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The Cultural Politics of Translation: The Case of Voltaire's *Mérope* and Scipione Maffei's *Merope*

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Translation and adaptation enact two distinct modes of relationship with the original source material, establish different degrees of dependency and freedom from it, and express dissimilar concerns about the intercultural and linguistic transpositions they respectively exact. They also ascertain different cultural hierarchies and distinctive jingoistic anxieties. While translation appears more bound to the source text by its literary and linguistic context, adaptation may depart from it in genre and artistic medium. As illustrated by Gérard Genette's *Palimpsest: Literature in the Second Degree*, adaptation can draw on excision, expansion, condensation, amplification, and proximization as viable adaptive strategies in the creation of the target text. Translation retains the Latin significance of the word *translatio*, 'carrying across', but the Latin etymological root of the word 'adapt', *adaptare*, means "to make fit," thus implicitly stressing change, transmutation, and innovation (Sanders 46). This apparent freedom is reflected in how the publishing industry recognizes adaptors as authors and holds translators in a subordinate position, evident in their frequent exclusion from the book cover. More importantly, in their different aims and methodologies, translation and adaptation suggest quite different artistic choices as well as a dissimilar notion of extra-cultural transferability and readability. However, the 'carrying across' and 'fitting' of cultural content is not the only factor shaping the choice of translation over adaptation, or vice versa. There are socio-cultural and hierarchical concerns implicit in this choice that may play a crucial role in whether a literary text is either translated or adapted. Postcolonial theory situates this issue within the parameters of coloniality and notions of centre and periphery, in which both translation and adaptation encompass ongoing socio-cultural relations and power struggles (Bhabha 303-337; Mignolo 66-75). However this issue articulates pressing concerns that are not solely traceable to postcolonial discourse but also to globalization and intercultural studies.

Probing the cultural politics that sit at the intersection of translation and adaptation reveals some of the determining factors leading to the choice of one over the other. What does one represent that the other cannot? Does a given culture lose anything when it concedes to translation? Is the status of a nation's literary and linguistic tradition inherently threatened by looking outward for texts to translate and read? While these are somewhat provocative questions that one could discard or discredit as ignorant of what translation truly means, one cannot help but wonder whether they reflect a more general and concerning cultural scenario, especially when considering the few translations that appear yearly in the U.S. and England, compared to the larger numbers of translations from English into other languages (Grossman 42-44).

The literary debate that developed in the first half of the eighteenth century over the translatability of the story of Merope, queen of Messene, which Aristotle considered in the *Poetics* as the exemplary tragedy, illustrates some of the implications raised by the choices of translation and adaptation. Aristotle viewed the Merope narrative, as it was represented in Euripides' lost tragedy *Cresphontes*, as one where the emotions of 'fear' and 'pity' spring out of the plot itself, where reversal and recognition happen at the same time, and the tragic deed is delayed and then thwarted (Aristotle 57). The trope of Merope was fully employed in the eighteenth century and contributed to the broadening of tragic subjects and suitable dramatic passions (Luciani 77-78). The discussion of 'passions' which finds a fertile philosophical terrain in intellectuals such as Descartes, Voltaire, Hume and Diderot significantly impacted pre-Romantic philosophical and literary theories, and informed the success of melodrama and sentimental novels in Europe (Ford 26). In theatre, the interest in diverse passions fit within the ongoing debates over classical Greek theatre and its representation of tragic feelings. The tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were translated and studied carefully throughout the eighteen century, as they became paradigmatic models for a reformed theatre, grounded in classical drama but contemporary in its aspirations.[1] The literary scandal surrounding Voltaire's *Mérope* and its Italian antecedent, Scipione Maffei's own *Merope*, must be understood in this complex literary landscape, where success in mastering a popular tragic trope reflected immediately on literary debates, marked the supremacy of national literary traditions, and signaled adherence to the aesthetic principle of neoclassical theatre.

With his *Merope,* which premiered in Verona in 1713, Scipione Maffei intended to reform the Italian tragic tradition and create a valid model to oppose the French theatre, which was translated and performed successfully everywhere in Italy. Even though at the time there was a large output of theoretical treatises on drama written in Italy, there was no Italian figure comparable to contemporary French dramatists. With the exception of Vittorio Alfieri, who composed most of his tragedies in the second half of the century and wrote within the frame of pre-Romantic aesthetics, Maffei was the only tragedian worthy of notice. With *Merope,* his only tragedy, Maffei aimed at creating something completely new: a reformed Italian tragedy inspired by the classical model but guided by the superiority of modernity. His attempt was successful and *Merope* granted its author notoriety and wealth. Since its original publication until the end of the eighteenth century, it was edited almost every fifteen years with new introductions and notes.

Voltaire's *Mérope* appeared thirty years later, in 1743, and must be contextualized within the often-vitriolic debate over the primacy of the French tragedy over the Italian.[2] Voltaire drew on both Greek classical and French neo-classical theatre as sources of inspiration, especially in relation to simplicity of action and plot. When he wrote his letter to Scipione Maffei, he praised his *Merope* for treating the topic in a sober and simple fashion. After listing all the bad versions of the story, from

[1] "*Pour faciliter la fréquentation indispensable des Anciens, les traductions du théâtre grec font enfin leur apparition, permettant à un public plus étendu de prendre connaissance d'une littérature dramatique qui … constitue un modèle*" (Trousson 2114).

[2] Luciani, Paola. *Le Passioni e gli Affetti. Studi sul Teatro Tragico del Settecento.* Pacini Editore, 1999.Trivero, Paola. *Tragiche Donne. Tipologie Femminili nel Teatro Italiano del Settecento.* Alessandria: Edizioni dall'Orso, 2000. Lancaster, Carrington Henry. *French Tragedy in the Time of Louis XV and Voltaire 1715-1774*. Vol I. Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1959.

France, England and Italy, Voltaire commended Maffei for having "avoided all the rocks which they split upon; you who have done honor to your country, by complete models of more than one kind, you have given us in your *Merope* an example of a tragedy that is at once both simple and interesting" (Voltaire, *Mérope* 12). Voltaire's understanding of 'simplicity' takes into account characterization, dramaturgical choices, and literary style, and it relies on the reduction of love-intrigues and the renunciation of gallantry as a means to appeal to the unsophisticated audience. In the letter to Maffei, in fact, Voltaire showed great appreciation for the Italian *Merope*, on the basis of its distance from any idea of sentimental love.

> You, sir, are the first who, in this age, when the Sophoclean art became enervated by love-intrigues, often foreign to the subject, and so often debased by idle buffooneries, that reflected dishonor on the taste of your ingenious countrymen, you, sir, were the first to have the courage and genius enough to hazard a tragedy without gallantry, a tragedy worthy of Athens in its glory. (Voltaire, *Mérope* 5)

For the very same reason he dismissed George Jeffrey's *Merope* and, together with it, all English theatre of the second half of the century which, he reckoned, was completely dominated by representations of sentimental love.[3] According to the letter he wrote to Maffei, he became so fascinated when reading the Italian tragedy that he initially planned to translate it into French.

> The moment I read it I was struck with it; my love to my own country has never shut my eyes against the merit of foreigners. On the other hand, the more regard I have for it, the more I endeavor to enrich it, by the addition of treasures that are not of its own growth. The desire which I had of translating your *Mérope*, was increased by the honor of a personal acquaintance with you at Paris, in the year 1733. By loving the author, I became still more enamored with his work […]. (Voltaire, *Mérope* 12)

The profusion of compliments Voltaire pays Maffei appears to be a genuine expression of admiration for the work of the Italian dramatist. Even when Voltaire explains the reasons why a translation in French was not possible ("I found it was impossible to bring it on the French stage"), he blames the persnickety taste of the French audience, its dislike of simple plots, its intolerance of natural and common feelings, and finally its expectation of heroic behaviour. His argument is grounded in the recognition of the limits of intercultural exchanges between France and Italy, not in a value judgment on Maffei's tragedy. In fact, Voltaire explains that French spectators always expect the dramatic plot to accommodate more codified and sophisticated expression of tragic passions,

[3] "But ever since the reign of Charles II, love has taken possession of the English stage; though there is not a nation upon earth by whom that passion is so ill painted; but the intrigue so absurdly brought in, and so badly treated, is the least fault of the English *Merope* …. This island, which has produced the finest philosophers in the world, is not equally productive of the fine arts; and if the English do not seriously apply themselves to the study of those precepts which were given them by their excellent countrymen, Addison and Pope, they will never come near to other nations in point of taste and literature" (Voltaire, *Mérope* 11).

what he calls "some strokes of art," and that those strokes "are extremely different at Paris from those which we meet with at Verona" (Voltaire, *Mérope* 13).

Nevertheless, Voltaire's well-reasoned rationale for composing his own *Mérope* falls short when one compares the two tragedies and realizes that in spite of evident differences they are not drastically dissimilar. Voltaire's choice of adaptation belies more complex and layered reasons than the mere different taste of French audiences. His argument becomes even weaker when one considers that after gushing over the structural and thematic perfection of Maffei's tragedy, Voltaire creates a fictitious identity, that of M. de la Lindelle, to discredit Maffei's tragedy and prove it unworthy of a French translation.[4] In an essay divided into fifteen arguments and conceived as a reply to the original letter Voltaire had addressed to Maffei, the imaginary de la Lindelle lists all the alleged faults of the Italian *Merope* only to remind the French dramatist of the superiority of the French version. At points ten and eleven, he gets to talk about minor characters and corollary scenes. With a shrewdness that is his hallmark, Voltaire/de la Lindelle states that "[…] Nothing can be more cold and lifeless than these scenes, full of declamation, that have no plot, interest, or contrasted passion in them; they are school-boy scenes: everything in a play, that is without action, is useless." He continues his attack at point twelve by saying that "There is so little art in this piece that the author is always forced to employ confidants to fill up the stage" (Voltaire, *Mérope* 23). The debate over minor characters such as confidants and messengers is recurrent in theoretical discussions about the theatre, and both Voltaire and Maffei are aware of its importance in defining the modern practice of the stage and in placing contemporary drama within the diachronical trajectory of the classic period. Voltaire lowers the number of confidants to one and claims that Ismene and Eurisio, the confidant and servant in Maffei's tragedy, are not essential to the tragic narrative. However, what Voltaire refuses to admit is that in Maffei's work those two secondary characters are hardly irrelevant. In fact, they further the story and function as a *trait d'union* between different scenes, as happens in Act 4 where Ismene convinces Aegisthus to wait while she goes to call Merope, paving the way for the queen's second attempt to kill Aegisthus. More importantly, they reiterate the maternal devotion of the queen, amplify her despair over the presumed death of her son, and intensify her joy when she finds him. Maffei is well aware of this vital function of the two confidants and states that they define Merope better than she could do herself, "*e tenerezze esprimono, delle quali in altra maniera non ci sarebbe luogo*" ("they voice tender feelings that could not be expressed otherwise," Luciani 98). Maffei's secondary characters enlarge the possible representations of passionate love and they are pivotal in creating sentimentally appealing narratives for the audience.

Voltaire is also interested in depicting maternal passions. When Ismene, who is worried about the future of the state, asks Mérope "…. must this tender passion turn / Thy soul aside from every other purpose?" she replies with a short but powerful sentence ("I am a mother: canst thou wonder yet?") which qualifies her feelings as totalizing and universal. However, it is already in this first scene that the representation of Mérope as mother shifts drastically as she begins to assume her role in the

[4] "Cette *Lettre de M. de la Lindelle*, personnage imaginaire, et la *Réponse* qui la suit, sont imprimées pour la première fois en 1748, à la page 481 du tome V des *Œuvres de Voltaire*, Dresde, 1748-54, dix volumes in -8º. (B.)" (Voltaire, *Œuvres Complètes de Voltaire* 192).

kingdom. The queen appears very preoccupied with the succession to the throne to which her son is entitled and becomes the institutional voice for rightful blood lineage. Voltaire does not allow the queen the maternal feelings that had made Maffei's tragedy a success. When Narbas, the old servant who carried Aegisthus to safety and hid him from Poliphontes, tells her that Aegisthus is her son, there is no reciprocal recognition of mother and son. Voltaire delays their reunion until the following act when the truth of Aegisthus' birth is finally known to everybody. At this point, the reader would expect some degree of sentimental effusion between Mérope and her son, but once again those expectations remain unfulfilled. Instead we see Aegisthus transcend the pastoral register that defines his character in the first three acts, as he kills Poliphontes and becomes king. Mérope's final peroration in defense of her son in front of the people of Messene is an attempt to bring together the reason of the heart and that of the state. Here Voltaire is trying to reconcile the two main elements of the play, sentimental and tragic passion, and bring together the heroine and the mother in the character of Mérope. This attempt to give a sense of structural and tragic unity to *Mérope* fails because the queen's strenuous defense of Aegisthus' right to the throne thwarts the full development of her maternal passion. Voltaire succeeds only partially in his attempt to use maternal passion to "…draw more tears from the audience" (Voltaire, *Mérope* 6). There are only two scenes where this passion is shown: when Mérope tries to kill Aegisthus because she believes he is the murderer of her son, and when she stops Poliphontes from murdering Aegisthus, unraveling the secret to both the tyrant and Aegisthus. However, these two scenes do not lead to any real insight into maternal passion and devotion. Mother and son do not hug, kiss, or even talk. Mérope is ultimately the queen and her maternal devotion to Aegisthus is expressed more by her furthering his royal interests than by a sentimental display of her affection.

The shortcomings Voltaire underlines in Maffei's tragedy are nothing but theatrical means used to shed light on Merope's maternal passion. The dialogical structure of the Italian *Merope*—which Voltaire thought too 'familiar'—and the use of secondary characters both support the theatrical configuration of domestic affections Maffei is interested in portraying.[5] While the two playwrights use different dramaturgical means to secure the success of their works, it is evident that Scipione Maffei fully accomplishes his goal of making maternal love a viable topic in modern tragedy. De la Lindelle's criticism of Maffei's tragedy appears to be a strategy to dispel any idea that Voltaire's *Mérope* was indebted to the Italian one, as many a spectator appeared to believe in Paris, and to confirm the superiority of French drama in Europe (Arnold xxii). Voltaire answers de la Lindelle's letter disingenuously calling his own alter ego 'hypercritic' but admitting, "I acknowledge that, in many points, you have too much reason on your side" (Voltaire, *Mérope* 26). While he claims Maffei's work superior to his own in certain aspects, he is quick to reiterate that "We must conform to the fashions of our age and nation […] Most certain it is, that in Italy many things are passed over, which would not be pardoned in France" (Voltaire, *Mérope* 26-27). In spite of his attempt to pacify the debate, Voltaire had accomplished through the voice of de la Lindelle the important objectives

[5] "How could I venture to make the under characters talk together for a long time? With you, those conversations serve to prepare interesting scenes between the principal actors: they are like the avenues to a fine palace: but our spectators are for coming into it at once" (Voltaire 17).

of separating the French and Italian Meropes and of establishing the superiority of the French version. De la Lindelle's letter and Voltaire's reply to it prefaced all future editions of *Mérope,* and it was meant to reiterate both Voltaire's originality and the preeminence of French drama (Arnold xxiii).

While declaring his intention to translate Maffei's play might have been a mere strategy to set up the Italian playwright in order to tear him down later, and while it is conceivable that Voltaire never meant to translate the Italian tragedy, his stated intention to do so is still worthy of evaluation. The ownership of the Merope trope, with the cultural and dramaturgical implications attached to it, was at the time a significant point of contention, and playwrights struggled to distance themselves from previous versions of the story. *Mérope* struggles to make a case for Voltaire's originality; however, not only do the Italian and French Meropes share many similarities, but Gotthold Ephraim Lessing believed that Voltaire had borrowed more than the topic from the Italian tragedy. There is also the peculiar fact that Voltaire had amply borrowed from George Jeffrey's *Merope* as well, the same author he had bitterly criticized in his letter to Maffei. Voltaire's claim that he had not bothered to read Jeffrey's *Merope* too attentively could be a way to "throw off the scent those who could have suspected him of outright plagiarism which would have been particularly outrageous since this would have been an instance of double plagiarism: first the plundering of Maffei's play and then using ideas derived from the English version" (Petrovska 132-133).

Given the complexity of this literary scandal, the question of whether Voltaire used ridicule to prevent accusations of plagiarism comes naturally. But why did he feel obliged to justify his missed translation of Maffei's tragedy? His argument that Maffei's *Merope* could not have worked in France is a weak one and belies Voltaire's major anxiety about the meaning of translation. Translating it would have meant to assign France a place inferior to that of Italy, and it would have implied that Maffei had exhausted the trope of Merope and that nothing more worthy could be said about it. On the contrary, composing his own version allowed Voltaire to respond to Maffei as an equal and to defy the very idea that the Italian had reached the pinnacle of contemporary tragedy. Furthermore, reverting to the long-lost Greek story provided Voltaire with temporal and dramaturgical freedom from any contemporary textual influence, and freed him of the discomfort of being Maffei's translator. By picking Merope's maternal love as a subject for his tragedy, Voltaire entered a dialectical dialogue not only with all the previous versions of the story but, more importantly, with Euripides' *Cresphontes*, a tragedy that even if lost had impacted every discussion of dramatic theory due to the position Aristotle had given it. Moreover, the fact that Euripides was unanimously considered by the French academy as "…*le dramaturge un peu philosophe*" was appealing to Voltaire, who aimed at delivering strong ethical lessons in his tragedies (Trousson 2116).

The notion of "transtextuality," which "sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts," lies at the core of Voltaire's choice of adaptation over translation (Genette 1). While Voltaire knows he cannot prevent speculation over the thematic and structural derivation of his drama, he resorts to any possible means to ensure that his *Mérope* occupies its own deserving space in the palimpsestic "architextuality" of the Merope trope which saw countless adaptations and translations in the eighteenth century (Genette 1). Voltaire claimed that there is a line that links French dramatic theatre to classic tragedy, and therefore *Mérope* presents itself as the

perfect example of his idea of a linear progress of classical spirit to modernity.[6] He aspired to bridge the dichotomy between classical and modern drama by creating a tragedy praised by Aristotle in the fourth century B.C., and still greatly appealing to contemporary audiences. He was aware of the long-lasting fascination of the theatre for the story of Merope and he wanted to compose his own version of it, a version that would surpass the previous ones and thus consolidate its author's position within the French Academy.[7] Considering *Mérope*'s enormous success, which represented the high point of Voltaire's playwriting career, Alfred Noyes observes that "if any play had to be chosen in support of the eighteenth century belief that the contemporary French drama had surpassed the Greek, *Mérope* would illustrate the argument […] better than any other" (301). With this tragedy Voltaire had accommodated what he believed to be suitable to the French stage in terms of structure, emplotment, and characterization, and what would conform to the morals and aesthetics of the French court. He had to strive to find a balance between acculturation, as the attempt to "bring a text more completely into the target system" and foreignization, which aspires to reconnect it to its source (Bassnett 121). In doing so, he claimed the Frenchness of the trope by distancing himself from all other versions of Merope and bridging the gap that separated him from Euripides.

Voltaire's missed translation of Maffei's *Merope* comments on the role translation held for the French dramatist and proves how translation invites discussion of cultural centers and peripheries of national literatures. It also probes questions for our time about what languages are translated the most and why, what determines the choice of adaptation over translation, and how that choice might suggest anxieties over what is gained and lost in the translational and adaptational processess.

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[6] "*Voltaire se révèle ainsi prisonnier à la fois d'une conception de progrès linéaire de la tragédie et du mythe de l'insurpassable perfection classique: Eschyle, Sophocle, Euripide, sont des 'inventeurs' dont le tort est de n'avoir pas inventé la tragédie francaise. Tout comme Eschyle est inférieur à Euripide, Euripide est inférieur à Racine*" (Trousson 2127).

[7] *Merope* was represented many times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France, England and Italy. Mr. Gilbert (1643), La Chapelle (1683), Jeffrey (1731) M. de la Grange (1701), Torelli, Maffei, and Alfieri all composed their own version of the story of Merope.

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