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ON THE RHETORIC OF HANDMAIDENHOOD: THE TRANSLATOR'S CONSTRUCTION OF (IM)MODESTY

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Abstract: The translator's positionality is not merely imposed by the public or literary stakeholders, but he or she has often been an active co-constructor of it. My claim goes beyond repeating the norm of self-effacement: translators to this day have staked the humble position in ways strikingly like those used by authors, making the humility topos, I argue, a writerly gesture. This work surveys the rhetoric of humility, its nuances and justifications, and diverse publics for whom these strategies are performed: authors, patrons, or readers. Ethos, persona, and hexis form part of the self-fashioning strategies that are also trust-building, and which often reveal slippages into self-assertions and even preemptive challenges. The practice extends well beyond early modern literature to the modern era, as I illustrate. I entertain whether humility is in fact the translator 'under erasure', not invisible but visible-in-invisibility. As modesty topoi are also shown to often be mere translation norms, "devotional formula", or even immodesty in disguise, this work considers many of its 'rhetorical moves', complicating assumptions of the meek translator. Finally, I briefly delineate an 'immodesty turn' with perhaps ancient origins but found full-voiced in certain feminist translators. Forms of immodesty overtly assert authorhood and explicitly 'write back' against the rhetoric of the past.

Keywords: ethos; modesty; humility; rhetoric; the translator's subject position; self-presentation; trust.

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> The notion of transparency — with its moralized corollary, the 'modesty' of the self-effacing translator — belongs to the [realm of] opinion, as it does to the theoretical ignorance and misunderstanding typical of an ideology that does not know itself. To it we may oppose a view of translation as a re-uttering specific to a historical subject, interaction of two poetics, decentring, the inside-out of a language and its textualities.
> (Henri Meschonnic 1973 341, trans. Pym 2003)

> If, after checking my Thai translation [of *Romeo and Juliet*] with the English of Shakespeare, you still wish to complain, please direct your disapproval to me. I shall accept your advice with respect, and apologize for my blunder.
> (King Vajiravudh 1922, in Chittiphalangsri 2019: 118)

> We dress the vineyard, but the wine is the owner's [; ...] for the proud reader will only say, the poor drudge has done his duty.
> (Dryden, dedication to the Aeneid, [1697] 1792: 209)

1. Introduction

Wherever we find the modesty trope in translation, there we also find a fundamental tension or contradiction between the expansiveness of textualizing another's voice on the one hand, and what Wright has called a central feature of humility, the "'shrinking' of the self" (2021: 401) on the other. This work aims to contribute to translator studies on several fronts: 1) presenting auctorial and translatorial norms of humility in conversation; 2) presenting readings of the rhetoric of the humility topos and discourse, including emendation, exploring its metaphorics, contradictions, and blurred boundaries between real and assumed humility; 3) highlighting not only the purposes of moves, but their multiple addressees (patrons, other translators), and the ways readers are given augmented agency; 4) mapping this ethos as a habitus or subject position that goes well into the late modern period and even contemporary times, beyond existing medieval and early modern studies; and finally, 5) giving voice briefly to the 'immodest' translator, and concluding that unhumility and humility are often inextricable.

A beginning may be made by placing the conversation in the context of twenty-first century concerns over the translator's subjectivity, voice, biography, and agency, all of which recognize the translator's decision-making, and above all, humanity. A translation is a mediation, and the entexted loyalty assumed in a translation extends to its paratext, a site of negotiated identities, prebuttals of arguments, and appeasements of patrons. If we have begun asking who the translator is, we must also begin attending to what they tell us about their aims, which tells us about themselves. Why are they saying what they do, and, humbly or unhumbly, in the way they do? And could it be it is neither true nor false but *conventional*?

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1.1. "Mediocritas mea": The humility topos and the writer

The writer preceded the translator in matters of modesty, and I will argue, provided the model. Curtius, who has excavated this topos of authorial humility authoritatively, writes of the paradox that "[i]n his exordium it behooved the orator to put his hearers in a favorable, attentive, and tractable state of mind. How do this? First, through a modest presence. But one has to draw attention to this modesty oneself. Thus it becomes affected" (2013: 83). Humility is a pre-Christian term, when an orator invoked his own inadequacy and feebleness (*infirmitatem*), a borrowing from judicial proceedings where swaying judges was the object; authors of both pagan and Christian late Antiquity, into the Middle Ages, lamented their crudeness of speech (*rusticitas*) (*ibid.*). The clichés had formed by the fifth or sixth century:

> The author apologizes for his style (*sermo*) or his talent (*ingenium*) or both; they are dry, hard, thin (*ariditas, siccitas, ieiunae macies orationis*; the last already Tacitean); artless (*rudis, simplex, communis, incompositus, incomptus, incultus*); crude (*impolitus, scabies*); rusty (*rubigo*); unclean (*sordidus*); paltry (*egestas, inopia, paupertas, exilitas, sterilitas*). (Curtius 2013: 411)

Quintilian saw a correlation between self-abnegation and how closely the speaker would be heeded, since—and one may read as much bad intent as one wishes here—Dunn tells us, "he has made his own motivation invisible" (1994: 6). Though the topos stretches back to Cicero in Curtius' findings, it joined forces with "formulas of self-disparagement" derived from Old Testament prayers for wisdom while using metaphorical self-debasements of themselves, and in secular form often accompanied declarations of the writer daring only to write due to the bidding of another (though a mere commonplace) (2013: 84-85). The essential conflict in these self-presentations was, in the case of Christian writers, between the very act of authoring and piety: "Authors strive to dissimulate the personal agency of authorship. Writing was not supposed to set the person of the author in the spotlight", and thus silence was broken, per this thinking, only reluctantly and for utilitarian ends, and even style could be suspected vainglory (Bernard 2014: 43). Philosophers call this a *pragmatic paradox*, a statement undermined by the conditions of its utterance: By writing, one undercuts one's humility, even if one writes to assert one's humility. Translators often had it both ways, using preference for a florid style against the reader at the same time they would beg forgiveness for changing "Latin or Greek ornaments of the original into a plain English coat" (Belle 2017: 75). Pender (2012: 22-24 following Obermeier 1999) cites Quintilian's contention that artifice's secrecy protects eloquence (1922: XII.ix.5), and lists the vast number of flexible forms that this rhetoric, closely associated with dissimulation, can take, including disavowing authorship, self-detriment, remorse and apology, "admission of guilt with counterattack", claims of incompetence, reluctant authorship, addressing the work to gratify a single reader or patron, and self-defining as compiler rather than author (and in this latter stratagem we perhaps have chanced upon the motivation for much pseudotranslation through history). But it is Alexakis who

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points to the strategy that perhaps underlies all its uses: to deflect criticism (2004: 521), what Andoková (2016: 5) evokes in terms of *Benevolum parare*, cultivating readers' leniency.

1.2. The translatorial persona of the humble translator and 'the master's voice'

Ethos, according to Aristotle's theory, referred to a 'real self' that was stable, and intended to enhance credibility (Lehman 2016: 190-191). The more modern notion of persona as distinguished by Cherry relates to a changeable 'fictional self', distinct from ethos but mediated by an implied author, who, "Januslike", creates a blurred boundary between real and artifice, ethos and persona (1988: 263). Theorists such as Lehman, by contrast, argue that the 'real' self is constituted by a deliberate self-presentation, and is not static but dynamic (2016: 193, 197). Such debates revive the age-old questions of whether a 'real' audience can be addressed, whether the 'real' writer is writing, and whether their claims are 'real'. For our purposes, the persona is useful as a contextual construct in prefaces. (Dis)trust is constructed rather than assumed. Rizzi, Lang and Pym remind us that "Trust or distrust encapsulates complex rhetorical, emotional, and attitudinal signals: promise-making, sincerity, and readers' and audiences' reactions to texts and agents" (2019: 40).

Self-disparagement was translators' inheritance from writers, and the persona construct similarly lingers in prefaces. Belle provides the notion of assuaging the "status anxiety" of translators and "paradoxically enough—to carve out a space of authorial recognition" (2017: 64). One can wring from this assertion an essential hypothesis: Translators, in performing modesty, were not necessarily subordinating themselves, but assuming a writerly position. Below I will attend to some ways this was carried out, and will be concerned here far less with translatorial action upon texts (such as translators' expurgations in the name of modesty) than with the rhetorical varieties the translator performed. In passing I will take note of figurations of the translator.

Expectations of a diminished self for the translator was long predicated on an inverse relationship, and thus serving the author shaded into servitude to the author. George Steiner provides the *locus classicus* here: "[...] modesty is the very essence of translation. The greater the poet, the more loyal should be his servitude to the original; Rilke is servant to Louis Labe, Roy Campbell to Baudelaire. Without modesty, translation will traduce; where modesty is constant, it can transfigure". Or consider Theo Hermans, who in "Shall I Apologize Translation?" writes that

> in most conventional thinking about translation we require translators to be […] 'self-effacing', to stand not at the original author's side but 'behind him', hidden, out of view, transparent, incorporeal, disembodied and disenfranchised. We need translators as purveyors of otherwise inaccessible data, but we don't want their intervention to leave any traces of their own, and therefore we persist in trying to constrain, control, regulate and ultimate to negate the translator's labour. (2001: 7)

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He continues, arguing that we ought to ask whose interests are served by regimenting translators, and surmises that oversight arises out of

> into imagining a true original, one that cannot be printed on the page. Indeed, the anxiety of translation: the desire to ensure that source-language speaker and translator will speak with a single voice, the master's voice, and the knowledge, deep down and repressed, that the translator's own voice can never be wholly reduced, subsumed, or extinguished. Mimetic speech can mimic its model, but it cannot coincide with it; the actor will never be the character he or she represents. (*ibid.*)

Whence the translator's modesty, then? In this light it seems but two things: the assurance of mimesis and only mimesis, and the insurance of failure, the assertion of bona fide efforts that came up short. The doctrine of untranslatability is not the emphasis in such discourse, and neither the secondariness of translation itself, but rather an ancillary fact: the accentuation of the original writer's greatness, compared to an 'unworthy' translator, makes the writer shine brighter. One variation on this idea is that the unworthy translation creates a mechanism for seeing beyond it. In this sense, it is not self-effacement so much as self-debasement. For instance, Richard Linche, in Saenger's words (2005: 201), "makes us aware of his own fallibility and his own temporality in order to make us alert to the transcendent original that we must yearn to see behind his translation". Linche writes:

> Such as it is therefore, either culpable in words too much affected, or in disproportion being not methodically composed, or in shallownesse in the not proper understanding of the first authors meaning, it must now passe, as for me it is too late to recall it […]. (Linche, 1599, STC 4691, p. [A4]v.)

An expanded role for the reader is implied, which I will attend to below.

2. The reader's activation: 'imagining a true original'

A fundamental shift to self-effacement is found in Richard Linche's (1599) appeal to the reader to do the work of recreating the original (Saenger 2005: 200). In this way the translation reader implicitly is being ennobled, entrusted to read actively and to supplement the translator's flawed performance. That is, the reader is enticed

> into imagining a true original, one that cannot be printed on the page. Indeed, I suspect that the typical Renaissance translator is demanding of his reader something like an Iserian response, to fill in the gaps of the translated text and search for a glorious absent ur-text. In so doing, the reader becomes engaged more profoundly with the book […]. (*ibid.:* 201)

This engagement is also borne out by another kind of openness: the reader correcting the translation. In John Lydgate's *Troilus and Criseyde* by Chaucer (1380s) he provides the reader with an opportunity for moral improvement, that

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is, “virtue through emendation” (Blatt 33-4) of the text. In Carey’s “To the Favourable Reader” the reader may even be to blame for faults, and the humility has a whiff of challenge about it:

> To the favourable READER.
> THIS Booke in its native Language, I dare boldly affirme, doth very well deserve the reading; if it shall not seeme to thee to doe so, being thus transplanted, the fault is either thine, or mine; all of favour I will desire of thee is, not to bee too sudden in thy censure; for beleeve me, it will admit of second thoughts. (Carey 1637: A3, ctd. in Iamartino and Manzi 2018: 217)

By contrast, Charlston brings a case, that of Pinkard’s translation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit,* which he calls a hexis of circumspection position (2014:17), ‘hexis’ referring to reputation, or in Pasmatzi’s reading (2014: 78-9), “defensive and honour-seeking stances”. By this he means the translator’s “success as a translator is dependent upon his (serious) critics being able to use the translation against Pinkard’s own view, in support of his critics’ different view”. A failed translation by this measure implies a text making opposing readings more difficult (Charlston 2014: 17). Pinkard declares that he, of course, has his own interpretation of the book (Pinkard, p. i), but its goal, in essence, is to facilitate difference. This remarkable rhetoric essentially makes of the translation’s goal the production of a text that makes possible even its own refutation. As Charlston writes, “To have produced a translation biased in favour of one’s own interpretation, in full knowledge of the existence of many subtly conflicting interpretations of Hegel, would be dishonourable” (2014: 17). This example showcases the translator’s self-aware participation in functionalism within a wider community of readings, rather than the work closing the hermeneutic circle. This constitutes a relatively modern variant of the “emendation invitation” of the early modern era, though he is still submitting evidence of his own goodwill or virtue, viz., the betterment of the text, and the field, over his own ambitions.

Rosetti similarly places before the reader the translator’s success or failure, adding impetus to the idea that the reader’s judgment exercises a kind of patronage, and it is the reader too, not only the author or other translators, who adjudicates the translator’s success or failure:

> Any merit possessed by these translations is derived from an effort to follow this principle [of literality]; and, in some degree, from the fact that such painstaking in arrangement and descriptive heading as is often indispensable to old and especially to “occasional” poetry, has here been bestowed on these poets for the first time. That there are many defects in these translations, or that the above merit is their defect, or that they have no merits but only defects, are discoveries so sure to be made if necessary (or perhaps here and there in any case), that I may safely leave them in other hands. (1913: 176)

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Rosetti declares that he is protecting the reader from the translator's woes, conceding that "it is the reader's best privilege to remain ignorant" of infelicities of translation-making. But then he is at pains to tell of his pains:

> The task of the translator (and with all humility be it spoken) is one of some self-denial. Often would he avail himself of any special grace of his own idiom and epoch, if only his will belonged to him: often would some cadence serve him but for his author's structure—some structure but for his author's cadence: often the beautiful turn of a stanza must be weakened to adopt some rhyme which will tally, and he sees the poet revelling in abundance of language where himself is scantily supplied. (*ibid.*)

Rosetti's unburdening goes on: neither the author's 'music' nor 'matter' can be neglected; and flaws in the source that he would be happier removing must remain, for "it is not in the bond". The translator must sacrifice for the narrower goal than that to which he is tempted; he or she is not less, but the scope of action is:

> His path is like that of Aladdin through the enchanted vaults: many are the precious fruits and flowers which he must pass by unheeded in search for the lamp alone; happy if at last, when brought to light, it does not prove that his old lamp has been exchanged for a new one,— glittering indeed to the eye, but scarcely of the same virtue nor with the same genius at its summons. (1913: 177)

The image is twofold: it figures, on the one hand, access to a treasure (that of the author), but, on the other, also the threat of disenchantment, an indenturedness to the goal and its burden, and anxiousness about one's own relatively inferior powers, that one's own 'lamp' may be false, that is, magicless fool's gold. This image of the translator as treasure-hunter accords with thinking in today's Translation Studies in that it depicts the translator's reading not as mindlessly searching but *curating*.

Another translator's prefatory poem, this one from the 1850s, is worth a read in this light. In an apostrophe to Schiller, and invoking the translator's task, Edgar Bowring's (the translator's) paean, "The Translator's Apology to the Reader", ends with the image of translation adding a single flower to 'life's garland'. Like the lamp, the single flower is martyrly:

> Yet thou hast liv'd not for one land alone,
> For the whole world are surely meant thy lays.
> He, then, who seeks to make thy numbers known
> To those whose hearts their spell may upwards
> Raise,
>
> If in the language cloth'd, they call their own,—
> He who to others' ears perchance conveys
> E'en a faint echo of thy minstrelsy,
> He who dares this, may haply pardon'd be.
>
> If, then, these feeble numbers have but power

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> E'en on one bosom pleasure to bestow,
> If they can help to cheer one heavy hour,
> Soothe e'en one sorrow, lighten e'en one woe,—
> If to life's garland they can add one flower,
> Although unseen, forgotten, it may blow—
> Then will the prize I covet be obtain'd,
> I ask no more,—my utmost wish is gain'd.
>
> (Bowring 1851: xii)

The genre of the apologia, a defense, is in evidence here. But it is a feeble defense, the standard set low: but one single, unnamed reader need be charmed for the translations to have served their purpose. However, this apologia shares features with the more contemporary apology in that the narrator is seeking *forgiveness* for attempting the translation ("He who dares this"), and the minimum success described ("E'evn a faint echo of thy minstrelsy") is the proffered redemption ("may haply pardon'd be"). Lowering expectations, Bowring is also disinviting the reader to criticize his work against the source. The "faint echo" and "one flower" / "one bosom" establish an ethos of understated goals, and thus are two powerful means of disarming the critical reader: litotes or imitatio. Here they clearly are forms of *Captatio benevolentiae* (to favorably dispose the audience to the speaker/writer).

Not all translators were modest in the scope and simplicity of their defenses. A veritable rhetor's arsenal is on display in William Caxton's preface to *The Recuyell of the Histories of Troy*, translated from 1469 to 1471. He begins by relating that his translation is undertaken to eschew sloth, a Christian vice, then proceeds to a protestation of incapacity, in Curtius' term, and of the special incapacity of his variety of English for the job:

> And afterward when I remembered myself of my simpleness and unperfectness that I had in both languages, that is to wit in French and in English, for in France was I never, and was born and learned my English in Kent, in the Weald, where I doubt not is spoken as broad and rude English as in any place of England; [...]. (Caxton 1920: 25)

He is unusually forthright in his motives: to please, and amend his faulty translation in the eyes of a patroness "whose dreadful commandment I durst in no wise disobey, because I am a servant unto her said Grace and receive of her yearly fee and other many good and great benefits, [...]" (Caxton 1920: 26). He commends himself to her ladyship and to the readers' implicitly superior editorial judgment:

> also nigh as I can following my author, meekly beseeching the bounteous Highness of my said Lady that of her benevolence list to accept and take in gree [i.e. a prize] this simple and rude work here following; and if there be anything written or said to her pleasure, I shall think my labour well employed, and whereas there is default that she arette [i.e. attribute] it to the simpleness of my cunning which is full small in this behalf; and require

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> and pray all them that shall read this said work to correct it, and to hold me excused of the rude and simple translation. (*ibid.*)

Caxton is not so "simple in his cunning", however, that he fails to blame the copyist for any errors ("I beseche you not tarette [t'arette] the defaulte in me, but in hym that I made my copye" [in Blades 1861-63: 156]). And neither is the translator's apology always limited to the translator's remit. In Hayward's mid-19th-century *Faust*, he writes a half-apology in his preface: "The bloom-like beauty of the songs, in particular, vanishes at the bare touch of a translator; […] I have one comfort, however: the poets have hitherto tried their hands at them in vain […]", and makes claims for the untranslatability of one of the songs (Goethe 1855: xxxi). That is, the translator's claim of his own limited success is contextualized by arrogating the same fate for all, for who would not rather fail in company? The translator argues for the utility of his meager translation, inverting the value system by evoking the conceit that "rude simplicity" can be more effective than "laboured elegance" (*ibid.:* xxv). Coverdale had deployed the same apologia in defending the idea that Scripture may be better served by "sundry translations of it, than by all the glosses of sophistical doctors", reasoning that the differences would invite comparison and judgment ("Extract from a Speech by Mr. Sulmer" 1827: 677).

Indeed, comparison to and criticism from others, and awareness of the inescapably ongoing work of translation, form the crux of many translators' bids for assistance and their challenges issued to fault-finders. Heather Blatt's work features a whole appendix (2018: 213-238) of "emendation invitations" to the reader, which she argues are forms of "a discourse of participatory reading" in the era she discusses, late-medieval writing; to my point about translators' authorial postures, authors and translators are listed together indiscriminately, their appeals analogous. In it we read in John Walton's (c. 1410) "Prefacio Translatoris": "Besekyng to ȝoure noble excellence Þat be ȝoure help it may amended be", but unmistakably appears a protest to his patroness: "youre heste[1] haþ done me violence", given his unworthiness, but ends in an appeal to higher powers to serve her (*ibid.*: 216). And the author of the preface to the Authorized Edition, Miles Smith, challenges self-anointing gatekeepers by warning them of the requirements to criticize: "[…] let us see therefore whether they themselves be without fault this way, (if it be to be counted a fault, to correct) and whether they be fit men to throw stones at us: *O tandem maior parcas insane minori*: they that are less sound themselves, ought not to object infirmities to others" (Smith 2013: 193). The Loeb translation of this Horace reference (*Satires* II. III. 318-326*)* reads "O greater one, spare, I pray, the lesser madman!" (Horace 1942: 181). Not textual but personal, such *ad hominem* or *tu quoque* defenses are as much to say, 'My translation is faulty, but how much greater *your* faults on it would be!'

Translators also have praised other translators to encourage a collective reading of sorts. One twentieth-century translator for example, Ciaran Carson, avoided rivalry with his competitors by borrowing their work and expressing

[1] heste = command, bidding.

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humble indebtedness. In his acknowledgments to his Dante's *Inferno*, he writes candidly: "Some phrases and rhymes have been adapted, adopted or stolen from other translations, [...]. I trust these will be seen not as mere plagiarisms, but as homages" (2002: ix-x). And Ursula K. Le Guin's dedication echoes not only gratitude to mediating translations but the age-old deference to translators to come, an emendation invitation to other, better translators:

> With my heartfelt thanks
> to the translators whose translations allowed me
> to pretend I was reading the original
>
> and heartfelt good wishes
> to the future translators who will improve on my versions.
> (Bellessi and Le Guin 1996: n.p.)

Le Guin's characterization is no subterfuge but a genuine acknowledgement of the brotherhood and sisterhood of translation, and of an evolutionary model of translation.

3. "Strategic humility"

Is rhetorical modesty always to be taken at face value, or is it consistent with actual translation approaches? No, as Hermans shows with the case of John Florio, who 'feminizes' himself with a dedication in his Montaigne's *Essayes* in which he misogynistically references 'this defective edition' and '(since all translations are reputed females, delivered at second hand[...]')" (Hermans 2001: 7), but then Florio manhandles the text itself with all manner of embroiderings and interpolations. Dunn (1994: 6) describes the "simple inversion" that "the less physical, social, or political power one presents oneself as having" in classic modesty constructions, "the more rhetorical power one has". Deborah Uman characterizes the premodern preface as a place to find an often gendered "strategic humility", the "disingenuous" apology that also defended the work against imagined challenges, and whose writers were subordinate to their patrons (2012: 18; see also Robinson 1995 for female subversions of male rhetorics of the day). It is perhaps an extravagant claim to see *exclusively* "false humility" in the humility topos (as we see, for instance, in Dagenais, 1994: 24), however, given the wide variance of writers and circumstances. Often the rhetoric was inextricably tied to the relative status of languages from and into which the translator worked, English still having the reputation of unsuitability and coarseness for classical learning (*ibid.*: 19-20). The gendered component in modesty might lead the unsuspecting to conclude that women's prefaces prove they have internalized the submissiveness expected of them, rather than a self-fashioning of belonging to the particular historical guilds of "literariness" in which such discourses circulate (Pender 2012: 3). Pender also exposes how the gendered double standard leads us to read, for instance, Milton's modesty rhetorically and ironically, while many women's have been read autobiographically (*ibid.*: 7, 17). Hermans alerts us to the fact of prefacing matter

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responding to the expectations of being read through the lens of particular norms:

> [L]audatory poems, prefaces and dedications are governed to a considerable degree by rhetorical conventions. Being stereotyped forms, they will frequently exaggerate their conventional postures, topoi and formulae. [...] The translator will consequently understate his own abilities and achievement in order to highlight the difficulty of the task, the excellence of the model and/or the erudition of his patron […] (1985: 106).

Not only prefaces are sites of preemption. Richardson observes that dedications served the purpose of claiming a proxy authority of sorts whereby "the authority of the dedicatee should dissuade others from criticising this text" (2017: 17). One can draw here as well on Cottegnies' example from Cyrano (1658), whose translator lays the blame on the author's obscure wit, and even includes a "gesture of humility" by appending a glossary to show the work and "allow readers to enter his workshop [and] make visible the translator's work as craft" (2019: 325). (Curiously, proving positive reception of humility is not hard-coded to given gestures, Venuti draws the opposite conclusion that translators who open up their own 'black box' of their process to readers risk "the cynical charge of self-promotion" [2003: 257]).

In his discussion of Renaissance translators of the classics, Hermans evokes Quintilian's prizing of *inventio* over *imitatio*, which the latter figured as "treading in the forerunner's footsteps", portrait to its subject, or shadow to substance; in short, an impossible and necessarily subservient pursuit (Quintilian 1922: 79-81, ctd. in Hermans 1985: 107). To follow implies "a relation of stronger versus weaker, of free versus confined, of owner or master versus servant or slave" (Hermans 1985: 109), and moreover suggests inferior quality and lesser talent (*ibid.*: 113). Leonardo Bruni in the fifteenth century denies the translator's followerhood altogether by disassociating his translation, *Commentarii de primo bello punico*, from translation status, claiming it is instead an account collected from multiple sources (Rizzi 2018: 60). Hermans enumerates the vast lexicon of metaphors to suggest inferiority: limping, flying low under the soaring original, song and faint echo, the reverse side of the tapestry (which predates Cervantes), the 'rich' garment versus the 'poor', a 'jewel in a rough casket', and the translator who dares fly high as a Phaeton, Lucifer, or Pan (1985: 114-119). Despite the discourse of (self-)deprecation, the issue of the *virtue* of the one who translates was prioritized in early modern times, essentially making translation about the translator. Many examples of a preface extolling the translator as a person of character to be trusted to translate the work can be found. The mid-seventeenth-century also employed the conventional formula "person of honour", language that belies modesty with its implicit class aspirations. The front matter in Coverdale's Bible (1867 [1535]) advertises his character in the very first line the reader sees, and on page 2, he asserts that he has not translated in a tendentious way, i.e., to further a specific sect. These are legacies of Aristotle's person of character (good sense, virtue, and goodwill), which many effective exordia in the era's books would also defend, followed by a detailing of obstacles, an

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assessment of the difficulty of the task, and the benefits to be derived (Belle 2017: 74-75).

4. Immodest Translators: Parsing the Unhumility Discourse

Often the way translators frame translation reveals a conscious understanding of it as ancillary, but unconsciously, perhaps, as rivalrous. Here is Miller Williams:

> To me the role of the translator is very close to that of a spiritualist medium. When I'm translating I want the poet to be able to speak through me. I want to know his work well enough so that I move from metaphor to metaphor at his pace, to vibrate as it were with him so that I can look at something and respond to it as he would. [...] When we talk about the translator's humility, we're not talking about piousness, or even a humble deference, but the kind of humility that causes one actor to be quiet backstage when another one is working. Part of the humility is the awareness of the inability to say all we want to say, to say enough of what the original poet said. [...] It's part of the terms of any writing, but also its motive. (Jackson 1983: 11-12)

Miller's thinking goes from translator-as-earthly-ambassador to translator-as-stifled-performer. His mixed metaphors reveal an important nuance—we see not so much a deferent translator as a limited one. At first, his prevailing image is mediumistic. The translator channels the spirit of the absent author, and acts in his or her place. The 'power of attorney' view of translation here performs an ontological fiction, the translator presuming to speak 'for' an author who does not know the target language—and even to move— "as he would". In this image, the translator represents another's will, limiting their own agency. The second image he uses—a quiet actor backstage—is that of professional respect: the translator should yield the floor. He explicitly explains the image in terms of turn-taking (though the translator's turn does not come), as if an author could be 'working' onstage while the translator is in the wings. The "futility" of this role of frustrated player, Miller suggests, is that this backstage actor wants to speak, and thus their job consists in part of holding their tongue. He describes humility here in terms of the necessary self-control, and self-diminishment. The image, deconstructed, is an incoherent one: How can an actor speak to a foreign audience while the translator stays silent? But it shows us a translator asserting peerhood among the writers.

The question of whether literary translators define humility in the same way was complicated by one study (Orzóy 2022: 44), which in interviews with literary translators found that one respondent aligned the word with loyalty to the source text; another, that humility was like "the pride of guild masters", completely unrelated to humiliation, and thus for her, humility bespeaks quality and professional pride. Whether out of pride or rebellion, or self-protection, unhumility, too, has always permeated humility discourse. The translator of *The Andria and Eunuchus* pleads that no diversity of register is found in the source, and suggests the reader "might lay the blame, if there be any, on the shoulders of [author] Terence himself, which are sufficiently able to bear it" (Gardiner

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1821: v). This is a dexterous dodge, and immodest: he praises the greatness of the one who might bear the burden better than himself, then for good measure he denies any blameworthiness is due (*ibid.*). McElduff (2013: 234n19) recasts rivalry into a kind of accompanying, and as a national good, relating Phaedrus' own description of his work on Aesop as "polishing"; in the epilogue to Book Two, Phaedrus says, "Since he [Aesop] holds first place, I have tried to make sure that he is not alone: this is not envy but emulation. And if Latium favors my work, it will have more to challenge Greece with" (2.9.5-9).

The watchword for the immodest translator surely is "Prefaces should not be apologies" (Godard 1983: n.p.). But if 'modest' translators were merely rhetorically modest, what to make of the immodest ones, who are rhetoricizing in order to expose the rhetoricity, one can argue, of modesty? Immodesty declares a new poetics as well, of processuality, translatorship, the feminine signature, and turning demureness inside out into flaunting:

> The feminist translator, affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing, flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text. Womanhandling the text in translation would involve the replacement of the modest, self-effacing translator. Taking her place would be an active participant in the creation of meaning, who advances a conditional analysis. Hers is a continuing provisionality, aware of process, giving self-reflexive attention to practices. The feminist translator immodestly flaunts her signature in italics, in footnotes—even in a preface. (Godard 1990: 94)

While modesty is a culturally accepted ethos for the translator, immodesty's claims can be reconciled, such assertions suggest, by their very rejection of dishonest presumptions of passivity, of receiving a text as a closed system, and crucially, by their self-awareness—code for the translator's objective, and not rhetorically prescribed, self-criticality. A critic might wonder whether immodesty as a construct might be just as artificial, whether it risks ossifying into an 'anti-devotional formula' in turn, or whether it forces the translator into a binary choice. However, immodesty has real effects on who translates, and the social and financial capital of the translator. It should be said that immodesty is not one of only two choices. Gregory Rabassa writes, "The translator must be modest, then, must be careful, cannot impose himself, and, yet, he must be adventurous and original […]" (2002: 89). The humble and the unhumble, the modest and the immodest, invoke each other.

We are only now dawning into the history of the immodest, though it has been a secondary norm for centuries, and often submerged within modesty discourse. Thus only one more example shall suffice to convey its spirit. Rutherford asserts in his theorization of his work on *Don Quixote* that "some of my jokes and poems are better than those of Cervantes. Such a claim is heresy for some, yet it is perfectly reasonable: translators can improve on the original, because the target language is bound to offer expressive possibilities not available in the source language [...]" (Rutherford 2006: 79). He argues that translators hold the advantage over the writer in that translators can concentrate on expression, not world-building (*ibid.)*. In this he is not making a case for any

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language's superiority, as in premodern appeals, but rather for the need for the translator to intervene creatively. His rhetoric is thoroughly modern when he cheekily asks, "[…] when my version of a sonnet or a joke or a sentence did turn out better than Cervantes', should I have rewritten it to make it worse?" (*ibid.)* A shift in loyalty can thus be perceived—to effectiveness, to quality, not to an author or prior texts. He writes in the knowingness of his transgressive view of the norm of modesty, calling it 'heresy', a word facetiously religious here, and he self-consciously calls attention to its flouting of the norm. Rutherford similarly inverts the proverbial 'humble' translator's responsibility to not add or subtract a jot from the original (which contemporary thinking about translation holds as an empty promise).

A question the reader may be entertaining here is how an ethos of immodesty might be fashioned. If good sense, virtue, and goodwill are the standard to build trust with the reader, according to Aristotle, do readers expecting humility—genuine or conventional—concede this to the translator? Or is a revolutionary trust of sorts built in professions of overthrowing the old-order humilities? Is the immodest translator gaining trust by laying their untrustworthiness on the table?

5. Conclusion

Despite the familiarity of verbalized hoping to (or failing to) do justice to the venerated author, in practice there are few acts more audacious than translation: the truly humble act would be to not take up the pen. Literary action and being humble present a contradiction, then, that writers and translators must attempt to publicly reconcile. It would be presumptuous to assert that the rhetoric of humility is always used by writers and translators consciously, in full awareness of its historical uses. Perhaps some truly indulged in the rhetoric of modesty out of genuine virtue, but others used "devotional formulas" as one might defend a claim in court—harnessing the discourse that places one in the best light. And even more complicatedly: it is possible to be at once genuinely humble before some (benefactors) while unhumble toward others (would-be detractors). The key is, as Curtius states, "A constant literary formula must not be regarded as the expression of spontaneous sentiment" (2013: 412).

In large part, we can speak of the modesty topos as a norm, and one concerned with status and the translator's subject position. Perhaps too, translators have taken refuge in the privacy aspect of modesty in that not revealing oneself and one's ambitions is prerequisite to achieving them. Again, too, the privacy of invisibility may, for some, have been genuinely sought. But a visiblity-in-invisibility characterizes its presence in the text, or paratext. The refuge of immodesty runs parallel, perhaps rebuking the posturing of modesty but certainly responding to a less servile or mechanistic view of translation, and by extension, its patriarchies and hierarchies.

Do we ever have access to the translator's self-concept? How great is the gap between declared goals and actual performance? Does the humility topos hurt the translator's art and reputation both, and what does the discussion of process, and perceived successes and failures, described in more metatranslational terms

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than in the past, do to the 'mystique of humility', we might call it, given that discussing one's work analytically is incompatible with professing ignorance of the object of that work? Can we conclude tentatively that some aspects of humility have been passed down to us still unquestioned or valorized in some quarters (invisibility) while others have been relegated to bad taste or unprofessionalism (direct appeals, flattery, declarations of incompetence)?[2] Given all its forms, we can speak of humilities, plural, and internal contradictions and tensions in humility's employment. Are such postures taken at face value by readers, whose role demands are affected by such discourses, and do the postures have the desired effects? Study of the reception of humility's 'moves' might tell us more. We well may also wonder if, and how, the discourse of those translators who are also writers differs in the prefaces of their own work and those of the authors they translate. We have presented the immodest translator as a modern response, but in fact its lineage might be traced to the inter-translator rivalries found in retranslators' prefaces dating back centuries. The language may be genteel, but at times these works of translation criticism, aesthetic and economic rivals to their forebears, take a didactic, even knowing, tone toward previous translations. The crown of humility was and is borne or cast off restlessly, far more than meets the eye.

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[2] Modern humility is ad hominem: Ursula Le Guin declares her own language skills incompetent, ironically, as we don't wish to believe her; another lesser light tries this (especially if true) at his or her peril.

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