

**LA VIE SEXUELLE DE CATHERINE M.:
A JOURNEY THROUGH 'WOMAN', 'SEXUAL LANGUAGE'
AND 'TRANSLATION'**

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Resumen

La vie sexuelle de Catherine M. (2001), de Catherine Millet, es quizás uno de los libros más explícitos sobre sexo jamás escritos. Se trata de una descripción, extraordinariamente franca, de las actitudes sexuales de la autora, sin remordimiento o tabú alguno.

En este artículo analizamos cómo las revelaciones sexuales que nos ofrece Millet pasan del francés al inglés (en traducción de Adriana Hunter, 2002) y al español (en traducción de Jaime Zulaika, 2001). Ello nos permite una perspectiva muy rica: cómo se transfiere el lenguaje sexual al inglés o al español; cómo se mantiene o se atenúa, en el proceso de traducción, la perspectiva amoral de Millet; qué relación existe entre lo 'erótico' (o lo 'pornográfico' o lo 'sexual') y la escritura femenina, etc. Vale la pena explorar la intersección entre tres grandes espacios: la mujer escritora, la traducción y el lenguaje sexual. Dicha intersección nos ofrece una multiplicidad de puntos de vista, que poseen un carácter fundamentalmente ideológico. Traducir el lenguaje explícitamente sexual continúa siendo un espacio de lucha personal, de disidencia ética o moral, de controversia religiosa o ideológica.

Palabras clave: Catherine Millet, lenguaje sexual, traducción, literatura erótica, mujeres.

Abstract

Catherine Millet's *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001) is probably one of the most explicit books about sex ever written. It is an extraordinarily frank description of sexual attitudes, without any remorse or linguistic taboos.

In this paper we analyse how Millet's sexual revelations travel into English (translated by Adriana Hunter, 2002) and into Spanish (translated by Jaime Zulaika, 2001). This allows us a very rich perspective: how sexual language is transferred into English or Spanish; how Millet's amorality is maintained or toned down in the translating process; what is the relationship between the 'erotic' (or the 'pornographic' or the 'sexual') and the woman author, and so on. The intersection offered by woman-as-author, translation and sexual language is well worth exploring: it offers a multiplicity of viewpoints, mostly contextual and ideological. Translating sexually-explicit language continues to be an area of personal struggle, of ethical or moral dissent, of religious or ideological controversy.

Keywords: Catherine Millet, sexual language, translation, erotic literature, women.

1. A translation journey through Catherine Millet's *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*

Catherine Millet's *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001) is probably one of the most explicit books about sex ever written. It is an extraordinarily frank description of sexual attitudes, without any remorse or fear of linguistic taboos. In this paper we analyse how Millet's sexual revelations travel into English (*The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*, translated by Adriana Hunter, 2002) and into Spanish (*La vida sexual de Catherine M.*, translated by Jaime Zulaika, 2001). This allows us a very rich perspective: how sexual language is transferred into English or Spanish; how Millet's amorality is maintained or toned down in the translating process; in a word, how sex – or eroticism or pornography – travels from one language to another and how these translations propitiate a multicultural dialogue which unearths contradictions and differing literary or ideological agendas.

The idea of translation is closely connected with that of *movement* or *mediation*: between different spaces and times, cultures and ideologies, nations and texts. The word *translatio* carries the dual meaning of language transfer and movement from one place to another, between two positions. Any translation points to shifting between words, texts, languages, ideological positions, personal convictions, economic or cultural situations. We will take a translation journey through *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001), Catherine Millet's unclassifiable novel and two of its rewritings – the Spanish version *La vida sexual de Catherine M.* (2001) and the English version, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* (2002). The order in which we have made this journey goes against the usual logic found in translation studies, which starts with the *original* work and, later, moves on to other languages and cultures.

The concept of a 'truly original' text has various interpretations. Most readers, in all languages, consume translations as if they were, in fact, originals. Only translators are, by profession, opposed to this illusion. In countries like France or Spain, nearly 30% of all the books that are published yearly are translations. Though commonly overlooked, we are in fact part of this world of literary translations, the only exceptions being the UK or US, where translations represent only 2% of books published. Translation still seems to many a transparent, unmediated fact. Contemporary theories take the opposite approach, and defend the artificial, contingent character of translation. The idea of 'original' is a debated (and debatable) concept. Our societies are fundamentally based on the exchange of information, and on the constant rewriting of texts. Translation is among the most visible mechanisms of rewriting, though not the only one. Other mechanisms include the publishing industry, a range of (self)ensorships, the economic system, the mass media, the educational system, the stereotypes or taboos of a society, and so on.

Catherine Millet is a relevant personality in the Paris contemporary art world. She is the editor of the monthly journal *Art Press* and has curated exhibitions and is an established art critic. We can cite works such as *Yves Klein* (1992), *Dali et moi* (2005) or *L'art contemporain: Histoire et géographie* (2006). Until very

recently,¹ she had only published one book explicitly addressed to a wide audience, *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* Whether this book constitutes an erotic or pornographic work, an autobiography or a selective memoir, a commercial strategy or an innocent disclosure, what is undeniable is that one of its most relevant traits is that sexuality and sex-related language are omnipresent. A language which oscillates between philosophical density and extreme vulgarity, but which is overtly sexual. In France it was a publishing sensation in 2001, and since then it has been translated into forty languages.

2. Translating sexually-explicit language

In order to retrace the steps of this translation journey, I will concentrate mainly on the workings of sexual language. Explicit sexual terms or expressions constitute a highly delicate material which – if at all – travels with great difficulty, and is usually subjected to a multiplicity of (un)declared (self-)censorship(s). The translation of sexually explicit language is an area of personal struggle, of ethical/moral dissent, of religious/ideological controversies, of systematic self-censorship.

When translating sex, what is at stake is not only grammatical or lexical accuracy. Besides the linguistic meanings of sex-related expressions, there are also other components – aesthetic, cultural, pragmatic, and ideological. There is also an urgent question of linguistic ethics. Eliminating, attenuating or overemphasizing sexual terms in translation does usually betray the translator's personal attitude towards human sexual behaviour(s) and their verbalization. The translator basically transfers into his/her rewriting the level of acceptability or respectability he/she accords to certain sex-related words or phrases. The analysis of the translation of sexual language into other languages helps us draw the imaginary limits of the translator's sexual morality, and even gain insights into the moral fabric of a specific community at a specific historical moment.

I subscribe to the 'translation effect' (Von Flotow 2000) that each and every translation produces. Although overlooked by some in the name of a now discredited equivalence, translation researchers nowadays believe that every translation must necessarily change the original (another discredited concept) text. In Von Flotow's terms:

The basic idea is that translation is part of a process of creating meaning, the circulation of meaning within a contingent network of texts and social discourses. If this is so, then the cultural and ideological contexts in which a translation is

1. In 2008, her second 'literary' work was published. *Jour de Souffrance*, still in the wake of *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, takes up again some of Millet's obsessions with love, sex and – especially – jealousy.

produced and marketed will have an effect on the way a text is prepared, consciously or unconsciously, for the new audience. Further, the translator's personality, identity, experience and background will feed into the new text, also affecting the translated version. (Von Flotow 2000: 15)

If this is true, we must surely agree that it is even more true in the case of the translation of sexual terms, a notoriously difficult area of translating activity, “a *cas limite* that in some ways serves as a test of translation” (Von Flotow 2000: 16). Elsewhere (Santaemilia 2005a) I analyzed the trends which tend to govern the translation of sex-related terms or of sexual innuendoes. I identified “a more or less general axiom at work that prescribes that translation of sex, more than any other aspect, is likely to be ‘defensive’ or ‘conservative’, tends to soften or downplay sexual references, and also tends to make translations more ‘formal’ than their originals, in a sort of ‘hypercorrection’ strategy” (Santaemilia 2005a: 121). Another trend can be added: all translations, in spite of appearances, respond to a systematic ideological design, as “rewriters adapt, manipulate the originals they work with to some extent, usually to make them fit in with the dominant, or one of the dominant ideological and poetological currents of their time” (Lefevere 1992: 8). The translation – or rewriting – of sex, with occasional exceptions in periods of newly-regained freedom, is usually subordinated to perceived notions of political and ideological correctness.

The translational responses to sexually explicit language may offer a great diversity. We can cite as examples omission, over-sexualization, state censorship, euphemism, self-censorship, and so on. Most possibly, today, in a capitalist society, the publishing machinery is one of the most effective rewriting systems, and – with regard to sexual mores – it serves to impose wider notions of political correctness than any other social system. Sexuality, in particular, needs to be made palatable for consumption: book covers, blurbs, book series or collections, media reviews – all are made to fit the accepted social standards. Literature is today such a ritualized commodity in the Western countries that in some cases a translation does nothing but to *sanction* the *status quo* of the original text in the source literary, cultural and commercial environments. This forces a cross-cultural dialogue that tends to privilege the prejudices of the target audiences towards the source language and culture.

3. *La vida sexual de Catherine M.*

When I read *La vida sexual de Catherine M.*, I formed an image of that book and of its author, as if this was the *original* book. For the majority of people (including translators), the commercial translation of a book, in any language, in any culture, in any genre, is *the original* for all purposes.

In this book, there are two key elements. On the one hand, it is a depiction of its author's sexual life. This is a recurrent trait in Western societies: the constant

presence of sexual episodes in literary or audio-visual texts, as well as in daily conversations; the growing explicitness of the said episodes; the use of a sexual language that is becoming more and more vulgar and conversational. "We have become the sexual storytellers in a sexual storytelling society", says Plummer (1995: 5). Sex sells, and this principle can be seen in action by looking at the titles of literary and audio-visual productions.² Sex is, then, simultaneously, a stylistic resource, a commercial strategy and a sociological instrument.

A second relevant trait is that it is a book written by a French woman. Both these characteristics are relevant here, that is to say, the fact that the author is *French* and a *woman*. Both are associated with the authority of tradition. The more stereotypes are repeated, the more they seem to get closer to truth, though they remain stereotypes. France, at least since the 18th century, has stood for the stereotypical source of the *true* philosophy (and rhetoric) of sexuality. "The French have always had sex on the brain," summarizes Merkin (2002) with astonishing simplicity; and she adds: "For years now the French have been exporting their cinematic and literary meditations on the erotic." In sexual matters, Barrios (2002) argues stereotypically, French are inventing the wheel every day.³ And not only that: the French themselves – Catherine Millet herself is a good example – proudly accept the stereotype that France is a sexually permissive culture.

A third element is that Catherine Millet's book is written *as truth*, as an authentic autobiography. All or most literature offers varying degrees of truthfulness; a woman's autobiography, in particular, offers a promise of reality, a glimpse of a woman's intimacy. It is irrelevant whether what we read is accurate or not, lived or invented; the important thing is that one of the objectives of a woman-authored sexual memoir is to push the boundaries of contemporary representations of female sexuality.

In an analysis of the rewritings of a novel into other languages, the translators' trajectories are very important. *La vida sexual de Catherine M.* was translated by Jaime Zulaika, an expert translator of authors such as Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, Graham Greene, Barbara Pym or Jacques Chessex, and who has been praised for the lexical rather than for the pragmatic accuracy of his translations. He had already translated works such as Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal, and the White* (2002), where crude sexual language is of foremost importance.

Once I read *La vida sexual de Catherine M.*, I formed the image of a timely book, the result of two converging and extremely popular trends – on the one hand, that of revealing (or unveiling) one's body and one's sexuality; and on the other hand, the persistent *voyeurism* which seems a basic trait of Western, liberal societies. The

2. As an example, since Candace Bushnell's *Sex in the City* (1996) – *Sexo en Nueva York* in Spanish – many books have included the magical word 'sex' in their title. A recent book by Catherine Townsend (*Sleeping around*, 2007) has been translated into Spanish as *Más sexo y menos Nueva York*.

3. "Francia, en cuestiones de amor y sexo, inventa la rueda cada día." (Barrios 2002).

book, also, arrived on our shelves as a *success* in France, which immediately leads to associations with feminism and sexually-liberated literature.

The book is, of course, duly commoditised as a quality product. It is published in Anagrama, a prestigious publishing house in Barcelona which offers a wide panorama of contemporary world fiction – David Lodge, Paul Auster, Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, Raymond Carver, Marie Darrieussecq, among others. The book cover, very discreetly, features a very small nude photograph of a young Catherine Millet just under the title.

As usual, our reading is mediated by the paratexts which accompany the book. On the back cover, in very small print, we find crammed a dozen or so opinions, mostly from French reviewers (Françoise Giroud, Luc Le Vaillant, Philip Sollers, Christine Ferrand, Maurice Nadeau, Catherine Robbe-Grillet, Josyane Savigneau, and others). The excerpts selected emphasize the quality and accuracy of Millet's writing, her audacity within the French tradition of erotic writing, and her frank and brave portrayal of a woman's sexuality, in the first person, without remorse. As is evident, the Spanish edition distributes a clean, innovative, contemporary product, certainly addressed to liberated women, but also appealing to those who are interested in new representations of female sexuality and – why not? – to those only interested in eroticism or the physicality of sex.

On the whole, the book seemed to be well written, but some dissonance was apparent. I seemed to perceive two or three rhetorics – at times the book was too daring and vulgar; and at times it sounded dull and pretentiously philosophical; and at other times it was mechanical. A book which seemed to offer varying, and contradictory, purposes. A book which, paradoxically, is always on the verge of pornography, or deep in it, while at the same time advocating to transcend that very pornography and to exercise sexual freedom. As a consequence, language is a hybrid where – according to Barrios (2002) – several registers are merged: aseptic, pedantic, sugary, and vulgar.⁴

The reception of *La vida sexual de Catherine M.* was mixed: in general, it was praised for being a brave and frank book; and at the same time, it was dismissed as a cold, detached and opportunistic editorial enterprise. For instance, Mario Vargas Llosa (2001) emphasizes the fact that Millet's book is an intelligent, frank reflection on sexuality, written in the guise of a clinical report. Conte (2001) likens this autobiographical text to a sociological treaty. Plaza (2002) considers it a really brave confessional work. On the negative side, what several reviewers (Vargas Llosa 2001, Conte 2001) find disconcerting is the coldness with which *La vida sexual de Catherine M.* is written. And two women reviewers, writing for conservative media, look at the text from a wider perspective: Pita (2002) laments Millet's depiction of

4. Barrios (2002) says that language is “un híbrido donde conviven lo aséptico, lo pedante, lo alibarado y lo vulgar” (Barrios 2002).

her perverted sexuality, while Piotto (2006) ponders on *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* as an example of contemporary voyeuristic editorial successes.

4. *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*

I decided to continue my translation journey towards the 'original' and move on to the English translation. At this stage, I had built a (more or less) clear mental picture of what Millet's book represented, a composite picture made from my own impressions as well as from other sources like the translation(s), the media reaction(s), the reviews, the public opinion, etc. All these paratexts (Genette 1997) determine to a great extent the position of this book within the Spanish literary, cultural and editorial system. Once our impression is formed, it is very difficult to change it, and we are likely to perceive only the clearest dissonances and most obvious divergences with the image we have already formed.

The Sexual Life of Catherine M. was published in 2002, in a translation carried out by Adriana Hunter. She is a young British translator who has also turned Agnes Desarthe, Christian Oster, Frédéric Beigbeder or Shan Sa into English. In the reviews of the English version of Millet's book there is an unprecedented focus on the translator and/or the translation. As usual, the opinions are mixed, and one wonders whether they sometimes have anything to do with the English version at all. With little time for a fairer analysis, Thurman (2002) writes that *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* has "just been translated – carelessly and in places incoherently – into English." Diski (2002) heavily criticizes the English translation, as lacking the clarity and style that the French original is supposed to have. Her conclusion reminds us of the most old-fashioned stereotypes blaming translators for any fault with the final product: "often the writing is so muddy that you can only hope it's the fault of the translation" (Diski 2002). In a similar vein, Passaro (2002) lays any and all blame for the text's "tumescent Latinates and grammatical clumsiness" on the translator. Sometimes, reviewers are irreflexive in conflating 'original' and 'translation':

The Sexual Life of Catherine M. is afflicted by all the worst aspects of porn: it's repetitive; it lacks humor, narrative, characters and graceful language. The translation, provided by relatively newcomer Adriana Hunter, is deadly; it may be that Millet's original French is convoluted as well. (Richter 2002)

Surprisingly, we also find a positive assessment of the translator's work: Hilton (2002) writes that Millet is "fortunate in a translator who has contrived to preserve the tension between the explicit and the elegant which is characteristic of French writing about sex, but difficult to render without crudeness in English."

The mixed English-language media reactions seem to reflect the time-long concern of Anglo-Saxon culture with pornography as a legal and artistic category.

Although in principle it can be viewed either in a positive or a negative light, a focus on pornography or obscenity carries associations of a repeated, mechanical and libertine sexuality. Zacharek (2002) hails *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* as a “new, pleasingly pornographic memoir”, which is, also, “titillating, explicit, dryly funny and sometimes exceedingly puzzling”. Sinagra (2002) considers Millet’s book a “demure, Proust-paced dissection of her own libertinism”, while Daniels (2002) emphasizes the fact that pornography such as this involves a “repeated, detailed and mechanical description” of her sexual exploits. For Passaro (2002), the book is an “astonishing memoir of physical desire, frequent orgiastic sex and rich psychic debasement.” These, and other, reactions give us a full measure of the positive-but-negative type of comments we can find in English-language reviews of Millet’s book. To make matters worse, these reviewers consider that in *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* pornography alternates with “occasional episodes of overintellectualized flatulence (she is French, after all)” (Zacharek 2002). Rather than a fair analysis of the book, these comments, taken as a whole, constitute a convergence of clichés revealing the limitations of English-language reviewers, who can only read Millet’s memoir through a pornography/non-pornography lens, to the exclusion of any other perspective. Needless to say, pornography seems to exclude for them the very possibility of creativity or artistry. And on top of all that, there is the stereotypical discourse that holds France and intellectual activity as almost a redundancy.

We have also found lots of utterly negative assessments, which consider the book to be immoral, sexist, dirty and opportunistic. Thurman (2002) writes that *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* is “an ostentatiously obscene work of erotobabble in the form of a memoir”. Wiser (2002) sees it as a “really dirty book”, and Levy (2002) as “existential pornography”. Miller (2002) reads this novel as one of the “most disturbing, depressing, and sexist” she has ever read, probably because it constitutes a “brittle, distant memoir of a voracious and oddly passive erotic life” (Richter 2002). Maslin (2002) seems to emphasize the fact that the book is a “self-promoting, heartily pornographic memoir” (Maslin 2002). Many a review mentions the idea of Millet’s book as a literary commodity; Catherine Millet is considered either as a fantasist or a “cynically calculating opportunist” (Daniels 2002). This connection is meant to reinforce the traditional association of pornography with commercial – and sexual – exploitation.

Possibly my first impression after reading *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* was that this book, besides being a translation of a French book that had proved to be a publishing sensation in France a year before, was a confirmation of all the pre- and misconceptions the English language tends to articulate around a woman’s sexuality and, what’s more, around the French (women) and their sexual philosophy. “The French can intellectualize anything,” underlines Butlin (2002) in his *Sunday Herald* review. The English text is certainly full of sexual scenes and of sexual language, but somehow it has deprived the text of some of its cutting edges and, to some extent, desexualized this sexual memoir. A full account of the scandal and heated debates its publication

provoked in France has been omitted from the British edition, whose cover presents a very diffuse watermark featuring a nude photograph of Catherine Millet. The sexual urgency of human naked flesh, clearly visible in the French edition and significantly smaller in the Spanish-language edition, has almost entirely disappeared from the English-language edition marketing strategies. The English version is presented as a somewhat desexualized (and feminist) territory where women have finally reached sex equality, and have finally been able to dissociate physical sex from emotion. This is one of the traits typically associated with the 'transformation of intimacy' which is characteristic of late modernity, where "previously private discourses of emotion are becoming increasingly public" (Holland *et al* 1998: 91).

5. Finally, the original text: A few comparative examples

When I reached my last step, the French 'original', very little was left to imagine or to be surprised about. Original and translation are conflated in our minds; only for translation analysts is this distinction relevant. Perhaps we are left with the (un)comfortable realization that the same original project lends itself to disparate linguistico-moral projects, as is evident in the Spanish and English versions. For us, now, *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* is a complex text which has set in motion the machinery of reactions, prejudices and (half)truths which constitute the cultural dialogue across languages and cultural traditions. At this stage, Millet's book is a multilingual text, full of contradictions and prone to differing reactions, in which the very idea of an 'original' is but a dim one, a useless one for most. A basic stereotype persists, though – that of *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* containing something which is irretrievably 'French', which for Botton (2002) consists of "the philosophical digressions, the absence of humour, the determination to see free love as a heroic political choice rather than a personal taste."

For Garcia (2005) and other researchers, Millet's book is a good example of a successful media construction, controversies included. In particular, the critic Philippe Sollers – one of the founders of *Tel Quel* and avant-garde literary guru – has proved highly influential, as he endorses Millet's (bourgeois) literary experiment as contemporary sexual/moral subversion. Sollers' review in *Le Monde* (2001) rapturously proclaimed the revolutionary message contained in *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*: "Hypocrites lecteurs, sournoises lectrices, convenez-en calmement: cette jeune femme s'est libérée pour vous." In Garcia's words, "La transgression morale des pratiques sexuelles ordinaires ou supposées ordinaires se fait passer alors pour une transgression politique" (Garcia 2005: 33). 'The political (sexual) is personal' seems to be Millet's message, in a paradoxical reversal of the 2nd-wave feminist motto.

We have chosen here a few excerpts in which sex-related activities and concerns prove a real *tour de force* in the adequate expression of desire, (in)decency, or sexual behaviours across languages. One of the key concepts in *La vie sexuelle*

de Catherine M. is the lexeme *partouze*, which is abundantly used in the novel to describe the type of sexual activity most commonly engaged in by Catherine Millet. *Partouze* is a popular term loosely denoting free-form parties, sexual or libertine gatherings in which a group of people – usually more than four – freely engage in a variety of sexual activities. The term is evocative of a sort of promiscuity which is usually associated with France, and – paradigmatically – with Paris. Let us see the first appearance of the term in the book:

Example 1

- (a) ... j'ai partouzé pour la première fois dans les semaines qui ont suivi ma défloration. (11)
- (b) ... I had group sex for the first time in the weeks immediately after my deflowering. (13)
- (c) ... participé por primera vez en *partouzes*¹ en las semanas siguientes a mi desfloración. (11)

In Example 1, we can see the different strategies employed by the English- and Spanish-language translators. On the one hand, Spanish prefers to preserve the 'French' flavour with the direct *emprunt* of the term *partouze*, adding an explanatory note which tries to contextualize the term as a trendy word suggesting sexual promiscuity and stereotypically evoking the Paris of the 1960s and 1970s. The English translation is sometimes 'group sex', as in Example 1, or – more commonly – 'orgy' or "orgy". Both options are neither correct nor incorrect, but rather poor counterparts to the euphonic French *partouze*, which suggests much more than mere sexuality. In short, while the Spanish version opts for a *foreignizing* strategy (Venuti 1995), which helps retain some of the unyielding foreignness of the original, the English text provides average alternatives to the evocative *partouze*.

A few examples will suffice as evidence of one of the most obvious patterns we have found while undertaking this translation journey. I refer to the tendency of the English translator towards indirect and euphemistic expressions, with the (undeclared) aim of eliminating direct references to sex, or even the references to sex altogether. As far as sex is concerned, and compared with the French or Spanish texts, the English version reads tamer and cleaner, vaguely asexual perhaps. The examples are:

Example 2

- (a) ... ils secouaient sur leur bite et qui ressemblaient à des ressorts qu'on fait vibrer. (25)
- (b) ... they traced their rhythmic action on their dicks in the darkness (26)
- (c) ... se meneaban la polla y parecían resortes a los que se imprime una vibración. (27)

Example 3

- (a) Nous baisions tous les trois, les deux garçons m'enfilant en même temps, l'un ... (29)
- (b) The three of us would fuck together, both boys inside me at once, one ... (30)
- (c) Follábamos los tres juntos, los dos me ensartaban al mismo tiempo, uno por ... (32)

Example 4

- (a) Je me branle avec la ponctualité d'un fonctionnaire. (225)
- (b) I masturbate with the regularity of a civil servant. (215)
- (c) Me hago pajas con la puntualidad de un funcionario. (244)

Example 5

- (a) ... je peux bien avoir l'entrejambe trempé ... (90)
- (b) ... I may well be dripping wet between the legs ... (88-89)
- (c) ... por más que tenga la entrepierna empapada ... (98)

Example 6

- (a) J'avais douze ans lorsque mes premières règles sont venues. Ma mère et ma grande-mère se sont agitées, ont convoqué le médecin, mon père a passé la tête par la porte et m'a demandé en riant si je saignais du nez. Voilà pour l'éducation sexuelle. (131)
- (b) I was twelve when my periods started. My mother and my grandmother got into quite a state and called the doctor, my father popped his head round the door and asked with a laugh whether I had a nosebleed. So much for teaching me the facts of life. (126)
- (c) A los doce años tuve las primeras reglas. Mi madre y mi abuela se alarmaron, llamaron al médico, mi padre asomó la cabeza por la puerta y me preguntó riéndose si sangraba por la nariz. Ésa fue toda mi educación sexual. (143)

In these examples, the pattern is recurrent. As regards sexual explicitness, the English options lag far behind the French and Spanish ones. In example 2, French and Spanish are direct and vulgar, while English "they traced their rhythmic action on their dicks" sounds meandering, not to say evasive, as if trying to drive the text away from the materiality of the sexual activity being described. In Example 3, the verbs "me ensartaban" and "m'enfilant" are action verbs that emphasize sexual activity and potency, while "inside me" constitutes a nonverbal structure, thus avoiding any reference to sexual agency altogether. In Example 4, "I masturbate" seems too formal – though correct – as compared to the French and Spanish versions. With regards to the physicality of sex, English once again prefers making unspecific references to

limbs or to body parts: Example 5 provides the indirect, asexual expression “between the legs”, as opposed to sexually euphemistic “entrejambe” and “entrepierna”. And Example 6 perhaps summarizes to perfection the potentialities and limitations of the three languages in expressing sex-related actions and concepts. French and Spanish use unambiguously the equivalent expressions “éducation sexuelle” and “educación sexual”. English, by contrast, seems to prefer indirectness as a sort of cultural strategy: the expression “the facts of life” is perfectly idiomatic, though faint and almost sexless and Arcadian.

The four examples below constitute instances of omissions of sex-related words or expressions. This is one of the most persistent impressions when reading this book: that in English, sex-related terms are sometimes eliminated or downgraded:

Example 7

- (a) ... et le patron de l’hôtel amènera un chien et il y en a qui paieront pour te voir mise par le chien. (44)
- (b) ... and the hotel manager will bring his dog, and there’ll be someone who’ll pay to see you doing it with the dog. (44)
- (c) ... y el dueño del hotel traerá un perro y algunos pagarán por ver cómo te jode el chuchó.

Example 8

- (a) Comme il n’y avait pas de feuillage pour servir d’essuie-sexes, ... (118)
- (b) As there were no leaves to wipe ourselves with, ... (113)
- (c) Como no había follaje para procurarnos algo con que limpiarnos el sexo, ... (128)

Example 9

- (a) ... à chaque poussée de sa verge, il me demandait instamment: “Regarde-moi dans les yeux.” (201)
- (b) ... with every thrust he would order me ‘Look me in the eye’. (192)
- (c) ... a cada empellón de su verga, me pedía encarecidamente: “Mírame a los ojos”. (218)

Example 10

- (a) J’aime beaucoup sucer le sexe des hommes. (185)
- (b) I really like sucking a man off. (177)
- (c) Me gusta mucho chupar el sexo de los hombres. (201)

Once again, in Example 7, specific verbs of sexual activity (French graphic “te voir mise” and Spanish vulgar “cómo te jode”) are avoided, and substituted for pro-verbs as in “doing it with the dog”. In Examples 8 and 9, the autobiographical

contexts are simply desexualized. When Catherine Millet is describing her favourite open-air spots where she and her partner Jacques Henric used to make love, she writes that they quite often did not have “*feuillage pour servir d’essuie-sexes*”, with a direct reference to their sexes, which is kept literally in the Spanish “*no había follaje para procurarnos algo con que limpiarnos el sexo*”. The English version (“no leaves to wipe ourselves with”) omits the reference to their sexes altogether, leaving the sexual meaning of the passage to the larger context in which this sentence is embedded. Later on, in Chapter 4 (*Détails*), the narrator is describing her feelings when masturbating, and she establishes an analogy between looking at the camera in a porn film and a vivid memory of one of her lovers, who “with every thrust he would order me ‘Look me in the eye.’” In French and in Spanish, the context is made entirely sexual: the ambiguous reference is made explicit in “à chaque poussée de sa verge” and in “a cada empellón de su verga”. This omission of “verge” or “verga”, as well as of other sex-related terms, cannot be coincidental: rather, it seems a desexualization strategy, as if sex was too overwhelming and offensive. Very much the same happens in Example 10: although “sucking a man off” is unmistakably sexual, the signifier ‘sex’ (French “*sucer le sexe*” or Spanish “*chupar el sexo*”) is again deleted.

Sometimes one feels the Spanish options are too far-fetched. In these two examples –

Example 11

- (a) ... puisque je couchais avec tout le monde, il serait vraiment dégoûtant de ma part de ne pas coucher aussi avec lui. (57)
- (b) ... seeing I was sleeping with everyone it would be churlish of me not to sleep with him. (56)
- (c) ... como yo me acostaba con todo el mundo, sería una verdadera putada por mi parte no acostarme también con él. (62)

Example 12

- (a) ... l’image d’une certaine petite vicieuse, de celles, n’est-ce pas, qui vous laissent de sacrés bons souvenirs. (66)
- (b) ... a particularly good-time girl, the sort, if I’m not mistaken, who leaves a man with some very good memories. (65)
- (c) ... la imagen de una determinada viciosilla, de esas, bueno, que te dejan un recuerdo cojonudo. (72)

– there is excessive emphasis for such insignificant sentences. In Example 11, an occasional partner of the narrator complains that it would be “churlish” (“*dégoûtant*” in French) not to sleep with her, seeing that lots of other people do. Though Spanish “*putada*” is somewhat desemantized, yet it retains strong ties with the idea of whoredom, a taboo area in most languages. Likewise, in Example 12, the narrator

receives from time to time a phone call from someone who seems to know her, and who probably forms in his mind the image of a girl “who leaves a man with some very good memories”, which is a reasonable translation of French “qui vous laissent de sacrés bons souvenirs”, but which is rendered in utterly vulgar terms in Spanish as “que te dejan un recuerdo cojonudo”. As in the previous example, “cojonudo” refers to testicles and, by extension, to maleness, which constitutes an instance of unnecessary overtranslation.

The Spanish versions of examples 13 through 16 are evidence, in my view, of bad taste. *Bad taste*, I admit, is a very personal category, and is probably the result of a series of linguistic, aesthetic and moral expectations. Let us read the examples in full:

Example 13

- (a) Chez Aimé, c’était autre chose: c’était le berceau nu de la baise. (33)
- (b) Chez Aimé was a different story: it was the very cradle of fucking. (33)
- (c) Chez Aimé era otra cosa: era la cuna misma del folleteo. (35)

Example 14

- (a) Qui n’a pas rêvé de polluer avec des parties de jambes en l’air les lieux les plus ordinairement innocents qu’il fréquente? (102)
- (b) Who hasn’t dreamed of polluting some ordinary and innocent place they know with a bit of nooky? (97)
- (c) ¿Quién no ha soñado con mancillar, con sesiones de jodienda, los lugares más normalmente inocentes que frecuenta? (110)

Example 15

- (a) [...] je sais au contraire très bien quand je plais à une femme, [...] Mais je ne me suis prêtée à ces étreintes, et aux gougnottages afférents, que pour ne pas contrarier la règle du jeu. (50)
- (b) I am always well aware when a woman is attracted to me, [...] But I have only joined in these embraces and their related fumbings so as not to break the rules of the game. (50)
- (c) ...sé muy bien, por el contrario, cuándo gusto a una mujer, [...] Pero sólo me he prestado a esos retozos, y a las bollerías inherentes, para no contrariar la regla del juego. (54-55)

Example 16

- (a) Lorsqu’on est adolescent, disposant rarement d’un espace à soi, on est bien obligé de se livrer au déballage charnel dans ces endroits semipublics ... (147)
- (b) Adolescents rarely have somewhere they can call their own, and so their carnal displays take place in semi-public places ... (141)
- (c) Cuando eres adolescente no sueles disponer de un espacio propio y no

tienes más remedio que proceder al despelote carnal en lugares semi-públicos ... (160)

Most of the terms here are semantically equivalent, but there are clear differences in the choice of register and opportunity. I would say that the Spanish options are vulgar, more vulgar than the French or English counterparts, but they are also more demeaning, less serious, sometimes less categorical. “Baise” and “fucking” are vulgar, but “parties de jambes en l’air” and “a bit of nooky” are less so, and even sound playful. The Spanish options are vulgar, but they somehow seem to diminish the sexual urgency, the dirtiness of the reference. In Example 13, Spanish “folleteo” adds a touch of irrelevance, of inconsistent playfulness. In Example 14, “jodienda” increases the vulgarity of the other texts, but at the same time renders it less erotic, less playful. In Example 15, the narrator clearly shows her discomfort when talking about lesbian experiences. Both “gougnottages” and “fumblings” seem to emphasize the trivial and insubstantial character of lesbian sexuality. The Spanish translator tries to take a step further. “Bollería” means, literally, bakery; it is, however, clearly meant to derive from ‘bollera’ (a vulgar term for a lesbian), but it has no currency in Spanish, and the term strikes as an infelicitous attempt at (street) slang. In Example 16, “despelote carnal” is, likewise, an odd solution. ‘Despelote’ is a colloquial term for stripping off, whereas ‘carnal’ is a formal, poetic term. Except for Example 13 (“fucking”), the English options (“nooky”, “fumblings”, “carnal display”) seem euphemistic translations, a way of saying and not saying (see Sauntson 2005) which constitutes, for many, the difficult balance to be achieved in erotic/pornographic/sexual writing.

A final excerpt constitutes, in my view, a good example of unfortunate coinage in Spanish:

Example 17

- (a) Ce ne sont pas obligatoirement les hommes à femmes qui satisfont le mieux ces dernières. [...] (Sans doute en va-t-il de même pour certaines “femmes à hommes”...) (212)
- (b) It is not necessarily womanisers who best satisfy women. [...] (No doubt you could say the same of some man-eating women...) (203-4)
- (c) Los mujeriegos no son forzosamente los que mejor satisfacen a las mujeres. [...] (Sin duda ocurre lo mismo con algunas “hombrieriegas”...) (230-1)

In this example, French is explicit and English seems pretty logical; Spanish, by contrast, is simply unfortunate. The collocation “femmes à hommes” may seem ambiguous but is suggestive. The English translator prefers to explore a common sexual metaphor (“man-eating women”). The Spanish “hombrieriegas” seems to me an unfortunate coinage, built on the analogy of the existing term ‘mujeriegos’, a celebratory term. Spanish offers a wide range of words and expressions referring to woman as a sexual object, but those referring to man emphasize sexual prowess and

exploits. The term “hombrieriegas” has no currency, and sounds awkward in Spanish, but is, I believe, consistent with some of solutions (exs. 13, 14, 15 and 16) analysed previously. In my view, they may denote hurried decisions, inappropriate register, or little aesthetic elaboration. It seems an easy solution – translation is never easy – but hardly literary or even erotic.

6. Conclusion

Catherine Millet’s *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001) was a publishing sensation in France, and it has also been translated into numerous foreign languages. Critical response – as was to be expected in matters of sex – has been mixed, and has provoked a heated dialectical debate in the European media. At the same time as *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* was published, a sort of companion volumen appeared as well, *Légendes de Catherine M.*, a collection of nude photographs of Catherine Millet, made by Jacques Henric, her husband and long-time sexual partner. This editorial coincidence has understandably prompted accusations of a concerted promotional campaign and of a sort of “conjugal exhibitionism” (Merkin 2002).

The book has great defenders, some of whom say hyperbolically that “(n)o woman has ever written a book like this” (Zacharek 2002). Others underline the fact that “(j)amais une femme n’avait pris la parole ainsi pour raconter sa vie sexuelle” (Botton 2001). Others still label the book as *feminist*, challenging “all kinds of romanticized beliefs about what sex should be” (Stone 2002). But there are also numerous detractors, insisting that the book is dangerous to women, teaching “men to treat women as objects, and an attitude that is passed down through generations” (Wiser 2002). The book, for some, is ridiculous, because it is “*all surface, all exterior*” (Miller 2002). Aesthetically, the book is “an oddly joyless exercise: explicit without being erotic, stuffed with sex but not sexy” (Begley 2002). In the wealth of media reviews in French, Spanish or English, the same (predictable) debates are replicated: eroticism vs. pornography, feminism vs. anti-feminism, sexual naïveté vs. commercial opportunism, etc.

What is true, however, is that *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* is, willingly or unwillingly, “pushing the boundaries of sexual representation” (Merkin 2002), as many women have been doing over the last decades, as Annie Ernaux, Camille Laurens, Virginie Despentes, Almudena Grandes and Lucía Etxebarria – among others – have been doing in France and Spain (see Bozon 2005 and Santaemilia, forthcoming).

The translations of Millet’s book will not modify its ‘literary’ or ‘erotic’ status. However, they will amplify the complex debate proposed by the book (the interface between woman, sexual language and eroticism/pornography) and confirm the TL attitudes/prejudices towards the source culture. Translating sexual language is a difficult and tortuous journey across a variety of languages, cultural scripts, taboos, prejudices, historical periods, in the discursive construction and/or representation of the female

body and sexuality. The variety of translations of this book constitute a massive paratext which is constantly echoing the web of cultural attitudes and prejudices towards a cluster of stereotypes revolving around the ideas of French as the language of sex, and the means through which sexual liberation is (to be) expressed; French women as the legitimate (and politically correct today) mouthpieces of sexual liberation; the limits of literary or artistic representation of women's sexuality, and so on. As we have seen, the Spanish and English translations of Catherine Millet's book focus more on resituating the *woman vs. sexual language* debate within each particular culture, rather than on the accuracy of the 'original' text itself. Significantly, the Spanish text prefers to retain some of the original 'French' flavour (Example 1), and often resorts to over-translating (Examples 11 and 12), or even to bad taste (Examples 13, 14, 15 and 16). In general terms, though, the Spanish translations preserve a similar degree of vulgarity and boldness as the French original. English, by contrast, seems to reaffirm its tendency towards indirectness and euphemism, with the elimination of direct references to sex or even to the term 'sex' itself (Examples 2, 3, 4 and 5). In terms of sexual explicitness, English is far behind French or Spanish. Sex is constantly omitted or downgraded in English (Examples 7, 8, 9 and 10).

Let us conclude here our translation journey through *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* Beyond the disparate or coincidental conclusions we have reached in this paper, it is undeniable that *woman*, *translation* and *sexual language* are apt concepts with which we can explore the moral or ethical standards of a given society, and are also critical notions through which to question their cultural, social, ideological or moral stereotypes. *Sexual language*, and the *translation of sexual language*, is a faithful index of social attitudes and cultural prejudices across languages. *Translation* is a privileged medium in creating, shaping, reproducing and challenging our most intimate identities and desires in a variety of languages, thus amplifying debates that were simply nonexistent three or four decades ago. *Woman* is a revolutionary category that has challenged to its root the very assumptions on which literature, sexuality, and (re)writing had been based since the beginnings of humanity. It is unpredictable where a critical and creative conflation of these categories – woman, sexual language and translation – may lead us to, but what is undeniable is that, when combined, they become first-hand tools for a critical understanding of the fractures and contradictions obtaining between cultures. The three are marginal categories which represent the core of human behaviour, and can help us to unveil the dynamics of (c)overt inequality(ies) in our society, as well as the ideological workings of prejudice and discrimination. This is perhaps the most precious gift of this translation journey – the realization that *women*, *sexual language* and *translation* are today privileged critical tools we can use to study the moral and ideological complexities of contemporary societies.

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