

# Found in (mis)translation, or the magic of foreign words

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Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère

## Found in (Mis)translation, or the Magic of Foreign Words

Cet article examine le rôle souvent occulté et pourtant essentiel de la traduction comme source d'innovation et de créativité dans l'histoire littéraire et la théorie. Il s'appuie sur plusieurs exemples allant du fameux épisode de la création d'Ève à partir de la «côte d'Adam» dans la Bible de Jérôme, basée sur la traduction fautive du mot hébreu «qaran» en latin et reflétant le biais patriarcal de Jérôme, à la traduction, tronquée du *Deuxième Sexe* de Simone de Beauvoir (1946) par le zoologiste retraité Howard M. Parshley qui allait néanmoins inspirer des études marquantes de la seconde vague féministe américaine telles que *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) de Betty Friedan et *Sexual Politics* (1970) de Kate Millett. L'exemple le plus développé retrace l'interaction productive de la traduction et de la réécriture dans la fiction d'Angela Carter, de *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (1977) jusqu'à ses célèbres «stories about fairy stories» recueillies dans *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) et *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1992). Je propose de lire les variations de Carter sur «Aschenputtel» dans «Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost» comme un correctif à sa traduction de la morale de «Cendrillon ou la Petite Pantoufle de Verre» de Perrault. La poétique traductive (*translational poetics*) de Carter démontre ainsi l'impact crucial de la traduction – y compris des erreurs – sur la démarche de l'écrivain, qui associe la (re)lecture créative inhérente à l'activité de traduction au travail de (ré)écriture jusqu'à en faire la matrice à partir de laquelle elle a élaboré son œuvre singulière.

“La traduction actualise l'étonnant potentiel théorique qui gît au croisement du langage et de la littérature”

(*Traduire-écrire: Cultures, poétiques, anthropologie*, 2014, 20)

Productive mistakes and constructive misunderstandings are bound to engage anyone working at the intersection of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies today. The gradual recognition of the central role of translation and its contribution to literary history in the circulation, adaptation, transmission and reworking of ideas, texts and genres fosters an open dialogue between the disciplines in the aftermath of the “translational turn” heralded by Susan Bassnett in *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (1993).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the emergence of new writing informed by

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1 Since the 1990s, Translation Studies has moved comparative textual analysis beyond the linguistic paradigm of equivalence to engage with issues of history, culture, ideology, ethics and poetics (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990, Lefevere 1992a/b, Bassnett 1998,...). Conversely, translation is currently redefining the contours and methods of Comparative Literature (see Bassnett 1993, Apter 2006 and 2013,

multilingual, mobile, migrant identities suggests that fluid, relational, and dynamic models are required to account for literary production across – but also within – national boundaries.

To be sure, translators are painfully alert to the dangers of misinterpretation in an age of ever more rapid exchanges taking place in a globalised context marked by international conflicts, ideological warfare and socio-cultural tensions, and keenly aware of their central role as mediators and facilitators. Reconsidering translation mistakes and misunderstandings is certainly no endorsement of *laissez-faire*, incompetence, or lack of professional or intellectual integrity, but a recognition of the complexities of communication as a negotiation of differences across languages, cultures and world-views, and of the in-between space of translation as a productive space.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, literary translation is a necessarily re-creative discursive practice and transformative process that not only questions the assumption of unmediated communication and the myth of equivalence, but also reveals the hidden translational dimension of works that were produced as a result of more or less deliberate ‘misreadings’. As Samuel Beckett proclaimed in *Worstward Ho* (1983), first written in French as *Cap au pire* (1982): “All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (*Samuel Beckett, Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism* 471). Beckett’s famous motto is embedded in a prose that twists, mocks and turns Charles Kingsley’s jingoistic novel of empire *Westward Ho!* (1855) on its head, starting with its borrowed title. Mispronouncing, mishearing, and misunderstanding can be seen as Beckett’s diagnosis of the terminal condition of European literature in the late twentieth century, but his wry ruminations about the inevitability of failure, couched in terse, ironic, stumbling prose, also capture our endless fascination for mistakes, errors, and misunderstandings as a tale-spinning species. Because they capture something about the elusive nature of language and the

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Bermann 2009 and 2014, Coste 2016, Dominguez and Ning 2016 among others), as the 2016 ACLA conference at Harvard amply confirmed. My own approach is indebted to Bassnett in particular: instead of ontologizing language difference through a focus on untranslatables in order to expose a history of ‘mistranslation,’ ‘translation failure,’ and ‘misfired speech-acts,’ to quote Emily Apter in *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013), I favour a dialogical model that brings to light the dynamic, mutually transformative dimension of translation as a central and ongoing force in literary history, and refuses to sacralize the source text (see Hennard Dutheil 2013 and 2016). Rather than a discourse of negativity and inevitable loss, I prefer to believe, after Salman Rushdie, that “... we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained” (Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*, 17). I am indebted to Didier Coste for his useful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

2 See Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994) in particular.

productivity of language differences, they in turn inspire further responses and become the impetus for giving old texts new relevance and directions (for better or for worse) in translation.

Rather than offering a typology of ‘mistranslations,’ this article suggests that each case study raises specific questions about translation as a subjective practice shaped by its context of production and reception. The first examples outlined below call for an investigation of the translator’s agency and creative response, but also of the historical, cultural, ideological and material conditions under which the task was carried out, given that translation involves a degree of manipulation and repurposing for a new audience to the point of becoming a ‘rewriting’ (Lefevere 1992a). Furthermore, ‘mistranslations’ shed light on the translator’s project and intentions (political, polemical, poetical), or the constraints (personal, editorial, ideological) under which the task was carried out. In the most fully developed example below, it is interesting to observe that plain semantic errors (transliterations and faux-amis) can also produce new networks of significance, associations and resonances. Due to the affective echoes and sensory materiality of literature as overdetermined language (a ‘forme-sens’ to borrow Meschonnic’s phrase), such errors yield unsuspected aesthetic and semantic benefits, and thus activate new possibilities for re-creation. Generally, these examples shed light on a history of extremely variable translational practices that are also genre-dependent. Because it actualizes the potentialities of a shared cultural script in the act of re-enunciation, the fairy tale as a cross-cultural and transformative genre par excellence allowed Angela Carter to develop the translational poetics that characterizes her fiction.

### Productive mistakes, from spare ribs to male chauvinist pigs

One of the most famous errors in the history of translation was made by Jerome, the patron saint of translators, who learned Hebrew so that he could translate the Old Testament into Latin from the original text, instead of resorting to the Greek version (the Septuagint) that had been used so far. The resulting Latin version, which became the basis for hundreds of subsequent translations, contained a translation choice that would have important implications in the history of Western art and culture. When Moses comes down from Mount Sinai his head has ‘radiance’ or, in Hebrew, ‘qaran’ (קָרַן). But because Hebrew is notoriously written without vowels, St. Jerome read ‘qaran’ (radiating with light) as ‘keren’ – that is, ‘horned.’ This unique occurrence of a verb derived from a noun has been rationalized away as a symbol of power in ancient semitic cultures (horned rams), or as reflecting the pressure of the image of the “horns of the sun” in Aramaic. From this culturally and ideologically loaded choice came centuries of paintings and sculptures

of Moses wearing horns, including Michelangelo's famous statue. Another example from the Hebraic to the Christian Bible is Jerome's mistranslation of 'tsela' (עלצ) in *Genesis* 2:21, when Eve is said to be created from Adam's 'rib' (as represented in Michelangelo's painting of the fashioning of Eve in the Sistine Chapel), and not 'at his side,' as the Hebrew text suggests, with serious implications for the place of women in the new religion. In the Old Testament, the word is used to refer to the ridge of a hill (2 Samuel 16:13), the side chambers of a temple (1 Kings 6:5, 6), and the supporting beam of a building or a door (1 Kings 6:15, 16), but never to a human rib. Jerome's translation choice in this crucial scene is therefore quite surprising, considering that his translation *iuxta Hebraeos* is otherwise characterized by its literalism, and thus draws attention to the gender bias of the translator's interpretation and rendering of the passage in Latin.<sup>3</sup>

Another creative (mis)reading gave rise to a new literary genre. When the Italian astronomer Giovanni V. Schiaparelli began mapping the planet Mars in 1877, he described the lines he could see on the surface of the planet with the Italian word 'canali' (channels), which the translator conveyed as 'water canals' (man-made canals), probably because the word fired his imagination.<sup>4</sup> This translation choice in turn gave rise to a theory about intelligent creatures living on Mars. Subsequently, books were published with illustrations showing artificial structures built by these remarkable engineers from outer space. Trained as a science teacher and under the probable influence of Percival Lowell's *Mars* (1895), which elaborates on this theory, H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1897) describes the invasion of the Earth by Martians in search of nourishment when the resources have gone scarce on the red planet. It is noteworthy that the novel in turn became the inspiration for a veritable sci-fi subgenre in fiction, comic books and film.

Productive misreadings also characterize the reception of literary theories when they begin to travel across languages, socio-historical contexts and intellectual traditions, in turn generating new approaches and perspectives. Margaret A. Simons has shown how the reception of 'French feminist theory' in Anglo-American academic circles started on the wrong foot with the error-riddled and truncated translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* (1949). Prompted by his publisher, the translator Howard Parshley, a professor of zoology at Smith College, deleted half of the chapter on the history of feminism, cut entire passages, and altogether removed the names of dozens of women mentioned by Beauvoir, besides mistranslating key

3 I am grateful to the theologian Yolande Boinnard for taking the time to discuss these examples with me. The question of the gender politics of Jerome's translation (and of biblical commentaries generally) began to be raised in the aftermath of the feminist movement and is still hotly debated today.

4 <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/lunar-bat-men-the-planet-vulcan-and-martian-canals-76074171/?c=y%3Fno-ist>.

concepts borrowed from existential philosophy (such as *identification* for *aliénation*) due to his ignorance of the movement. The reception of ‘French feminism’ subsequently led to a number of misunderstandings humorously encapsulated in the following question: “Is *phallogocentrique* the translation of ‘male chauvinist pig’?” (Simon, *Gender in Translation*, 88). As Nicole Ward-Jouve aptly summarizes, “the translation process implies untold selections, omissions, [and] enlargements, that have as much to do with the translating culture, its needs and projections, as they have with the writing that is being translated” (Jouve 1991: 91, quoted by Simon 88).<sup>5</sup> The faulty translation would notably inspire Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* (1963) and Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970).

The idea that everything changes in translation, to deliberately ‘misread’ the title of a recent book by Lawrence Venuti, *Translation Changes Everything* (2013), is gaining traction in translation theory, the publishing industry and the media. Literary translators are achieving greater visibility today: many stress the artistic nature of their activity, and some have earned fame and recognition like Gregory Rabassa, Lia Wyler, Ann Goldstein and André Marcowicz. The 2016 Man Booker International Prize was awarded to both the author and translator of *The Vegetarian* (Han Kang and Deborah Smith, respectively), partly as a result of Marina Warner’s eloquent plea in favour of world literature in translation the previous year.<sup>6</sup> Susan Bassnett thus considers the literary translator as “a creative artist mediating between cultures and languages” (Bassnett, 2014: 10), and reconceptualizes translation away from the binary and hierarchical model of culturally valued source vs. debased and derivative copy, to stress the re-creative dimension of this activity and its positive impact on the receiving culture. The new paradigm disputes the idea of hallowed original text pitted against inferior copy in order to rethink their relationship as a dynamic, differential, and open-ended process of continuous reinvention. Translated texts are therefore considered as literary productions in their own right whose differences from the source are not only inevitable but also meaningful and potentially productive. To quote Bassnett:

it is absurd to see translation as anything other than a creative literary activity, for translators are all the time engaging with the texts first as readers and then as rewriters, as recreators of that text in another language [...]. Translation was a means not only of acquiring more information about other writers and their work, but also of discovering new ways of writing. (*The Translator as Writer*, 2006, 174)

5 Another case in point is the afterlife of Bakhtin’s writings in (mis)translation. See Karine Zbinden and Irene Weber Henking’s edited issue *La Quadrature du Cercle Bakhtine : traductions, influences et remises en contexte* (2005).

6 <http://themanbookerprize.com/international/news/vegetarian-wins-man-booker-international-prize-2016>.

Countless writers have indeed placed the activity of translation at the heart of their creative process, either by translating their own writings (Vladimir Nabokov, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Vassilis Alexakis, Nancy Huston,...), or by translating other texts that fed into their own work (Rabindranath Tagore, Charles Baudelaire, J. L. Borges, Ezra Pound, Hu Shi, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Italo Calvino, Angela Carter, Seamus Heaney, Don Paterson, Haruki Murakami,...).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, due to increased mobility and migration, many authors today live, work and write in several locations, languages and cultures, and their literary output reflects a fluid linguistic and cultural identity whereby translation is experienced not as a temporary activity but as the very condition for living and being in the world (Ariel Dorfman, Agota Kristof, Kazim Ali, Tawada Yōko, Jhumpa Lahiri,...). Translational literature as a transnational phenomenon allows texts, ideas and human beings to circulate, but also to be re-imagined anew in the process in an ever-changing and mutually transformative fashion. To quote the poet, editor, writer and translator Kazim Ali:

The trick of translation is that the act of it transforms everyone:  
the original text, the new language, the author, and the translator all.  
("Carrying Words Through Time" in *The Art of Empathy: Celebrating Literature in Translation*, 2014: 72)<sup>8</sup>

### Angela Carter's fairy-tale retellings found in (mis)translation

My last example focuses on the British author Angela Carter (1940-1992), who is best known for *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), a collection of innovative fairy-tale retellings that revived the genre for adult readers, and inspired the vogue for dark revisionings of Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White and Beauty and the Beast in literature, film and other media. What has long been overlooked, however, is the role of translation in Carter's fashioning of her unique, baroque, multi-layered, and densely intertextual style, and her use of her own translation errors as points of departure for some of her most memorable takes on the familiar stories.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Isabelle de Courtivon ed., *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity* (2003) and Christine Lombez, *La Seconde Profondeur* (2016).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/The%20Art%20of%20Empathy%20Translation.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> This section is based on Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, *Reading, Translating, Rewriting: Angela Carter's Translational Poetics* (2013). On the interplay of translation and rewriting in Carter's fiction, see also *Angela Carter traductrice – Angela Carter en traduction* (2014); "From the Bloody Chamber to the Cabinet

Carter was a South Londoner at heart, but she had a keen interest in foreign languages and cultures. She travelled far and wide during her life and lived in Japan, Australia and the United States. Throughout her career Carter engaged with the work of foreign authors, traditions and movements from a critical, creative and woman-centred perspective as a writer, editor, translator and cultural critic, and encapsulated her literary project in a memorable image:

Reading is just as creative an activity as writing, and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode.

(“Notes from the Front Line,” 37)<sup>10</sup>

Commissioned by the innovative British publisher Victor Gollancz, Carter’s translation of Charles Perrault’s *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (1697) came out with illustrations by Martin Ware in *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (1977). It was praised by the Perrault scholar Jacques Barchilon and positively reviewed in several newspapers as a fresh take on the familiar stories. As Carter explains in “The Better to Eat you With” (1976), her purpose was to recover a pre-romantic, rationalist French tradition compatible with her pedagogical aims and feminist standpoint. In the same essay, she praises Perrault’s “fables of the politics of experience” (452) because they carry a pragmatic message of worldly instruction that children can learn from: “Cut the crap about richly nurturing the imagination,” she says, “*This world is all that is to the point*” (*Shaking a Leg*, 452). Carter also argues that Perrault’s cautionary morals (which are often cut in editions for children) teach children to “cope with the world before [they learn to] interpret it” (*Shaking a Leg*, 452-3), and so her translation project was to revive the tradition of the fairy tale as a carrier of practical advice, useful knowledge and earthy wisdom about how to live in the world, ward off its dangers and make the best of opportunities.

Accordingly, Carter modernised the language, the setting, and the message of Perrault’s tales for modern-day children. Although the translation generally remains close to the text, Carter subtly infuses the morals with new meaning: thus, Perrault’s gendered address condemning female curiosity in

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de Curiosités: Angela Carter’s Curious Alices through the Looking-Glass of Languages” (2016), and “Angela Carter’s *objets trouvés* in Translation: from Baudelaire to *Black Venus*” (2017).

10 This reverses the message of *Mark* 2:22 in King James Bible (Cambridge ed.): “And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles, and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new bottles.”



“La Barbe bleue” is removed in favour of a pragmatic caution against marrying for money. But Carter also made a few translation mistakes that were probably not intended: in “Little Red Riding Hood,” for example, the word “*ruelle*” is (mis)translated as “street” in the moral. Whereas, in Perrault’s time, “*ruelle*” referred to the place behind the bed, which signals that Perrault’s “*loups douceureux*” are libertines haunting the bedchambers of the ladies, the modern translation sets the tale in a modern urban environment that attenuates the sexual innuendo. In contrapuntal fashion, sexual politics would become the main focus of Carter’s retellings in “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Company of Wolves”. Because every reader is a potential author who can tease out new meanings in old texts, (mis)translation thus gave Carter an occasion to re-imagine the familiar stories anew for an adult audience.

From Charles Perrault’s “Cendrillon ou la Petite Pantoufle de verre” (1697) to Angela Carter’s “Cinderella: or, The Little Glass Slipper” (1977) and “Ashputtle *or* The Mother’s Ghost” (1993)

Charles Perrault’s “Cendrillon ou la Petite Pantoufle de Verre” in *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé, avec des moralités* (1697) mocks the bitter competition to win a prince’s heart, and the obsession with fashion at the court of Louis XIV. In contrast to Disney’s 1950 Cinderella movie and widespread ideas about the tale today, Perrault’s moral explicitly distances itself from the conventional praise of female beauty, and stresses the role of good manners and instruction instead. To quote the first Moralité:

*La beauté pour le sexe est un rare trésor,  
De l’admirer jamais on ne se lasse;  
Mais ce qu’on nomme bonne grâce  
Est sans prix, et vaut mieux encor.  
C’est ce qu’à Cendrillon fit avoir sa Marraine,  
En la dressant, en l’instruisant,  
Tant et si bien qu’elle en fit une Reine:  
(Car ainsi sur ce Conte on va moralisant.)*

It may surprise readers of fairy tales that Perrault’s first moral values “*bonne grâce*” over and above beauty. Antoine Furetière’s dictionary (1690) defines *bonne grâce* as affability, amiability, and kindness. In the courtly context of Perrault’s tale, *grâce* denotes a pleasing attitude, appearance, dress or conversation, in conformity with good taste and polite manners (the example given is “*faire un conte de bonne grâce*”). The meaning of *bonne grâce* also extends to the positive effect these qualities may have on a prince or a king. According

to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1694): “On dit, *Estre en grace auprès du Prince, ou de quelque personne puissante*, pour dire, Y estre en consideration, en estime. *Bonnes-graces*, se dit dans le mesme sens. *Il est dans les bonnes-graces du Roy. Il a perdu les bonnes-graces du Prince.*” Associated with the appearance, attitude and behavior of court ladies, *bonne grâce* is therefore a strong marker of power and influence at court. Perrault may even ironically allude to his own fall from grace (*disgrâce*) at the court of Louis XIV after the death of his protector Colbert, and so speaking from experience. In the fairy tale, it is the proper training of the girl and the aristocratic connections of her fairy godmother that ensure the fairy-tale heroine’s success and royal marriage, even more than her natural qualities. These can only shine with the help of an influential patron, as the second (disenchanted and disenchanting) moral makes clear.

Translating from a late twentieth-century perspective coloured by her feminist sensibility, Carter picks on the idea of education, behaviour and personality to challenge the beauty myth associated with the fairy tale, and praises natural *charm* as the new locus of magic. In keeping with modern expectations and Carter’s own values, the new moral focuses on true love (“to win a heart”) over social advancement and a royal marriage, and Perrault’s wry humor is turned into a more child-friendly, optimistic, and pragmatic advice to young girls:

#### *Moral*

Beauty is a fine thing in a woman; it will always be admired. But charm is beyond price and worth more, in the long run. When her godmother *dressed* Cinderella up and told her how to behave at the ball, she instructed her in charm. Lovely ladies, this gift is worth more than a fancy hairdo; to win a heart, to reach a happy ending, charm is the true gift of the fairies. Without it, one can achieve nothing; with it, everything. (*The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, 95-6, italics mine)

Perrault stresses the role of experienced and well-connected women in the making of a princess. Because she has been trained (“*dressée*”) to catch the prince’s attention, Cinderella gets a royal marriage as her “prize” with the help of her godmother. But Carter (mis)translates “*dresser*” as “dressed,” a calque that probably owes something to the thematic focus on clothing and fashion in the tale, let alone its reception in illustrated editions and Disney’s influential fairy-tale film.

When she rewrote the tale in “Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost” (anthologized in the posthumous collection *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*, 1993), however, Carter offered a corrective to her translation: she activates the meaning of the word “*dresser*” as the brutal training of an animal to obey. This time, the story of Cinderella (or, rather, Ashputtle, after Grimm’s

much darker and bloodier folk tale) becomes an occasion to reflect on the social, cultural and economic constraints placed on women under patriarchy. In her preparatory notes, Carter observes: “Ashputtle has no name; she is her mother’s daughter and that is all” (Carter Papers, British Library). Because marrying a daughter well is their only ambition, ruthless mothers shape generations of Cinderellas to fulfil their wishes: the stepmother “is prepared to cripple her daughters” (*American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*, 115) to fool the prince into marrying them, and so cuts their heel and toe, while the heroine’s mother (who returns as a bird in Grimm) “peck[s] her ears” at the ball “to make her dance vivaciously, so that the prince would see her, so that the prince would love her, so that he would follow her...” (115), and cruelly blinds the stepsisters on the heroine’s wedding day. “Ashputtle *or* The Mother’s Ghost,” then, captures the darker implications of the tale as a bitter reflection on how economic dependency and subservience determine a girl’s life, shaping behaviour, education and expectations, and fostering conflict among women from one generation to the next. The shift from “Cinderella: *or*, The Little Glass Slipper” to “Ashputtle *or* The Mother’s Ghost” then arguably hinges on a word, *dresser*, whose meaning slips (pun intended) from dress, fashion and romance to the condition and conditioning of women in a patriarchal system.

### “Ashputtle *or* The Mother’s Ghost”: Puns and Pumpkins

How did “Ashputtle *or* The Mother’s Ghost” come into being? As the bottle metaphor suggests, literary creation involves a constant mixing, brewing and decanting process. Accordingly, Carter combined Perrault and Grimm in her rewriting through a cross-linguistic pun, when she connected the godmother’s changing the pumpkin into a golden coach in Perrault with Ashputtle’s near-orphan state in Grimm. In her notes for “Ashputtle *or* The Mother’s Ghost,” Carter indicates that the original version of her own story (its ‘seed’, as it were) was based on a pun. On a page entitled “Eating Mamma,” she pauses on the episode of the pumpkin transformed into a stage coach in Perrault’s text, which she quotes in French: “Va dans le jardin et apporte-moi une citrouille. Cendrillon alla aussitot (sic) cueillir la plus belle qu’elle peut (sic) trouver”. She then establishes a connection between Cinderella’s lack of family (or “kin”) with the magic pumpkin, and she starts dreaming over the word:

The godmother asks the girl to fetch a pumpkin; poor orphan Cinderella, out she goes to fetch the only fruit that never wants for family because its “kin” go everywhere with it, as suffix, as indelible second syllable although this point is lost in French, of course. (British Library, Carter Papers, Add MS 88899/1/39)

The pumpkin/kin pun becomes a key creative device, through associations of ideas that link Perrault and Grimm (the pumpkin and the absent kins so sorely missed by the heroine), their conflation or union generating the idea of pregnancy, mothering and reproduction central to the rewriting. Carter thus locates magic in language, which becomes especially productive in translation. This draws attention to the mutability of the genre, and to cross-linguistic and cross-cultural translation as a central modality of fairy-tale transformation.

“Ashputtle *or* The Mother’s Ghost” retells the story of Cinderella three times in markedly different forms and styles, but it always places as its focus the figure of the dead mother borrowed from Grimm. A mother comes back to persecute and/or to help her daughter find a suitable husband, in both cases dictating her fate and imposing her will, though the possibility of liberation from pre-written scripts is raised at the end. The same applies to literary creation as it unfolds in the interplay of repetition and difference and so, Carter suggests, must involve transformation, departure and re-invention if it is to ‘live on’ in the interplay of translation and rewriting.

When Carter decided to include “Ashputtle *or* The Mother’s Ghost” in *American Ghosts and Old Wonders*, the story took on a poignant resonance due to the double meaning of the mother’s ‘will.’ Condemned by lung cancer, Carter meditates on her role as a literary mother returning in ghostly fashion through the magic of writing. She stages herself as a maternal figure taking leave of her reader-daughter(s), and invites us to use the gifts she has bestowed on us in order to tell our own story. In the last, enigmatic retelling, a mother asks her daughter to step inside her coffin. The girl refuses at first, but the mother insists:

‘I stepped into *my* mother’s coffin when I was your age.’

The girl stepped into the coffin although she thought it would be the death of her. It turned into a coach and horses. The horses stamped, eager to be gone.

‘Go and seek your fortune, darling.’ (*American Ghosts*, 119-120)

Once again, the genesis of the tale gives a clue to the creative process. In the typewritten draft kept in the Carter Papers, Carter scribbled at the top of the page: “escape the same fate.” The story of Cinderella, then, takes new and unexpected turns in Carter’s fiction, from the pregnant belly of the pumpkin to the coffin that turns into a coach, from cooking and eating to breeding and dying; from Cinderella to Ashputtle, from dresses to ashes, dust to dust.

Where fairy tales are concerned, then, there is no such a thing as an ‘original’ text, especially given how modern rewriters like Carter conceive of them, and this complicates the binary opposition of original text vs. translation that has long prevailed in Western culture. As Lorna Sage put it: “There’s no core, or point of origin, or ur-story ‘underneath,’ just a continuous interweaving

of texts” (“Angela Carter: The Fairy Tale,” 74), and this becomes particularly obvious in the interplay of translation and rewriting. Carter herself remarked that she was interested in recovering a sense of collective creation in her last completed project, *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*:

Ours is a highly individualised culture, with a great faith in the work of art as a unique one-off, and the artist as an original, godlike and inspired creator of unique one-offs.

But fairy tales are not like that, nor are their makers. Who first invented meat-balls? In what country? Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup? Think in terms of the domestic arts. “This is how I make potato soup.”

(*The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, 1990: x)

The potato soup analogy thus invites us to rethink translation away from limiting ideas of authorship, authority and origin that tend to obscure the creativity of (mis)translation as a condition for literary innovation.

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