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Dante's 'Shameless Whore': Sexual Imagery in Anglo-American Translations of the *Comedy*

Abstract

This article focuses on the strategies pursued by Anglo-American translators in dealing with Dante's sexual imagery in the *Comedy*. The author attempts to explain why the original imagery — which condemns a corrupt Roman Catholic Church — has sexist connotations, and why it is reproduced in most translations in the corpus. "Fidelity" or adequacy with respect to sexual/sexist images seems striking in view of the fact that certain translators bowdlerize the source text or tone down the boldness of its vernacular style. It is suggested that the patriarchal nature of both the Italian and English languages explains why the use of sexist imagery is tolerated (or perhaps even encouraged) in literary texts. The findings of the analysis are then brought to bear on one important question: should the translation scholar aim to bring about "politically correct" changes in translation practice, that is, changes attenuating the offensiveness of the original language? The author advocates a descriptive approach, even though "gender and translation" seems more politicized than other areas of research within Translation Studies. The paper concludes that Translation Studies may benefit from the findings of gender studies, provided scholars in this area do not attempt to change actual translation practice and focus on the hermeneutics of translation. In fact, gender scholars can make an important contribution to Translation Studies by focusing on the ideological nature of the gendered construction of meaning.

Key words : Dante, translation, gender studies, sexism, imagery

Résumé

Cet article s'intéresse aux stratégies adoptées par les traducteurs anglo-américains en ce qui a trait à l'imagerie sexuelle dans la *Comédie* de Dante. L'auteur tente d'expliquer pourquoi l'imagerie originale — qui condamne une Église Catholique corrompue — possède des connotations sexistes et pourquoi celles-ci se retrouvent dans la plupart des traductions du corpus. Ce souci de « fidélité » ou de justesse surprend si l'on considère que certains traducteurs expurgent le texte d'origine et/ou atténuent l'impudence de son style vernaculaire. On suggère que la nature patriarcale de l'anglais et de l'italien explique que l'utilisation d'une imagerie sexiste soit tolérée (voire encouragée) dans les textes littéraires. Ces découvertes nous amènent à nous poser une question importante : le traducteur doit-il, dans sa pratique,

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chercher à rendre le texte « politiquement correct » en atténuant le caractère offensant de la langue d'origine? L'auteur préconise une approche descriptive, bien que la notion de « genre et traduction » semble plus politisée que d'autres dans le domaine de la traductologie. On en conclut que la traductologie peut tirer profit des découvertes réalisées dans le domaine des études sur les rôles masculins et féminins, qui n'essaient pas de modifier la pratique de la traduction mais se concentrent plutôt sur son herméneutique. En effet, les chercheurs dans ce domaine peuvent apporter une contribution importante à la traductologie en se concentrant sur la nature idéologique de la construction de sens sexuée.

Mots-clés : Dante, traduction, études sur les rôles masculins et féminins, sexisme, imagerie

I. Introduction

¹This article analyzes a corpus that includes the most significant and successful translations of the *Divine Comedy* in English: Boyd (1802, British); Cary (1844, British); Binyon (1947, British); Sayers (1949, British); Ciardi (1954, American); Bickersteth (1955, British); Musa (1971, American); Sisson (1981, British); Mandelbaum (1995, American). In the corpus, there are also four high-quality renderings of *Inferno*: Phillips (1985, British); Pinski (1994, American); Ellis (1994, British) and Halpern, ed. (1994, a collection of translations by a group of twentieth-century English-language poets — of whom only Macdonald (*Inferno* VII) and Williams (*Inferno* XIX) will be considered here)^[1].

²This article will focus on a specific type of sexual imagery in the *Comedy*: that expressing a condemnation of the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church^[2].

³Dante argued against the belief that spiritual and temporal power should be vested in the same person. He put forward the doctrine that Pope and Emperor should be independent of each other and exercise their authorities in distinct spheres: spiritual and temporal. The Church should concern herself (or itself?) only with the exercise of spiritual power, her (its?) sole rightful prerogative. Dante believed that the Popes' lust for temporal power was the real source of perversion in his troubled times; corrupt Popes and clergymen, he argued, contaminated the spiritual leadership of Christianity. It is small wonder that the indictment of a degenerate Catholic Church was uppermost in Dante's mind. Consider, for example, the sale of indulgences, a widespread practice that provoked the scorn of religious reformers until the Protestant Reformation.

⁴The Florentine poet employed sexual imagery that linked together the notions of whoredom, adultery, fornication and avarice. But why did Dante choose this type of imagery, which would have been shocking to the pious fourteenth-century reader, in order to describe a corrupt Church? Consider the contemptuous image of the Church as the "*puttana sciolta*" (dishevelled or shameless whore) in *Purgatorio*, XXXII. 148-150. In fact, Dante followed in the footsteps of the heretics and religious reformers of his day, who had frequent recourse to sexual images when they attacked the Church's lust for temporal power.

⁵Like his contemporaries, Dante uses the metaphor of marriage to describe the sacred union between the Church and its spiritual office. This metaphor was employed by Christian writers of the first century: "in *Cor* 11: 2 and *Eph* 5: 21-32, the whole Christian community in *Corinth* and the whole universal church (respectively) are seen as the bride of Christ as husband" (Tuckett, 1992, p. 125). St. Paul, too, uses the image of the Church as Christ's bride in the

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new Testament (Warner, 1976, p. 124). In fact, the “mystic marriage with Christ” is a recurrent theme in medieval Christian texts, where Christ often appears as a bridegroom while the Virgin Mary is “identified with the Church, the bride of Christ” (p. 125). In fact, “as a figure of the Church, the Virgin Mary, was associated with the bride of the Song of Songs” (p. 128), a remarkable text containing “luxuriant images of desire and longing” (p. 125). The Song of Songs was a powerful reservoir of “erotic imagery” (p. 126) for Christian exegetes, who identified “the lover of the song with Christ and his beloved with the Church, each Christian soul, and the Virgin Mary” (p. 125). In this text, Christ and the Church are represented as a man and a woman who are kissing each other — the sacred kiss symbolizes Christ’s mystic union with the Church and his sacrifice on the cross that redeems humanity (Pertile, 1998, p. 214).

⁶The bridal metaphor, in its turn, conjures up the images of adultery and prostitution, which forcefully stigmatize a corrupt clergy. Clergymen who sell or obtain an ecclesiastical office by fraudulent means, Dante argues, prostitute a gift of God for money. The Roman Catholic Church — the bride of Christ — has become a “whore” because she has betrayed her spouse for thirst of wealth and power (temporal dominions).

⁷Dante and his contemporaries often referred to the whore of Babylon, which is a symbol of the Church’s corruption that derives from the condemnation of pagan Rome in early Christianity. The sexual images of whoredom, fornication, etc., were therefore widespread in those medieval religious circles that openly advocated the reformation of (what was perceived as) a corrupt and dissolute Church (p. 204). Unfavourable sexual connotations, it may be argued, are inevitable because *Ecclesia* (the Church) is grammatically feminine in Latin. But the question is far more complex. Dante has recourse to a conception of sexuality and the feminine that was deeply ingrained in his culture. It seems that the grammatical gender of *Ecclesia* was not purely arbitrary for medieval Christianity: the construction of a gendered subject — the feminine *Ecclesia* — was necessary in order to unleash a powerful condemnation of clerical corruption. I shall return later to the implications of this observation, which fully discloses the significance of gender in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

⁸Let us now consider Dante’s conception of love and sexuality. Dante rejects the classical model represented by Virgil’s Dido, whose love is a burning passion, that is, *eros* (p. 101). Rather, he subscribes to the notion of love as saving force, that is, *caritas* (p. 94). Dante was influenced by a number of religious sources that idealize non-carnal love. In Christian culture, in fact, sexuality is typically associated with sin and danger (p. 50). The Bible, for example, often hints at “the superior quality of non-sexual love between men” (Harris, 1984, p. 111). St. Paul condemns “carnal, or lower physical life” and claims that men and women “should seek

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spiritual things and spiritual life rather than earthly and bodily pleasures” (p. 111). The writings of the mystic Bernard of Clairvaux illustrate the medieval longing for asceticism. Bernard’s use of erotic imagery in his sermons on the Song of Songs unfolds two clearly distinct dimensions of love: “carnal desire,” which “disfigures the pristine soul” (Warner, 1976, p. 129) and a pure, non-carnal love characterized by “the leap of the soul towards God, which “restores the primal resemblance” (ibid.) between humanity and God. The crucial point is that carnal desire stands in the way of pure, mystic love: “The suppression of fleshly appetites can assist the soul on its upward climb. Through austerity, the Greek *askesis*, the soul can be emptied of self-interest and filled with love” (p. 129).

⁹Dante, therefore, draws on the pejorative view of sexuality that was widespread in his time: a truly spiritual Church suppresses earthly appetites just as a pure lover renounces carnal desire. Only non-sexual love — that is, desire untainted by temporal power — makes it possible for the clergy to leap towards God. The metaphors of whoredom, fornication etc. — which stigmatize the triumph of the flesh over the spirit — aptly stand for the Church’s corruption originating in a unholy desire for earthly possessions. The clerics coveting temporal aggrandizement subvert the ideal-spiritual order of things, which draws its strength from a mystical conception of love. The *Comedy*’s sexual imagery, in conclusion, forcefully represents the clerics’ depraved lust of earthly things, which is utterly incompatible with Dante’s Christian ideal of spirituality (Pertile, 1998, p. 86).

¹⁰It is unsurprising that the target Protestant culture found these metaphors congenial, given its entrenched hostility to the Church of Rome (p. 204). Protestant theologians in British culture turned to Dante because his vision of the Church as the whore of Babylon suited “their own anti-papal views” (Yates, 1951, pp. 98-99). Two examples must suffice. The Anglican Bishop John Jewel (1522-1571) in his *Apology for the Church of England* (1560) regarded Dante as a fierce opponent of the papacy, and approved of his description of the Church as the “whore of Babylon” (Chiminelli, 1921, pp. 220-221; Toynbee, 1909, p. xxiii; Yates, 1947, p. 40). John Foxe (1516-1587) in *The Book of Martyrs*, published in 1563, was favourably impressed by Dante’s indictment of a corrupt Church because it was couched in sexual images: the Florentine poet, he claimed, “declareth the pope to be the whore of Babylon” (in Yates, 1947, p. 44).

II. The analysis

¹¹These observations bring me to the first textual example, which contains one of the *Comedy*’s harshest invectives against the Roman Catholic Church.

Example 1

**O Simon Mago, o miseri seguaci
che le cose di Dio, che di bontade
deon essere spose, e voi rapaci
per oro e per argento avolterate.**

Inferno, XIX. 1-4

O Simon Magus! O wretched followers of his,
who the things of God, which should be married
to goodness, and you rapacious,
for gold and silver adulterate (my translation).

¹²In *Inferno* XIX the Florentine poet focuses on the sin of simony, that is, the sale (and therefore illegitimate possession) of ecclesiastical offices. The word “simony” derives from the name of a magician, Simon, who sought to acquire a gift of God by illegitimate means: he tried to purchase the power to administer the Holy Spirit from the Apostles. This episode is related in the *Acts of the Apostles* 8: 9-24.

¹³Simonists, that is, the evil clergymen in Dante’s time, “adulterate” the things of God for gold and silver; in other words, they accept money in exchange for the Church’s ecclesiastical offices. Because simonists trafficked in spiritual goods in their earthly lives, they are condemned to eternal torments in hell. The English equivalent of “*avolterate*” is “adulterate,” that is, “defile by adultery” or “fornicate”; the words “*per oro e per argento*” (for gold and silver), suggest that “adultery” and “prostitution” are inextricably linked together.

¹⁴Sexual imagery is present in most English versions of Dante, except for Boyd’s and Ciardi’s, where there are no sexual overtones. Boyd (1802: 251) writes that simonists “profane” the Church, while Ciardi (1954: 98) says that they are “pandering for silver and gold the things of God.” Mandelbaum employs the verb “fornicate” as a translation of “*avolterate*”; Sayers (1949: 188) prefers the noun “adultery.” The other translators in the corpus have recourse to the image of prostitution. In Cary (1844: 45), Binyon (1947/1979: 100), Bickersteth (1955: 68), Musa (1971: 239), Phillips (1985: 154) and Pinski (1994: 113), simonists “prostitute” (are “prostituting” in Ellis 1994: 113) the things of God. Sisson (1981: 123) writes that corrupt clergymen turn the things of God into “prostitutes.” In Williams’s text (1993: 84), simonists “whore away” their spiritual office.

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¹⁵Moreover, it is interesting to observe that Cary and Sayers harp on sexual imagery. Cary (1844: 45) says that the followers of Simon Magus “prostitute” the things of God “in adultery” (two lexical items translate “*avolterate*”). Sayers (1949: 188) uses the noun “adultery” and also describes simonists as “pimps,” which is an interpolation.

Example 2

**Ma Vaticano e l'altre parti elette
di Roma che son state cimitero
a la milizia che Pietro seguette,
tosto libere fien de l'avoltero.**

Paradiso, IX. 139-142

But the Vatican, and the other chosen parts
of Rome that were the cemetery
of the soldiery which followed Peter,
will soon be free of this adultery (my translation).

¹⁶In this passage (which is linked to *Inf.*, XIX. 1-4 discussed above) Dante employs once more the metaphor of “adultery” to stigmatize the abuses of the clergy and Popes. The soul uttering the words above is prophesying the reform of a degenerate Church.

¹⁷Dante's sexual metaphor is preserved in all the translations in the corpus: “adult'rer's doom” (Boyd, 1802: 127), “adult'rous bond” (Cary, 1844: 149), “adulteries” (Sayers, 1949: 129), “adultery” (Ciardi, 1954: 447; Bickersteth, 1955: 297; Musa, 1971: 109; Sisson, 1981: 390; Mandelbaum, 1995: 422). Binyon (1947: 415) uses a forceful expression, “whoredom,” which explicitly links the notions of adultery and prostitution.

Example 3

**Di voi pastor s'accorse il Vangelista,
quando colei che siede sopra l'acque
puttaneggiar coi regi a lui fu vista.**

Inferno, XIX. 106-108

It was shepherds like you the Evangelist had noticed
when he saw her, who sits upon the waters,

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a-whoring with the kings (my translation).

¹⁸These verses contain a forceful invective against the Roman Catholic Church. The verb “*puttaneggiar*,” which literally means “whoring,” is powerfully arresting (Dante verbalizes the noun *puttana*, that is, “whore”).

¹⁹The woman who is “whoring” symbolizes the Church in the act of fornicating with the kings. Dante alludes to the Biblical image of *Revelation* (17. 1-5), to which I shall return in section III.1. According to Saint John the Evangelist, the whore stands for a dissolute Imperial Rome. In Dante she represents a corrupt Church. All the translators in the corpus reproduce the original sexual image, except for Boyd (1802: 256), who modifies the source text considerably (“Those sordid scenes the man of Patmos saw,/When he beheld the foul enchantress draw/The royal train to wear her bonds abhorr’d.”).

²⁰The translators may be divided into two groups. The first settles for the image of whoredom, thereby adhering closely to the source text’s “*puttaneggiar*”: the corrupt Church is “a-whoring” in Binyon (1947: 104) and Bickersteth (1955: 71), “playing whore” in Musa (1971: 243), “whoring” in (Phillips, 1985: 158); in Cary’s version (1844: 46) the Church’s behaviour is described as “filthy whoredom.” The second group of translators prefers the image of fornication, perhaps because of its Biblical overtones. Fornicate, in fact, means “to have sex with someone who you are not married to; a formal or Biblical word used showing disapproval” (CED, p. 667). The noun “fornication” occurs in Sayers (1949: 191), Ciardi (1954: 100), Sisson (1981: 126), Phillips (1985: 158) and Pinski (1994: 197), while Williams (1993: 90) uses the verb “fornicating.” Phillips (1985) belongs to both groups of translators in that he harps on (or makes explicit) the original image by employing two closely related items: “whoring fornication.” The use of fornication — or fornicating, for that matter — does not represent a loss in meaning, since the translators who use this word have already established a clear link between prostitution and adultery in their translations of the beginning of this canto.

Example 4

**Sicura, quasi rocca in alto monte,
seder sovrasso una puttana sciolta
m’apparve con le ciglia intorno pronte.**

Purgatorio, XXXII. 148-150

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Secure as a fortress on a high mountain,
before me sat a shameless whore
with eyes glancing in all directions (my translation).

²¹In the verses above, Dante describes a procession in Earthly Paradise in which there is a chariot representing the Church. He alludes again to the prophetic language of John the Evangelist: the “*puttana sciolta*” (shameless or loose whore) on the Church’s chariot is the *meretrix magna* of the *Apocalypse* (17, 1-5), who sits on the beast and fornicates with the kings. The second part of this canto, therefore, is connected to *Inferno* XIX.

²²Consistent with the tendency observed so far, the translators in the corpus retain the source text’s sexual image conveying the indictment of the Court of Rome. Only Boyd departs from the original in that he prefers the image of adultery: “*puttana sciolta*” becomes “adulteress” in his version. All the other translators write either “whore” (Cary, 1844: 129; Bickersteth, 1955: 150; Mandelbaum, 1995: 370) or “harlot” (Binyon, 1947: 360; Sayers, 1949: 326; Ciardi, 1954: 383; Sisson, 1981: 343), which are near-synonyms. The only difference between “whore” and “harlot” is that the latter is an old-fashioned expression for prostitute (CED, p. 769). Interestingly, Musa (1971: 347) intensifies the indictment by making an addition, “sluttish,” which dwells on the original sexual image. The whore, in his version, is “casting bold, *sluttish* glances all around” (my italics).

Example 5

Non è senza cagion l’andare al cupo:

Vuolsi ne l’alto, là dove Michele

Fé la vendetta del superbo strupo.

Inferno, VII. 12

It is not without cause our journey to the pit:
It is willed on high, where Michael
Took vengeance on the proud rape (my translation).

²³In the source text there is a clear sexual image: “*strupo*” (*stupro* in modern Italian), that is, rape. This is a vivid metaphor for Lucifer’s revolt against God, which derives from biblical sources (*Ier.* 2, 16; *Revelation* 12: 7-9).

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²⁴Oddly enough, in the light of the evidence considered so far, the vast majority of translators in the corpus eliminate Dante's forceful image: "when Michael hung" (Boyd, 1802: 147); "arrogant violation" (Sisson, 1981: 73), "arrogant rebellion" (Mandelbaum, 1995: 86), "rebel arrogance" (Binyon, 1947: 36), "bold assault on God" (Musa, 1971: 129), "revolt of the proud" (Ellis, 1994: 41), "ambition and mutiny" (Ciardi, 1954: 34), "pride's rebellion" (Pinski, 1994: 67), "proud mutiny" (Phillips, 1985: 58), "the doomed/those angels Michael vanquished and cast down" (Macdonald, 1993: 30). True, it may be argued that Sisson's (1981: 73) "violation" has a sexual connotation in certain contexts (SOD, p. 3583). However, this word is not typically associated with sex (CED, p. 1866). The most likely meaning of "violation" in Sisson's version is "violent assault." The same observation applies to Musa's choice of "bold assault on God" (1971: 129). Assault means physically to attack someone (CED, p. 88); the sexual connotation comes to the fore in a clear manner only in the expression "sexual assault" (p. 88).

²⁵The only versions retaining an unmistakable sexual image—even though a slightly modified one—are Cary's, Bickerteth's and Sayers'. Cary (1844: 26) describes the rebellious Archangel as "the first adulterer proud." In Bickersteth (1955: 25), the rape becomes "proud whoredom;" in Sayers (1949: 110), it is transformed into a "proud adultery."

²⁶The translators who eliminate the image of "rape" or "adultery" do so presumably in order to explicate the original message. In fact, the reference to the Angels who rebelled against God is immediately intelligible in their versions. This begs the question of why Dante translators do not translate in a manner consistent with the tendency observed earlier, whereby they strive to achieve formal equivalence even at the cost of producing a slightly opaque text. In fact, a commentary is necessary to fully grasp the significance of Dante's sexual imagery, and this applies to both the nineteenth- and twentieth-century target text reader. Moreover, one could argue that the elimination of sexual imagery in this last example does not depend simply on the exigency of clarifying the source text, even though the connection between "rape" and Lucifer's rebellion against God may not be immediately intelligible to a modern reader³. As we have seen, it is possible to explicate the source text by intensifying on—rather than eliminating—sexual imagery. Consider Cary's insertion of "prostitute" and Sayers' addition of "pimps" in the first example of my analysis, Phillips' interpolation of "fornication" in the third example, and Musa's addition of "sluttish" in the fourth example.

²⁷I suggest that there could be a relationship between the ideological content of the source text and the nature of the translator's acts of clarification⁴. On one hand, it could be that Cary, Sayers, Phillips and Musa make additions drawing on sexual imagery because they wish to raise the level of explicitness of the target text's message in such a way as to reinforce Dante's

indictment of a corrupt Church. On the other hand, most translators might feel comfortable with eliminating sexual imagery in the last textual example simply because the source text does not express a momentous ideological theme, that is, anticlericalism. From this point of view, the behaviour of the majority of Dante translators is not idiosyncratic in that the image of “rape” that they eliminate does not condemn the Catholic Church.

III. Discussion

III.1. Dante's sexual imagery and the symbolic structure of patriarchy

²⁸The retention of sexual imagery in Dante translations is significant because of its markedness; it runs counter to what Newmark (1982, p. 59) dubs “undertranslation,” that is, a “tendency to water down words and metaphors, a fear of the truth in the source language.” Newmark (p. 59) regards undertranslation as “the translator’s occupational disease,” namely something similar to a universal feature of translation. The translator’s quest for “adequacy” — according to Toury’s terminology — or “fidelity” — in old-fashioned terminology — in the domain of sexual imagery is foregrounded even more if we consider that the Anglo-American rewriters in my corpus are not always immune to the translator’s occupational disease: Boyd (1802), Cary (1844), Binyon (1947), Sayers (1949), and Bickersteth (1955) expurgate Dante’s swear words and generally tone down the *Comedy*’s realistic imagery and vernacular diction. This means that most translators in the 1940s and 1950s still upheld Boyd’s and Cary’s nineteenth-century idea of decorum and euphemism — the only noticeable exception is Ciardi (1954). Also translators of later generations tend to soften the violence of Dante’s demotic speech and realistic imagery. Ellis (1994) is the only translator, to my knowledge, who produced a strictly vernacular rendering.

²⁹The use of informal and vernacular language in Dante translations seems to have been no more than a theoretical possibility in the British and American literary traditions for a period lasting over two centuries, that is, from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century. On the contrary, Dante’s sexual imagery did not strike translators as being inappropriate or offensive, even though it occurred in an epic poem regarded as a classic of Western literature. The translation norm dictating bowdlerisation of literary texts had a binding force up to a certain point in time (the early twentieth century), while no norm prevented translators from using offensive imagery with obvious sexist overtones.

³⁰Why do certain translators avoid the strategies of undertranslation or euphemism when it comes to Dante’s sexual imagery? What powerful force facilitates the translators’ quest for

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“adequacy”: anticlericalism or the patriarchal nature of the English language? Sexism inherent in male-dominated language seems to be the more primordial force of the two, even though both forces are inextricably bound up in the nineteenth-century translations produced by Boyd and Cary, both of whom were certainly influenced by their anti-Roman Catholicism. I have already suggested that Cary, an Anglican Bishop, had a Protestant agenda. (Crisafulli, 1996, and 1999). That is why he reproduced all the controversial, that is, anti-clerical passages in his translation of the *Comedy* that had been added to the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* by the Catholic Church a few years after Dante's death (1321). The passages where Dante gives vent to his anticlericalism were censored in most editions of the source text published in Italy well into the nineteenth century (Martinelli, 1973, p. 75; Caesar, 1989, pp. 31 and 36). However, politico-theological considerations do not seem seriously to have affected the twentieth-century translators of Dante considered here⁵. This confirms that sexism is a powerful force facilitating the achievement of “adequacy” in the field of sexual or sexist imagery.

³¹Since Cary's time, translators in Anglo-American culture have been able to draw inspiration from a codified repertoire of sexual images or clichés, which are identical to those circulating in the source culture. In fact, this repertoire of clichés predates Dante's, and his translators', anticlericalism. The Bible itself is replete with sexual allusions taken from the semantic field of “fornication,” “prostitution,” “adultery.” As we have seen, for example, Dante's invectives against the “shameless whore,” figure of the Church of Rome, are clearly influenced by the *New Testament* (Rev. 17, 1-5):

Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters: With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication. [...] And I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: And upon her forehead *was* a name written, **MISTERY, BABYLON, THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.**

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³²Because the Judeo-Christian tradition typically associates “sexuality, language and betrayal” (Simon, 1996, p. 41), it is hardly surprising that Dante's sexual imagery has never represented a problem for Anglo-American translators. Sexism or male-dominated language is deep-rooted in the Christian tradition (consider the debate on “inclusive language” in Bible translation — on which see Von Flotow, 1997 and Simon, 1996).

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³³But is Dante's image of the Church as a "whore" genuinely "sexist"? Bearing in mind the caveat that gender is a problematic and "unstable" construct (Cameron, 1998, p. 15), I would regard this image as sexist insofar as it reflects only "men's lives, their realities, their ideas" (Von Flotow, 1997, p. 9). The *Comedy's* sexual imagery — and the Bible's, for that matter — is not innocent in that it presupposes a state of affairs which encapsulates female subjectivity in fixed, sexualized roles. It still seems a paradox, one might argue, that Dante draws on the semantic field of prostitution or whoredom — which typically stigmatizes women — to express his contempt for corrupt practices initiated and sustained by men, for a prostitute is "a person, *usually a woman*, who has sex with men in exchange for money" (CED, p. 1322; my italics). It is a well-known fact that women could not (and still cannot) administer ecclesiastical offices and sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, it is men, and men alone — the clergy and the Popes — who committed simony, a deadly sin against God. It is the Vicars of Christ who betrayed their spouse, the Church, for thirst of wealth and self-aggrandizement. Yet, the most compelling image before readers of the source text and the target texts is that of the "shameless whore" which is the epitome of degeneration and immorality.

³⁴I should like to stress that it is not only a question of male-oriented grammar and lexis impinging on Dante's stylistic choices. This is not to criticize Doyle's observations (1998, p. 153) on the biased (patriarchal) orientation of English and Italian lexis: "many negative terms for women have no masculine counterpart, and even when counterparts exist they are often little used." "Prostitute" and "whore" are cases in point. But one has to go deeper if one is to grasp the significance of sexual imagery in the *Comedy*.

³⁵Dante was not only in the grip of a male-dominated society. Nor was he simply influenced by a codified or fixed repertoire of negative sexual terms typically associated with women. In fact, I would agree with Black-Coward (1998, p. 115) that patriarchy is not simply an extra-linguistic reality reflected in language: it is a complex symbolic structure. In Dante's sexual imagery one recognizes "the conceptual structure of patriarchy, a masculine mode of perceiving and organizing the world, a male view encoded in centuries of learning so that it appears natural and inevitable" (Simon, 1996, p. 90). Dante had no choice but to personify the Church as a woman because *women and women alone are gendered or sexualized subjects within the symbolic structure of patriarchy*. Men, in fact, tend to be seen as non-gendered human beings. This, I believe, explains the paradox discussed above whereby the sin of simony, which is committed by men, is condemned by harping on the images of "prostitution" and "whoredom." Only by personifying the Church as a sexualized subject — a personification facilitated but not determined by the feminine gender of *Ecclesia* — could

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Dante forcefully condemn simony. The recourse to a gendered subject opened up powerful stylistic possibilities: Dante could strike the reader's imagination by linking together whoredom and betrayal/corruption, an association which, as we have seen, lies at the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Negative sexual categories or connotations are more often associated with women than men because the former are generally perceived as sexual beings, while the latter are often de-sexualized.

³⁶Black and Coward (1998, p. 116) are worth quoting at length on this point. Women, they claim :

[n]ever appear as non-gendered subjects. Women are precisely *defined*, never as general representatives of human or all people, but as specifically feminine, and frequently sexual, categories: whore, slag, mother, virgin, housewife (...). Women are not the norm, but this does not mean that they are *not defined*. The curious feature is exactly the excess of (sexual) definitions and categories for women. A similar profusion is not found for men, whose differentiation from one another comes not through sexual attributes and status, but primarily through occupation, or attributes of general humanity, for example, decent, kind, honest, strong. Men remain men and women become specific categories in relation to men and to other categories (...). We suggest that it is this which gives a certain discursive regularity to the appearance of gender in language.

³⁷As we have seen, medieval Christian culture valued asceticism enormously. Christian theologians and poets distinguished between two abstract dimensions of love — *eros* and *caritas* — which correspond to the battle “between the flesh and the spirit” (Warner, 1976, p. 57). What is striking is that such a battle is often conceptualized by referring to women alone, because they are “the *cause* of sinful behaviour among men” (Harris, 1984, p. 94). Let us consider two exemplary female figures, the Virgin Mary and St. Mary Magdalene, who represent two different ideals of the feminine: “consecrated chastity in the Virgin Mary and regenerate sexuality in the Magdalene” (Warner, 1976, p. 235). It is not without significance that Mary Magdalene's sexuality is regenerated when she renounces carnal love. But it is even more significant that “both female figures are perceived in sexual terms: Mary as a virgin and Mary Magdalene as a whore —until her repentance” (Warner, 1976, p. 225). Both of them are represented as gendered beings, that is, are defined exclusively in terms of their relationship to men.

³⁸This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that Christian culture has always sexualized women: “There is no place in the conceptual architecture of Christian society for a single woman who is neither a virgin nor a whore” (p. 235). Given the negative view of sexuality in Judeo-Christian culture, it is inevitable that women tend to attract a string of sexist epithets.

³⁹Medieval Christianity had an ambivalent attitude *only* towards women. On the one hand, “for the fathers of the Church after Augustine, woman is the cause of the Fall, the wicked temptress, the accomplice of Satan, and the destroyer of mankind” (p. 58). Whores and adulteresses wield enormous power in that they are capable of seducing men and convincing them to commit adultery (Harris, 1984, p. 94). The image of whore, in particular, is employed “to represent just about any and every evil deed” (p. 114). On the other hand, the Virgin Mary, being placed on the side of the spirit, represents the Christian ideal of the feminine: mystic, spiritual love — “The Platonic yearning towards the ideal, [...] is the core of the cult of the Virgin Mary” (Warner, 1976, p. 333).

⁴⁰In theory Christian theology overcomes every distinction between man and woman, both being equal in Christ (Fatum, 1995, p. 51). But, in fact, women are essentially different from men precisely because they are represented as gendered creatures. Pauline theology exemplifies this paradox of Christian thought. St. Paul considers sexuality as anti-eschatological because it relates only to “the temporary existence of this world” (p. 71). But his theology is essentially androcentric; for, according to St. Paul, only women “remain bound to the terms of sexuality” (p. 69). While he sees men as non-gendered subjects, St. Paul cannot help viewing “Christian women as women and females instead of as Christians” (p. 69). Women are first and foremost sexual creatures, whose life “is either conditioned by asceticism or [...] is determined by gender and sexuality” (p. 79). This is the reason why St. Paul condemns the conduct of women who worship unveiled. Such conduct is indecent because women should repress or hide their sexuality so as to conform to the eschatological perspective of Christianity (p. 79).

III.2. Feminism and translation studies: the question of agency and transformation

⁴¹The observations made so far raise a number of interesting questions. As Chamberlain (2000, p. 326) argues, “ideologically offensive” texts pose “an initial dilemma for the feminist translator.” If one decided to ignore such texts and avoid translating them, one “would capitulate to that logic which ascribes all power to the original” (p. 326). Should then translators try to eliminate or attenuate the offensiveness of Dante’s patriarchal imagery in the name of verbal hygiene and political correctness? Should they challenge the alleged misrepresentation of women’s experiences brought about by male discourse in source texts? Is it the translator’s duty to change negative or subordinate views of femininity as they emerge through translated texts? If the answers were in the affirmative, these questions would point to a further question: what effective metaphors could be employed if one finds Dante’s sexist

imagery unpalatable but wishes to preserve the forcefulness of his indictment of a corrupt Church? I believe this is a difficult question to answer *a priori*; a translation scholar may indeed suggest theoretical possibilities, but it is always wiser to observe actual translation practice (*a posteriori*).

⁴²The case of “*strupo*,” the last example in my analysis, suggests that there are alternative ways of dealing with sexist imagery. Translators who choose the image of “revolt,” “rebellion,” “mutiny” raise the level of explicitness in the target text in such a way as to eliminate any sexual connotation. But is this course of action really desirable? I shall leave this question without answer because I subscribe to Descriptive Translation Studies. Whether or not verbal hygiene is desirable is an issue outside the scope of descriptive and empiricist approaches to translation studies; rather, it pertains to the field of cultural politics. I believe it is necessary to implement a division of labour: scholars should not promote a specific translation method/strategy⁶, even though they may point out potential options at the translator’s disposal. Descriptivists do not seek to establish the conditions for successful translation. In the end it is always the translator who bears the burden of making the final translation choice; he or she has to take responsibility for promoting a politically progressive translation project.

⁴³It should be added, moreover, that the question of how to engage with sensitive texts is far from uncontroversial. As Von Flotow (1997, p. 45) points out, “a strategy for translating politically ‘offensive’ texts has not yet been theorized.” Suzanne Jill Levine, for example, argues that one ought to undermine the source text’s gender constructs even if this implies being a “betrayor” (Arrojo, 1994, pp. 151-152). Chamberlain, too, (2000, p. 326) argues that translators should “subvert the text,” and thereby presumably expose the fallacy of its ideology. She explains that “what must be subverted is the process by which translation complies with gender constructs.” But then she adds a disclaimer: “in this sense, a feminist theory of translation will finally be utopic” (p. 327).

⁴⁴It is unsurprising, in the light of Von Flotow’s statement quoted above, that some feminist scholars do not even advocate bowdlerizing offensive imagery/language. Not everyone believes that sexual stereotypes should be erased from texts (whether original or translated), as some “interventionists” contend. There is a school of thought, in fact, which casts doubts on the effectiveness of inclusive or non-sexist language. The argument of this school — which refers to Bible translation but is applicable to all types of texts — is that non-sexist language “softens the harsh and intransigent message of a truly patriarchal document” (Simon, 1996, pp. 124-125). Scholars adhering to this school of thought are not ‘interventionist’ because, they argue, the pursuit of verbal hygiene would be nothing but a series of “cosmetic touches”

(p. 129), which would not alter the symbolic structure of patriarchy. There are even scholars, among interventionists, who go so far as to contend that feminist translations of the New Testament should not only retain but also foreground “the patriarchal and androcentric nature of the text” (p. 130) in order to fully expose the fallacy (and pervasiveness) of male-dominated discourse. The ideological orientation of the original writer should always be visible in the target text, as a sort of warning not to forget an unjust state of affairs. Hammond (1992, p. 63), for example, is highly skeptical about inclusive translations of the Bible. The politically progressive translator should not erase the linguistic records that document past sufferings or abuses within patriarchal societies: “if the English Bible is to help women readers reclaim the memory of their foresisters, then it must portray their experiences accurately” (p. 70).

⁴⁵It is interesting to add that Massardier-Kenney (1997) and Arrojo (1994) put forward a radical critique of feminist interventionism, which draws on a sound epistemological argument. Massardier-Kenney (1997, p. 56) casts doubt on translation strategies that aim at “making the feminine visible” because she finds fault with their (alleged) assumption “that we are working with a set, stable definition of the feminine that is independent of context.” Feminist translators cannot simply operate with “predetermined gender definitions” (p. 55), whether they are of a positive or negative kind. Along the same lines, Arrojo (1994) argues against current theories advocating feminist intervention in translation, which, she contends, are based on the dubious assumption that texts are characterized by a determinable, sexist meaning — patriarchal, logocentric imagery — that the feminist translator should erase or somehow subvert. Arrojo, a post-structuralist scholar, cannot even conceive of political theories that are grounded upon the belief that texts exhibit transparent representations of the signified. Arrojo (pp. 151-152), for example, rejects Jill Levin’s politically motivated advocacy of “betrayal”: if there is no such thing as a “neutral recovery of someone else’s meaning” (p. 151), as Arrojo believes, no translator is in the position of betraying the original text. Arrojo’s perspective is pessimistic. It is simply not possible, in her opinion, to produce a politically progressive translation inscribing feminist concerns within the target text.

⁴⁶It must also be borne in mind that no call to action should overlook the conservative and norm-governed nature of translation, which explains why even the most recent twentieth-century translations, that is, those produced in the 1990s, are not affected by considerations relating to political correctness. Not even Ellis, the most *avant-garde* of Dante translators, experiments or takes liberties with the *Comedy*’s sexual imagery.

⁴⁷Toury’s (1995) law of “growing standardization” has good heuristic value here. Because translators tend to be conservative (idiosyncratic behaviour is generally sanctioned in the world of translation), they obviously avoid extreme forms of innovation, among which would

be creating totally new poetic imagery. The conservatism of translation practice explains why bowdlerization and euphemism feature in Dante translations produced in the 1940s and 1950s. It was only when the literary movement of Modernism was canonized in the Anglo-American polysystem (and therefore had lost its revolutionary impact) that all the versions of Dante started to reproduce his informal language and, to a certain extent, also his forceful realism.

⁴⁸Prevailing conservative attitudes to sexual imagery — and consequently mainstream translation strategies — can change radically only after writers and rewriters reject the symbolic structure of male-dominated language. But, then again, feminist interventionists do not face only the thorny issue of whether or not it is desirable to defeat patriarchy. They are also concerned with an even thornier dilemma: is this a feasible task? As Butler (1990, p. 7) puts it, “if gender is culturally constructed (...) could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation?” As we have seen, even an interventionist like Chamberlain (2000, p. 327) is aware that feminist strategies are not easy to theorize: how can one produce a translation that subverts patriarchal tropes that lie at the heart of the target culture?

⁴⁹A way out of this difficulty is to follow the hermeneutic path. Massardier-Kenney (1997, p. 55) claims that translators should raise their level of hermeneutic awareness of gender constructs in texts, which, ideally, should lead to an “interrogation” of gender definitions and roles. Understanding the source text’s ideological structures is more useful than trying to modify them in the name of political correctness. One possible strategy, which she calls “commentary,” is grounded in paratexts and “involves using the metadiscourse accompanying the translation to make explicit the importance of the feminine or of woman/women” (p. 60). Spivak (2000, p. 397), too, advocates a hermeneutics of translation, whereby the translator’s task is not to intervene; rather, “the task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency”.

IV. Conclusions

⁵⁰Translation is not only interesting when it exhibits evidence of manipulations, deviations or shifts from formal equivalence. It is erroneous to assume that translation scholars should focus only on whatever constitutes a translation problem (wordplay, taboo language, etc.). The translators considered in this article did not find it difficult to achieve adequacy in the area of sexual imagery. Their translation strategies, in fact, draw on gender stereotypes that are deeply ingrained in both source and target cultures. Yet, even adequate translations that show little, if any, sign of manipulations on the translator’s part are worth investigating: they may enable us

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to throw light on the process of interpretation, which, in the present article, concerns the gendered construction of meaning.

⁵¹Descriptive Translation Studies conceives of translation as a norm-governed activity. Perhaps one has to reckon with more powerful forces than translation norms, that is, forces originating in archetypal conceptual structures — patriarchy, sexism — which condition the translator's response and textual choices. Current research in Translation Studies focuses on universals of translation from a purely linguistic point of view (see note 4). But there may well be also universals of culture — universal semantic categories, tropes, etc. — which conceptualize man-woman relations and gender roles in most Western cultures.

⁵²I had to touch on the question of agency and transformation, albeit briefly, because gender studies overlap with cultural politics. It seems to me that feminist translation scholars cannot easily sweep aside the issue of interventionism. Although they are divided on what constitutes effective action, only few of them would deny that some measures against offensive language ought to be taken. The very action of foregrounding — or explaining, for that matter — the patriarchal bias within the target text is a form of intervention.

⁵³From this point of view, it may seem that the goals of Descriptive Translation Studies and gender studies are incompatible. In fact, I — as a descriptivist — firmly believe that one may deal with sensitive or highly controversial areas of research like gendered translation from a non-politicized viewpoint. True, a totally objective scholarship is a chimera. I, therefore, agree with Von Flotow (1998, pp. 9-10) that feminist scholars (but why not all scholars?) should flaunt their “identity politics,” or general orientation, as well as their “personal interests and needs.” However, I find it difficult to accept Von Flotow's view that the scholar's political identity necessarily “determines her or his insights, opinions and prejudices” (p. 10), at least as far as rigorous research is concerned (cultural politics is an entirely different matter). I prefer to subscribe to the tentative view that research is affected rather than crudely determined by the scholar's political and cultural orientation. I intuitively feel that a number of feminists would disagree with this belief. All I can say by way of conclusion is that I eagerly await new, daring translations of Dante inspired by gay or feminist theories; to these, however, I would apply the same analytical and conceptual tools I have employed in my analysis of patriarchal or sexist language.

⁵⁴Yet, this cannot be the final word on the matter. I should like to stress that there is no incompatibility or conflict between Descriptive Translation Studies and gender studies insofar as Simon (1996, p. 133) is correct in claiming that “the goal of the variety of feminist critiques is not so much to rectify the biblical text [or any other text, I should add] as to underscore the

profoundly ideological nature of interpretation and translation.” Whatever one’s position on the question of agency and transformation, scholars of all persuasions should promote an epistemological line of enquiry in Translation Studies, which, as we have seen, is precisely what Massardier-Kenney (1997) and Spivak (2000) sustain.

55 From this point of view, descriptivists can only benefit from the insights of feminist scholars: the investigations of the latter facilitate “the recognition of the *gendered construction of meaning* in any textual practice” (Von Flotow 1997, p. 95). The feminist perspective has alerted me to the deep significance and implications of sexual imagery in Dante. It has also enhanced my understanding of the conditions which facilitate “adequacy” in translation when it comes to the (re)construction of gender in the target text. It is the feminist perspective that ultimately explains why Dante translators in the Anglo-American tradition have been able (or willing?) to preserve the boldness of the *Comedy*’s powerful sexual imagery.

Appendix

Abbreviations

SOD *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. 2 vols. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993.

CED *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*. London, Harper Collins, 1995.

AV *Authorized King James Version of the Holy Bible. Containing the Old and New Testament*. London, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1611.

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Notes

[1] Henry Boyd (1802) produced the first complete rendering of the *Comedy* in English and Henry Francis Cary's *The Vision* (1814, 1844) was for a long time the most successful translation of Dante in the English-speaking world. Boyd's translation (in pentameters arranged in six-line stanzas rhyming aabccb) belongs to the Neo-classical Age, while Cary's version (in blank verse) is part of the Romantic tradition. [On Cary, see Crisafulli 1996 and 1999.] As regards subsequent generations of translators, the corpus includes the twentieth-century versions of Dante regarded as noteworthy by critics and reviewers. The choice of such translators has also been influenced by the quality of their verse and the type of translation strategies (e.g., originality) they employ. Binyon (1947, rhyming tercets) envelops his text in an archaic patina. Bickersteth (1955, rhyming tercets), too, produces an archaic version with distinctive Victorian leanings. Dorothy Sayers' (1949, rhyming tercets) translation is highly innovative and goes some way towards reproducing Dante's mingling of styles. John Ciardi (1954, rhyming tercets) does not attempt to produce a mimetic text and focuses on the original poetic rhythm and idiomaticity. Mark Musa (1971, iambic pentameter) employs a literal method which aims to be "faithful" to the original content. Charles H. Sisson (1981, iambic pentameter) produces a transparent and readable text. Allen Mandelbaum (1995, iambic pentameter with varying number of syllables) creates a poetical version with a varied phonic rhythm. Tom Phillips (1985, blank verse) gives life to a distinctive poetic rhythm while closely adhering to the Italian text. Robert Pinski (1994, rhyme) focuses on the musicality of sound patterns and does not translate closely line-for-line. Steve Ellis (1994, free verse) has produced one of the most creative and engaging translations of *Inferno* in that it features highly idiomatic English. Daniel Halpern (ed.) (1993) assembles a version of *Inferno* by twenty contemporary English-speaking poets who use a variety of translation methods. This article considers only Cynthia Macdonald's version of *Inferno* VII, which is relatively free in terms of diction and adherence to the Italian text, and C. K. Williams's *Inferno* XIX – an experimental, free-verse rendering. On Dante's *Comedy* in English see Crisafulli (2000).

[2] I have not considered the differences between male and female translators in the corpus simply because there are too few female translators of Dante in the Anglo-American tradition. Dorothy Sayers is possibly the most significant female translator of Dante's *Comedy* into English and her work deserves to be studied from a feminist perspective. But this should be the object of an article with a different methodological angle (that is, a case study focusing on a single translator) from the one adopted here (a corpus study).

[3] Incidentally, this is why Cary, who retains the original image, feels the need to intervene in a footnote to clarify what he regards as the exact significance of sexual imagery in *Inferno*: "The

word 'fornication', or 'adultery', 'strupo', is here used for a revolt of the affections from God, according to the sense in which it is often applied in Scripture" (1844, p. 26).

[4] In other words, clarification/explicitation – a universal feature of translation – predominates over the translator's desire to reproduce the original sexual imagery only in specific circumstances, that is, when there are no ideological connotations (condemnation of a corrupt Church) in the source text. The limited amount of data I have described is not sufficient to generalize with certainty. Further research is needed to cast light on the elusive relationship between universals of translation and the translator's outlook or ideology. For one thing, one would have to examine all the instances of sexual imagery in the *Comedy* and compare them to those occurring in the corpus of Dante translators in English. If it were found that translators tend to reproduce sexual imagery for its own sake, the lack of the "rape" image in the target texts could be simply one of (possibly) few exceptions. However, even if this were the case, there would still be a relationship between a universal, clarification, and the ideological dimension: the patriarchal nature of English might be a powerful force driving translators to retain sexist imagery in the target text, regardless of its immediate intelligibility. It must be borne in mind that universals do not have a binding force, because they are tendencies of translational behaviour, not norms. On universals, see Baker 1993, 1996 and Laviosa-Braithwaite 1998.

[5] Politico-theological considerations play a less prominent role in the case of twentieth-century translators because the temporal power of the Roman Catholic Church came to an end with the unification of Italy in 1870. For this reason the relationship between Catholics and Protestants towards the end of the nineteenth century was not as tense as it had been previously: it must be borne in mind that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Whigs had promoted a Protestant reading in which Dante is a defender of political and religious liberty. The English liberals supported the cause of the Italian movement for unification, the Risorgimento, the leaders of which were fiercely anti-clerical in that they opposed the Papal State.

[6] I agree with Toury's position (1995, p. 1) that Translation Studies is an empirical discipline. I am concerned with describing what translation *is* rather than what it *should be*. My perspective, therefore, is diametrically opposed to Newmark's (1982, p. 19). Translation theory's main concern, Newmark argues, "is to determine appropriate translation methods for the widest possible range of texts or text-categories."

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