realities. The practice of translation becomes a process of mediation that does not stand above ideology but works through it (Simon 8). This active form of poetics enhanced the "visibility" of the feminist translator in the sense that s/he views his or her work as an integral part of his or her Weltanschauung. Translators of feminist writing also discuss their work and present their views in scholarly articles and autobiographical accounts of their experience. The application of principles belonging to a feminist discourse that promotes the construction of new meanings and, at the same time, the deconstruction of traditional, patriarchal discourse revolutionized the practice of translation (Saldanha 13-14). These principles were borrowed from post-modernist and post-struct-

turalist theories that advocated that there is no fixed point of reference and as a consequence no text abides by objective or universal criteria. Translation is now recognized as *écriture*, a form of production rather than a mechanical reproduction of the primary text (Arrojo 149). Anglophone feminist translators emphasize the visibility of the translator, in the same way Venuti does (see Venuti 1995), but also stress the importance of the feminist identity of the translator and the feminist aim of their project.

A feminist translation practice has not yet become visible in the Greek literary system. Translators do not usually provide metatexts to accompany their discourses and they tend not to reflect on how the source texts and authors are received in the target culture. There is a huge gap between the production of Anglo-Saxon and Greek feminist bibliography (Krontiris 64). The major reason behind that attitude is the idea that women are inferior to men. Their status and their gender, combined with their difficult economic condition, have prevented Greek women from affirming their own culture and generating their own artistic discourse (Patsalidis 86). Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Helene Cixous suggest a mode of writing that is cyclical, emotive, protean and profuse, “rebellious against the rigid definitions of phallogocentrism”¹ (Sakelliou-Schultz and Dokou 2). The point here is to see the power of an “open, non-linear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic discourse as opposed to, or clearly different from, preconceived, oriented, masterly or ‘didactic’ languages” (Makward 96) - in other words, to realize how the notion of “woman” interacts with literature, in all its inherited or inherent complexities. Thus a feminist analysis does not intend to divide the individual from its tradition, but to signal a more delicate tradition.

The Greek literary tradition, however, reflects the patriarchal attitudes of its society on the Other. Given the fact that the three French intellectuals are internationally acknowledged, their work is not widely known in Greece. Some of their texts have been translated into Greek, but they are not presented as works of *écriture féminine*. This altered perception of translation affects the “jagged relationship between rhetoric and logic, condition and effect of knowledge” in the target system (Simon 143). In the following section, I will trace the evolution of this perception by commenting upon the symbolic representation of women in literature.

1. Cixous problematized the concept of *logos* as a discourse and signification system already codified with patriarchal ideas, a notion that has been termed as the *phallogocentrism* of the symbolic.

Symbolic Representation of Women in Greek Literature

Female characters in the work of contemporary Greek writers reflect their place in Greek society. The characters they create understand the problems of their social position, yet their "emancipated activity" is restricted by traditional cultural norms regarding marriage and motherhood (Patsalidis 85). Subordination to existing hierarchical rules does not necessarily imply that all characters unquestionably accept male standards. Many writers create female characters who want to overcome the conventional companionship of husband and family and find a place where the "axis of power exchange will be different" (Dolan 163). The question raised in these literary artifacts, however, is whether these women can maintain their independence and pursue their goals in a society where the male spirit of hegemony seeks to assimilate every individual into a homogeneous group (Patsalidis 90). Usually, women who dare to ignore the patriarchal rule are faced with inner conflict and ambivalent feelings, frequently resulting in abandoning promising careers and goals for the sake of marriage and motherhood (Makri-Tsilipakou 91).

Literary discourse in Greece is dominated by male writers who promote an indirect reflection and transmission of values from a position of value, namely, the male authorial voice. This male authorial voice is doubly charged, once as the representation of the dominant discourse and then again as the male voice they represent as authors. In a system that is still pervaded by gender bias, Otherness is represented through the female figure that acquires the position of object as opposed to the position of subject occupied by the male. Generally speaking, the Greek literary canon employs dualities such as "man" versus "woman," "activity" versus "passivity," "originality" versus "reproduction." As Cixous states in *The Newly Born Woman*:

one can no more speak of "woman" than of "man" without being trapped in within an ideological theater where the proliferation of representations, images, reflections, myths, identifications, transform, deform, constantly change everyone's Imaginary and invalidate in advance any conceptualization. (Cixous and Clement 83)

Regardless of categories and ideological intentions, it is possible to say that the symbolic representation of women in Greek literature reflects their uneasy position in Greek society. The fictitious female characters are able to understand their position in a masculinist society, yet they are too constrained by traditional rules to broaden their gender activity, and as a result, they usually operate within domestic conflicts (Patsalidis 99).

Within a society that operates under the enormous weight of its tradition

and history on the one hand, and the still rigid patriarchal attitudes on the other, women partake in the formation of the canon by abiding to stereotypical metaphors of the feminine. To illustrate, stereotypes of the traditional angel/enchantress dichotomy, where the feminine is either frail and dependant, or catastrophic and independent, are used to portray women in Greek literature (Sakelliou-Schultz and Dokou 1). Fortunately, some highly acclaimed Greek women poets such as Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, and Eleni Vakalo address the tension between the social and the gender identity in an attempt to subvert the conventions of traditional Greek literature. Anghelaki-Rooke repeatedly attacks the sanctimonious order of religion, myth and history - all defining elements in Greek tradition - that oppress women. Eleni Vakalo directs towards a female experience that embraces women and their representative metaphors as a multitudinous gender category. Her writing not only derives from spontaneous feminine feelings, but also consciously identifies itself as feminine and as a challenge to male Greek literary tradition (Sakelliou-Schultz and Dokou 4-8). A simple revision of the canon though is not enough, and indeed it may not be feasible given its nature and the nature of *logos*. As Pireddu claims "the male text is neither totally obliterated nor faithfully reproduced: like an ancient parchment, it is partially erased to make room for another story - the female story - thus creating an interplay of transparency and opacity between the two levels" (Pireddu qtd. in Sakelliou-Schultz and Dokou 15). Yet, as with Rooke's and Vakalo's writing, "l'écriture au féminin" emerges; still, there is only silence to write their stories in. The deconstructive feminine writing in Greece must still find the audience that will understand it, and in that respect it is still at a self-admitted disadvantage in comparison to the canonical *logos*.

The Case of *The Vagina Monologues*

In her poetical feminist tracts, French Lacanian theorist Luce Irigaray views the female genitalia as a second set of lips, a second means of communication. Playwright and writer Evé Ensler has taken the aforementioned proposition into performance with her much acclaimed, Obie Award winning *The Vagina Monologues*. Ensler decided to write this vagina celebration when she heard a female friend talking slightly about her female genitalia. Determined to let the vagina speak for itself, Ensler interviewed over two hundred women of diverse ages and cultural backgrounds about their experiences of sexuality, giving voice to their innermost fantasies and fears. "At first women were reluctant to talk," Ensler notes; "they were a little shy, but once they got going, you could not stop them." (Ensler: back cover

blurb). They discuss issues ranging from gynecological exams to lesbianism, from first sexual encounters to rape. The outcome of these interviews, *The Vagina Monologues*, is a play that violates taboos by substituting women's voices for the deafening silences that perpetuate sexism. The title itself perpetuates the notion that the personal is the political. Enslar is interested in the way sexuality determines the social order, as *The Vagina Monologues* are informed by her own experience as a rape survivor. She notes that myths and fears can fade away when people start uttering the word "vagina" and express the multiplicity of emotions, sensations, symbols and experiences associated with it. Enslar's previous work had a similar political stance, using the female voice to identify problems and demand change. She has written books about homeless women, women in prison and nuclear disarmament. Her work aims to expose the underexposed and the shameful by giving voice to neglected minorities.

Target Text Shifts

According to the polysystemic and descriptive theoretical framework, the practical procedure of comparing the text and its translation should start from the immediate context and paratext of a translation, since they can provide useful clues to the actual make-up of a text. Indeed, a closer look at the blurb of the two editions reveals that the focus is different: the English edition includes excerpts referring to the impact of the monologues from renowned sources such as *The New York Times* and *Variety*. It also contains a brief commentary by the author herself, where she states how she originally conceived the idea to write about the vaginas. She mentions that "[women] get very excited [about talking about their vaginas], mainly because no one's ever asked them before." Her statement is further complemented by Gloria Steinem's words: "Women have entrusted Eve with their most intimate experiences [...] I think readers, men and women, will emerge from these pages feeling more free with themselves - and about each other." Gillian Anderson also states that this book opens up "the world to a different consciousness of the essence of women." At the centre of the blurb, a short summary about the book and the impact from the performance of the play has been incorporated. What is more, at the bottom end of the blurb there is a straightforward appeal to "join the V-Day Movement," a dynamic grassroots movement aimed to stop any kind of violence against women that was actually inspired by *The Vagina Monologues*, accompanied by the relevant web address for further information about the organization. This appeal to sensitize the readers is completely absent from the blurb of the

Greek edition. There is absolutely no reference (neither here nor at any other part of the book) to the V-Day Movement and, as a result, the target reader remains completely unaware of its existence. The format of the Greek blurb looks like a summary of the play: it starts by posing questions such as “If your vagina got dressed, what would it wear?” or “If your vagina could talk, what would it say, in two words?” and then it proceeds to the statement of the subject of the book. The function of the questions, which are actually the titles of the first chapters, is to attract the readers’ attention by touching upon a taboo subject, a topic that would not be openly discussed within the context of Greek society. As Sakelliou-Schultz and Dokou (6) state “for a culture as richly inundated and conscious of its myths as the Greek one, such a palimpsest deconstruction entails serious audacity.” What is more, in an attempt to make the translation more exotic, the Greek editors state that the play has been performed in New York by a star-studded cast of actors including Glenn Close, Whoopi Goldberg, Susan Sarandon, Gloria Steinem, Marisa Tomei and Winona Ryder, while they make no reference to the Greek performance and actors of the play. All in all, the Greek blurb is self-reflexive in the sense that it does not provide extensive comments from outer sources as the English does. In fact, the only excerpt from another source is the brief comment from *The New York Times* on the inside cover of the Greek blurb, which stresses the “cunning” character of Ensler’s writing.

If we now turn the book over, we notice some differences between the two versions of the play. In the English edition the focal point is Eve Ensler’s photograph from the performance of the play, framed by the title of the book and the indication that this edition includes a foreword by Gloria Steinem. The outcome is a powerful image of a woman who dominates the space around her and is not afraid to utter the word “vagina” loudly - hence the large letters indicating the word “vagina” underscore the word “vagina” in the title. In contrast, the Greek front cover perpetuates the stereotypical representation of femininity and the dominance of patriarchy by choosing to portray a rose on the front cover. A rose not only stands as the archetype of feminine beauty and elegance, but it is also an instrument of men imposing their desire upon women. It represents a shared cognitive model that allows language speakers to use non-verbal symbols to signify categories. To illustrate, traditional “stick figures” standing for men and women tend to use a skirt and long hair to denote “female.” Nonetheless, a skirt and long hair no longer reflect society; still, we understand the concepts that the symbols represent (Goddard and Patterson 52). The Greek publishing house, which promotes contemporary woman-oriented writing and whose target group is made up exclusively by women, opted for a symbol that would be immedi-

ately recognized as feminine. Indeed, in a patriarchal society that has not yet become acquainted with feminist literature, symbols like a rose serve as the most effective means to associate the cover of the book with its contents.

If we now browse through the inside of the English edition, we encounter Gloria Steinem's foreword. There, she refers to all these moments that increased her awareness of what it means to be a woman in a masculinist world and tries to abolish the old patriarchal dualism of feminine/masculine that is deeply rooted in society. This foreword is transferred to the end of the Greek version of the book, while Antonis Sourounis's short essay functions as the foreword of the edition. In his essay entitled "I and them," Sourounis narrates his own experiences with vaginas and how these have shaped his adult life. In his foreword, he does not theorize feminism in the way Steinem does, but rather prefers to state his quasi-autobiographical narrative in a humorous, almost satirical way. He does not approach such a serious issue with appropriate respect, and the question that comes immediately to my mind is why the editor (who is a woman and committed to promote women's voice in literature) decided to transpose Steinem's foreword and to replace it with the one written by Sourounis. A possible explanation might be that the content of Steinem's essay is rather provocative for the Greek literary system, since it questions the stereotypical construction of gender and, as such, should attract as little attention as possible - hence it was transferred to the end of the book. Another explanation might be that the editor wanted to avoid the classification of the book as gay/lesbian literature, since a woman writing about the vagina in the foreword would give the impression that the book belongs to that genre and, as a result, would merit no attention from the public. This hypothesis is further reinforced by the complete absence of gay/lesbian literature on the shelves of Greek bookstores; the classification of Greek and translated literature follows certain norms, and experimental or subversive fiction is not represented in that canon.

The most striking difference among the shifts at the paratext level is the alteration of Eve Enslar's introduction. The introduction of the Greek translation is a different text from the original. In the source text introduction, Enslar talks about the inspiration for the play and its unexpected success in all the countries where it has been performed. Then she juxtaposes newspaper headlines that mention facts concerning *The Vagina Monologues*. Strangely enough, the newspaper headlines are omitted from the introduction of the target text. The same applies to the paragraphs about the V-Day movement. As for the introduction per se, the Greek editor decided to deviate from the English edition. In the target text introduction, the discussion focuses on the

difficulty of uttering the word “vagina,” the censorship that Ensler had to go through in order to perform or publish the play with its full title, and how at the end she managed to increase people’s awareness about feminism. I assume that the alteration plays a crucial role in the target culture. Given the fact that the theoretical discussion about feminism has not yet been launched, this essay invites a feminist dialogue. By providing statistical data on the rape victims in Greece, it aims to alert public conscience to gender issues. The importation of foreign discursive elements is viewed positively, since the target culture lacks the models to oppose alien texts. Nonetheless, the migrant discursive elements are introduced as alien, and their foreignness is always emphasized, since the local literary system does not accept feminist fiction without any alterations (Robyns 415-417). The substitution of the source text introduction by a translation of another piece by Eve Ensler, which is deemed more appropriate for the target culture, serves as a reminder of the lack of feminist discourse in Greece and as an invitation to initiate it.

If we now turn to the target text’s macro-level omissions, additions or alterations, we will find noticeable variations from the source text. First, *The Vulva Club* chapter has been omitted from the Greek edition of *The Vagina Monologues*. In this chapter, Ensler relates the story of a woman who used to make up names for all the animate and inanimate objects around her. To illustrate, she called her hands “Gladys,” her shoulders “Shortys,” but she could not name “her down there.” One day she heard her baby-sitter calling it “itsy-bitsy” and from that moment “that name stuck, following her into adulthood” and causing her problems in her erotic life (Ensler 88). Only after she renamed it “vulva” and learned to appreciate it did she manage to acquire her true identity. The protagonist of *The Vulva Club* monologue broke the silence and reclaimed her hidden subjectivity. The self-asserting individuality that resulted from the naming of the vulva would be unacceptable in Greek literary discourse. As Koliass states in her essay “Greek Women Poets and The Language of Silence,” in writing women “do not go far beyond recording silences” (Koliass 100). Theorizing about the female body is considered unacceptable within a system where the “apparent absence of a nurturing tradition and a sense of coming into expression after years (and centuries?) of oppression and repression,” is taken for granted (100). Given the prohibiting context of bringing the feminine voice into existence, not to mention the dialectic about the female genitalia, the chapter is altogether omitted from the Greek edition of *The Vagina Monologues*.

Shifts on the macro-level occur in other parts of the book: namely, the chapter entitled *My Angry Vagina*, which comes after the discussion about

genital mutilation, has been placed earlier in the target text, while the information about female mutilation is omitted from the Greek translation. Why does this happen? The most plausible explanation is the lack of interest about issues concerning feminine identity. As I mentioned earlier, the feminine voice is silenced and there are not many individuals who state the problems that arise from the oppressive treatment of women within a patriarchal society (i.e. genital mutilation or rape). In a book that is dedicated to women and the deconstruction of patriarchy, there is only one reference - it is actually a footnote - in the introduction which mentions that the number of rape victims in Greece is approximately the same as in the United States of America, that is 500,000 rape victims, without even taking into account the rapes that are not reported (Enslar 23). Women in Greece have learned to live in silence, for they have no words to speak with because their ability to communicate is constantly being questioned (Koliass 100). And when a woman speaks in her authentic voice, she speaks with an inherited discourse which is under the control of power and the dominant class.

Conclusion

This paper was designed to explore the way woman-oriented fiction is translated in Greek. The question I posed was whether the Greek literary system promotes or neutralizes feminist issues and concerns in translation. In order to provide an answer to that question, I performed a comparative analysis of a well-known Anglophone feminist text and its respective Greek translation. The results were illuminating as far as the practice of translation is concerned: feminist issues and concerns as manifested in translated literature tend to be neutralized, or even silenced within the Greek literary system. The discourse of the Other, or if you prefer, the *logos* of difference, is likely to be regarded as trivial, private, and irrelevant to the fundamental issues and endeavors of humanity. The feminine voice tends to be constrained by a "double bind," an enormous tension between the socially defined notion of femininity and the needs of the creative mind to articulate one's own sense of self and world. Inhabiting a private, muted zone on the boundaries of patriarchal culture, the feminine voice has to struggle with this "double bind" situation between the conflicting demands of attachment versus autonomy, relation versus separation, self-denial versus self-assertion, self-sacrifice versus self-empowerment in a society whose norms and conventions restrict the literary expression of women. Translation practice tends to reflect such preferences and ideological assumptions in target versions of

texts as it is assumed to register intercultural difference in a readily visible manner.

The post-modern thinking in translation, which has been associated with feminist accounts of translation (see e.g. Simon; von Flotow), suggests that translation makes explicit the sense of layered, and possibly self-contradictory, strata of perception. The reading of the target texts, though, remains monosemic in the sense that only the stylistic elements are rendered in translation, while the deeper layers of the performance that bypasses the text are largely neglected (Scott 22-23). The post-modern turn in the practice of translation in Greece has not occurred in its totality yet. As a result, a fluent strategy of rewriting takes place whereby the translation is identified with the foreign text and the target text is “eminently readable and therefore consumable on the book market” (Venuti 4-5). In every market, however, there is a complex web of individuals who influence the final product. I am not assuming at any point that the translators themselves are uniquely responsible for the target text shifts. On the contrary, they receive varying degrees of editorial guidance from commissioners, editors, proofreaders, etc. The outcome of a translation should be sought from all those individuals who are responsible for that text, as well as to the ideological assumptions underlying contemporary discourses.

Athens, Greece

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