Embracing Difference
Challenges and Strategies in Translating Two 1920s Yiddish Poems by Women

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Abstract
This essay explores the transmission of historical, cultural and sexual differences in two 1920s Yiddish poems by women, and their translations into English. The poems were originally published during the Yiddish literary heyday, and a time of significant social change in Jewish communal and cultural practice, and in the roles and status of women. Both poems reflect and confront the impact of inequitable power dynamics on Jewish women's lives – one focusing on the theme of women's education, and the other on domestic violence. The power relations that underlie and frame the source texts are therefore examined in this article, along with an exploration of the ways that power intercedes in the translation of these texts. The divergent ways that women's resistance is depicted in the two poems is noted. Drawing on feminist translation strategies, this article applies a self-reflective lens that articulates translation processes and underlying theoretical approaches. Moreover, it highlights power dynamics, cultural assumptions and contextually-embedded meanings, and draws attention to critical historical, social and gendered differences. Strategies for conveying these differences in translation are identified. These include retaining key culturally-specific terms from the source language, replicating stylistic elements of the source text, and prefacing and supplementing translations with critical analyses that clarify and embrace the differential cultural contexts. Doing so makes historical, cultural and sexual differences visible in translation.

Introduction

Language plays a fundamental role in the development of individual and collective cultural identities (Simon *Gender in Translation* 134, 193). It directs perceptions of reality, and the ways that people see themselves, thereby shaping individuals' and groups' beliefs and worldviews (Mazid 7). Furthermore, language describes and prescribes cultural practices, enabling individuals to identify, express and sustain their cultural heritage.

The interrelationship between language and culture is powerful. As such, it is valuable to consider texts within their broader socio-cultural environments. Examining these contexts highlights the ways that cultural conventions can contain and constrain the text (Bassnett and Lefevere "Proust's Grandmother" 4-11). This essay therefore explores two texts and translations within their historical and socio-cultural contexts, and analyses ways that these translations interact with culture.

Feminist translation scholars and practitioners advocate a self-reflective approach in examining the intersections of gender, culture, language, power and translation (Godard, Palacios). This essay reflects on the translation process, by identifying the principles underpinning the translations, articulating dilemmas confronted, and clarifying decisions made in crafting these translations. Elaborating on these matters demonstrates the interconnectedness of theory and praxis and contextualizes the translations within their specific circumstances. Moreover, this approach makes the translator's mediation public. Doing so "defies expectations regarding both gender and genre", in particular that a woman "should not draw

attention to herself and that her intervention in the translation process should be invisible" (Palacios 88). Disrupting the imperative to remain invisible subverts the prevailing power dynamics that privilege men and source texts respectively. It thereby adds a significant, and at times overlooked, dimension – gender – to longstanding critical discourse on the translator's invisibility.

This self-reflective analysis focuses on the translation of two Yiddish poems by women published in the 1920s, during the Yiddish literary heyday, and a time of growing agency for women. These two poems and their translations form part of a broader study by the author on agency and power in 1920s Yiddish women's poetry. Like other poems in the study, these two poems question social constructs of power and subvert socially sanctioned power dynamics.

Power differentials intersect on many levels in these poems, most notably in relation to gender, language and culture. A key concern of feminist translation theorists has been to ask "How are social, sexual and historical differences expressed in language and how can these differences be transferred across languages?" (Simon *Gender in Translation* 8-9). These are critical questions to examine. This essay therefore identifies socio-cultural differences conveyed in the two poems, and explores problems and possibilities in transmitting these differences when translating these poems into English almost a century after they were published in Yiddish.

Literature is a form of cultural representation that reflects the values and mores of the time. Analysis of 1920s Yiddish poetry by women offers invaluable insights into Jewish culture and the role of women within that culture. These poems capture a transformational time in Jewish cultural life and in the social status of women. They present authentic voices articulating some issues of concern to women at that time. It is therefore instructive to outline the contexts in which these poems were published. Thus, some contextual information about Yiddish language and literature follows.

A survey of Yiddish language and literature

Yiddish was the predominant Jewish language at the time that these poems were published. In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, where the largest proportion of Jewish population lived, 98% of Jews spoke Yiddish (Margolis 4; Fishman 50). Yiddish was also the primary Jewish language in large, dispersed Jewish communities around the globe, including in the Americas, Africa and Australia. Eleven million Jews world-wide, or 75% of all Jews, spoke Yiddish prior to the Holocaust (Margolis 4).

The linguistic functions of Yiddish have been complemented by considerable cultural functions, as historically, the culture and meaning systems of Jews have been more bound to language than to place. Yiddish has always been itinerant, a language of wandering in response to geographical shifts of Jews. Yiddish has provided a portable identity for a dispersed people, taking the place of a native land and filling the gaps left by the decline in religious and geographic connection. The cultural politics of Yiddish are distinct from most modern languages because Yiddish has continued to nurture vibrant cultural expression despite never having had its own homeland, and never having been the primary language of a country. Yiddish has maintained considerable, diverse and comprehensive educational and literary systems, including an array of publishing houses covering the full spectrum of political and cultural perspectives, and school systems of every social, cultural and political persuasion (Norich 17-19). Moreover, Yiddish has defined and supported Jewish identity and fostered a sense of belonging, particularly among secular Jews (Klepfisz 31; Howe and Greenberg 14-15). Yiddish was, and continues to be a cornerstone of Jewish cultural identity for many Jews.

Colloquially referred to as *mame-loshn* [mother-tongue], Yiddish is particularly associated with women, and for centuries, was the language in which most Jewish women lived

their daily lives. Yiddish was the language of their homes, their communities, their cultural connections, and the language in which religious Jewish women prayed (Klepfisz, Seidman). As formal education became increasingly available to Jewish women, the predominant language in which they were taught was Yiddish (Parush 68).

Yiddish literature is unique in that, since its inception, it has been aimed primarily at a female audience (Niger 35-109; Kope 19). The earliest known Yiddish writing by a woman is a *tkhine* [supplicatory poem] by Royzl Fishls, dating back to 1586 (Korman 5). Yiddish literature has retained its connection with women throughout the centuries. While early texts were religious, the parameters of Yiddish literature expanded to a secular, communal arena as a result of the modernization that developed from the mid-nineteenth century. During this time, the number of women readers and writers grew exponentially as women's literacy rates rose. Thus, women's participation as authors and audiences has been decisive in the development of Yiddish literature.

Yiddish was the foremost literary language of *Ashkenaz* Jews in the early twentieth century, and the principal language of publication (Probst; Fishman 29). Until 1939, Yiddish literature was among the fastest growing, most published literatures in Europe. It also flourished across the Atlantic at this time. Yiddish writing therefore provides invaluable insights into the evolution of *Ashkenaz* Jewish life and culture.

Research into Yiddish writing by women is essential in ensuring a balanced, comprehensive perspective on Yiddish life and literature. Yet, balance has not been a primary consideration of literary stakeholders, including editors and publishers. Despite women's pivotal role in the development of Yiddish literature, women have been grossly under-represented in Yiddish publishing. This gender disparity corresponds to similar under-representation of published writing by women across other languages. Writer and academic Joanna Russ consistently found "restrictions on the quantity of visibility allowed women writers: that 5 to 8 percent representation" (85). Furthermore, women's writing is often restricted to more ephemeral publications. In the 1920s, Yiddish writing by women was dispersed in journals, newspapers and other regional periodicals, with very few women being published in book form, and even fewer being anthologized in collections (Korman vii). As a result, retrieval and recovery of Yiddish women's writing is particularly challenging.

Feminist translation scholars, many of whom are translators themselves, recognize that what is translated is as important as how it is translated. As scholar and editor Esther Allen argues, "the invisible hand of the cultural marketplace" does not always ensure that important literary works are translated well, or even translated at all (82). Publishing decisions are made on commercial and political grounds and often reflect the status quo, favouring powerful stakeholders over marginalized groups. The general under-representation of women writers in translation reflects and sustains inequitable social structures.

Yiddish women poets have been substantially under-represented in translation, with only a small number included in collections of Yiddish poetry in English translation (Klepfisz 58; Glasser), as Table 1 shows. Notably, the only two collections to feature more than 15% contributions by women were compiled and edited by women.

This gross under-representation highlights an urgent need for retrieval and translation of Yiddish women's poetry. Women have been influential actors in Yiddish culture and writing. Recognition of their cultural contributions can be reinstated by unsilencing Yiddish women's voices and rescuing their work from obscurity. Furthermore, gendered inequality is both replicated and confronted in Yiddish poetry. Many Yiddish poems by women depict inequitable power dynamics, challenge inequitable practices, and fight to reclaim power. It is vital that these poems be recovered and brought to broader audiences.

Table 1: Proportion of male and female poets in collections of Yiddish poetry in English translation

Title	male	female	unknown
Betsky-Zweig, *Onions and Cucumbers and Plums* (1958)	92.9	7.1	
Leftwich, *The Golden Peacock: Worldwide Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (1961)	91.5	8.5	
Howe and Greenberg, *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (1969)	89.7	10.3	
Whitman, *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry* (1979)	78.6	21.4	
Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (1986)	85.7	14.3	
Howe, Wisse and Shmeruk, *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (1987)	87.2	12.8	
Glasser and Weintraub, *Proletpen: America's Rebel Yiddish Poets* (2005)	76.3	18.4	5.3

Translational approaches

The exercise of power in society has significant impact on the creation and the translation of literature. Power relations influence the conditions of writing, publishing and promoting source texts. Moreover, issues of power impact on every aspect of the translation process, including the selection of texts to translate, and translational approaches adopted (Bassnett and Lefevere "Proust's Grandmother" 5). A self-reflective approach therefore examines the power relations that underlie and frame source texts, and the ways that power intercedes in the translation of these texts.

Distortions and reductions may be manifested when translating a minoritized language into a dominant language without regard to power differentials and social, cultural and linguistic differences. This impacts on the stylistics, as well as on the content. Feminist postcolonialist Gayatri Spivak cautions against a form of distortion that occurs when writing is translated with little regard for the aesthetic or rhetorical elements employed (371-2). This is particularly an issue when translating poetry. Replicating or retaining the stylistic features of the source text has therefore been an important objective in the translation of the two poems presented in this article. Both poems are *folkstimlekh*, that is written in the folksong-like genre of Yiddish poetry. Like folksong, *folkstimlekhe poezie* [*folkstimlekh* poetry] is of and for the common people. Both folksong and *folkstimlekhe poezie* typically employ a traditional rhythm and rhyme sequence in order to deliver a social or political message. The original poems presented here both utilize simple, accessible language and have a highly structured meter, musicality and rhyme scheme. While the 1920s was a time of substantial experimentation in Yiddish poetry, the *folkstimlekh* poetic form was still widespread at that time, and warrants replication in current-day translation, particularly because the original patterns of rhythm and rhyme are so integral to the delivery of the poems' messages. Moreover, maintaining the *folkstimlekh* tone of these poems situates them in historical and cultural contexts. As this is not a popular poetic form in English today, these translations do not mimic the current dominant poetics in English, seeking instead to maintain the cultural expression of the source language. It can be challenging to reproduce rhythm and rhyme sequences in translation, and "A *Shabbes*-Terror", my translation of "A Shabbes-groyl*"* can be read as a work in progress.

Cultural differences impact on substance as well as on style. All writing takes place within a cultural context, and this may not readily translate for a readership from another culture. Translation can reflect and reinforce long-standing cultural assumptions, some of which may be outmoded or specific to particular circumstances. Source texts may contain words of cultural significance that are untranslatable, or that can only be translated using many

words, thereby impacting on the rhythm of the poem. In some instances, providing an English synonym could negate cultural connotations. Thus, the translator may choose to retain culturally specific terms from the source text. These may need to be clarified for readers.

Source texts may contain significant cultural information, necessitating a range of strategies to replicate and clarify this information in translation. One such strategy is to wrap the text in an "instructive embrace" – a term coined by Gayatri Spivak – with explanatory notes prefacing the translation, and further clarification provided in footnotes and an afterword (Simon "de Stael and Spivak" 135). This supplementing of information is a beneficial accompaniment to the translation of the culture-bound poem "A Vaybele" by Shoshana Tshenstokhovska (Korman 114-115).

"A Vaybele"

The poem "A Vaybele" is set in the early twentieth century. At that time, Jewish women had greater access to secular education than Jewish men did, particularly in religious families, where men often devoted themselves to study of Talmud or religious texts, while women were taught reading, writing, arithmetic and other skills that enabled them to earn an income to support their families. As Parush states, "Marriage customs were influenced by the need to balance the demands of religion and livelihood" (64). These demands were divided along gender lines, with men occupied with religion while women were responsible for the family's livelihood. Ironically, Jewish men's devotion to religious study, and the concurrent burden on Jewish women to financially support their families, led to a secularization of Jewish life (Parush 101-2). Secular education opened doors for women, exposing them to new languages, literatures and ideas, and inspiring them to challenge the religious confines they experienced. Furthermore, this education empowered women to access radical philosophies, resulting in the high proportion of Jewish women in leading roles in revolutionary movements of the day.

While Jewish women often bore the burden of financially supporting their families, many couples also had some support from their families, particularly in the early years of their marriage. It was common for young newly-married couples to live with their in-laws for several years, so that the husband could continue to study free from financial concerns. This custom is known in Yiddish as *kest*. Tshenstokhovska's poem makes reference to *kest*, along with a number of other culturally specific terms that have been retained in translation, and hence, require clarification: *Shabbes*, the Jewish day of rest; *kidesh*, the custom of proclaiming the holiness of *Shabbes* by making a communal blessing over the wine; and the *Shmoyneh-esre* prayer, a long prayer that is recited silently, and that concludes with taking three steps back. These words are all also included in the glossary at the end of this article.

The poem "A Vaybele" is presented here in Yiddish, transliteration and translation, followed by reflection on challenges, strategies and the rationale behind translational choices.

אַ ווײַבעלע
פֿון שושנה טשענסטאָכאָווסקאַ

געלעבט האָט זיך אַ ווײַבעלע
אויף שווער און שוויגערס קעסט,
אַ גאַנצן טאָג אין שטיבעלע,
געהיטן פֿרום איר נעסט.

אַ גאנצן טאָג אין שטיבעלע
(געווען אַ סוד דערבײַ) —
געלייענט, געלייענט אַ ביכעלע,
יעטוועדעס מאָל אויפֿסנײַ.

צווישן אירע קליידעלעך,
צום חופּה-טאָג געמאַכט,
אַ קליינטשיק גוויִש ביכעלע
אויף קעסט זיך מיטגעבראַכט...

אין רעכטן בוזעם-טעשעלע,
אין שכניות מיטן האַרץ,
פֿאַרבאָרגן ליגט דאָס ביכעלע,
אַ ביכל קליינטשיק, שוואַרץ...

און טרעפֿט אַ מאָל צו קידוש-צײַט —
פֿאַרזעסן זיך בײַם בוך,
פֿאַרחידושט וואַרט דער שבת-טיש —
די שנור פֿאַרשפּעטיקט זיך...

פֿאַרבאָרגן אין איר שטיבעלע,
אַרײַנגעטאָן דעם קאָפּ
אין ביכל, לעזט זיך ס׳ווײַבעלע
און שפּרײַזט אַרויף, אַראָפּ.

דער שווער,ער קלאַפּט אין פֿענצטערל:
„קום, טאָכטערשי אַרויס!״
זי ווינקט אַנטקעגן: „כ׳גיי שוין, כ׳גיי,
כ׳גיי שמונה-עשׂרה אויס״...

A Vaybele Shoshana Tshenstokhovska	**A Young Wife** Shoshana Tshenstokhovska Translation by Hinde Ena Burstin
Gelebt hot zikh a vaybele Oyf shver un shvigers kest, A gantsn tog in shtibele, Gehitn frum ir nest.	A young wife once boarded With her in-laws during *kest*. All day long, piously, She tended to her nest.
A gantsn tog in shtibele (Geven a sod derbay) — Geleyent, geleyent a bikhele, Yetvedes mol oyfsnay.	All day long in that little house, (Just between me and you) — She read a book in secret, Read it each day anew.
Tsvishn ire kleydelekh, Tsum khupe-tog gemakht, A kleyntshik, goyish bikhele Oyf kest zikh mitgebrakht…	In amongst the dresses Made for her wedding day, She hid a secular book, In secret, stashed away...
In rekhtn buzem-teshele, In shkheynes mitn harts, Farborgn ligt dos bikhele, A bikhl kleyntshik, shvarts …	It sits next to her heart in The breast pocket on her right. She keeps that book concealed, A small book in black and white…
Un treft a mol tsu kidesh-tsayt — Farzesn zikh baym bukh, Farkhidesht vart der Shabbes-tish — Di shnur farshpetikt zikh…	And when it's *kidesh*-time — Her in-laws sit and wait, While she's lost in her book — Not noticing she's late…
Farborgn in ir shtibele, Arayngeton dem kop In bikhl, leyzt zikh s'vaybele Un shprayzt aroyf, arop.	Far away from prying eyes, Ignoring her in-laws and groom Absorbed in that little book She paces round her room.
Der shver, er klapt in fentsterl: "Kum, tokhtershi aroys!" Zi vinkt antkegn: "Kh'gey shoyn, kh'gey, Kh'gey Shmoyneh-esre oys"…	Father-in-law raps at the door: "Daughter, come on out of there!" "I'm just on the last steps," she winks, Of the *Shmoyneh-esre* prayer."

This poem contains a great deal of cultural coding about Jewish women's (and men's) education, expected gender roles, empowerment, access to literacy and literature, religious and cultural practices and secularization. Retaining the Yiddish terms *kest, Shabbes, kidesh* and *Shmoyneh-esre* prayer signposts this coding and preserves the poem's cultural specificity.

It is important to note that the translation presented here is a revised translation. Reflection on the translation process and the differences between the two translations reveals some strategies for situating translations within their cultural contexts. I initially translated and published the poem in 2006 (Burstin 108-113). My translation at that time was motivated in part by my recognition that the poem highlights the social construction of gender in education and employment in Yiddish cultural life. Yet the initial translation inadvertently dimmed some

of the spotlight on this significant aspect of the poem. While the original translation retained the Yiddish terms for *Shabbes* and *Shmoyneh-esre* prayer, it did not retain the term *kest*. Instead, the line was translated as "A little wife once boarded with her in-laws as a guest". This rendered the cultural context invisible, and made little sense, for in Jewish culture, a family member would not be considered to be "a guest". The cultural norms for guests differ markedly from the norms for family members. The use of "as a guest" could therefore have implied a distance, formality or lack of familiarity that did not appear in the source text. Moreover, in the earlier translation, the Yiddish cultural practice of *kest* was obscured. As has been noted, the education of Jewish women was, at that time, vastly different from the education of both Jewish men, and non-Jewish women. The use of the untranslated term *kest* signposts this difference, while also highlighting the newly-weds' youth and financial position and the young wife's access to secular books.

The subversive way that the young wife gains power is also less recognizable in my original translation, where I domesticated the text, in contrast with my more foreignizing revision. This surreptitious gaining of agency by the newly-wed wife is a significant aspect of the poem, drawing attention to the interrelationship between education and power. Furthermore, women's acquisition of knowledge and hence status was often a source of tension for their husbands, causing considerable conflict in relationships between the spouses, and in their relationships with their in-laws. Retaining the Yiddish term enables these features to be foregrounded.

Mingling Yiddish words in the translation draws attention to cultural differences. Differentiation is a significant aspect of Yiddish language and culture (Weinreich 193). For religious Jews, there is an imperative to maintain a difference between the sacred *Shabbes* (Saturday) and the regular weekdays (Weinreich 194). Jewish cultural practices also differ markedly from those of non-Jews. Hence, a body of vocabulary distinguishing Jewish and non-Jewish customs has evolved. Known in Yiddish as *lehavdl loshn* [differentiation language], this vocabulary includes words for parallel activities (such as slaughter of meat) and words that reflect inequitable and often intimidating experiences of Jews as a minoritized or marginalized culture living among a dominant culture of non-Jews. Furthermore, Yiddish writing contains many euphemisms and deliberately ambiguous expressions that developed as a survival strategy in hostile climates where the Jewish press was subjected to surveillance, such as in imperial Russia. These veiled references would be understood by Jews, but not by outsiders. This "coded phraseology", often drawn from religious or folkloric sources, creates a secret language that is challenging to translate (Marten-Finnis 340).

Differentiation is at play in the poem "A Vaybele", in the use of the term *goyish bikhl*, which, literally translated, means "a gentile book". Yet it is clear from the text that this literal translation is not in keeping with the poet's intention. Rather, the poet has used the term *goyish* to distinguish the book from a specifically Jewish book (i.e. a book pertaining to Jewish religion or culture). In doing so, the word *goy* draws on its original meaning as "nation", applicable to Jews and non-Jews alike – a meaning that has changed over time. *Goy* has therefore been translated as "secular", reflecting the historical and contextually embedded meaning of the word, as opposed to current-day usage of the word *goy* as "gentile".

Language and culture are dynamic, while meaning is bound by both time and context. As Palmary advises, "language does not simply mirror the world but constructs and negotiates it in a contextually bounded way" (577). Cultural meanings evolve, as do the meanings of individual words in both source and target languages. Translating from the past requires attention to the historical dimensions of source texts, and to linguistic, cultural and socio-historical changes over time.

Attention to individual words is critical because words have the power to determine, create, reinforce or subvert cultural knowledge and meanings. Retaining culturally-specific words from the source text – such as *kest*, *Shabbes* and *Shmoyneh-esre* – invites the reader of the target text to enter, albeit briefly, the world of the source language. It differentiates the source culture from the culture of the target text, ensuring that the translation does not cede to the dominant culture by homogenizing the source text or obscuring cultural elements through domestication.

Lawrence Venuti defines domestication of texts in English translation as "fluent translations that invisibly inscribe foreign texts with English-language values" thereby providing readers with "the narcissistic experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other" (15). Domestication imposes the dominant culture on the translated culture. It brings the writer to the reader, keeping the translation and translator invisible (1). Domesticating a text relinquishes power to the dominant culture, and can be regarded as an act of cultural destruction. In contrast, foreignization attempts to "restrain the ethnocentric violence of translation" (Venuti 20), making the translator visible through "highlighting the foreign identity of the source text and protecting it from the ideological dominance of the target culture" (Munday 147).

Foreignizing a text may have a disruptive effect for the reader. Yet, this disruption is considered desirable, for it reminds the reader that they are reading a translation. When a translation reads fluently, it can appear to be the original text. Conversely, a strong emphasis on the foreign aspects of a text may unintentionally exaggerate otherness, or exoticize the source culture. Moreover, maintaining unfamiliar elements may make the text inaccessible, thereby defeating the purpose of the translation. As Jaivin argues, "if a translation reads too strangely to its target audience, it risks not being read" (33). Thus, many translations – including the two presented here – include elements of both domestication and foreignization. At times, a translational choice may mediate between the source and target culture. While my translation retains the term *Shmoyneh-esre* to describe the prayer, I did not replicate the entire phrase "ikh gey Shmoyneh-esre oys", which literally means "I am walking the *Shmoyneh-esre*", an idiom for "I am taking the three steps of the *Shmoyneh-esre*". This would have been confusing, and would have disrupted the poetry. Instead, I sought to capture the essence with the words "I'm just on the last steps". In doing so, I hoped to convey the socio-cultural context without making the text too unfamiliar for a non-Jewish readership.

"A Shabbes-groyl"

Translators who fail to understand the socio-cultural contexts of the texts that they translate risk producing translations that are linguistically correct but culturally inaccurate. While the words themselves may be appropriate synonyms, the meaning may miss the mark due to cultural differences. One example of this is Miriam Ulinover's poem, "A Shabbes-groyl" ["A *Shabbes*-Terror"] (34). This poem is set on *Shabbes*, the weekly Jewish day of rest that falls from sundown on Friday night to starlight on Saturday night. A translator who is not cognizant with the cultural meanings of *Shabbes* would substitute the term Saturday or Sabbath. But Saturday and Sabbath are different from *Shabbes*. In Jewish culture, *Shabbes* is a peaceful day of reflection. The daily grind and day-to-day pressures are set aside on *Shabbes*. It is important to capture this essence in the translation, so I have retained the word *Shabbes*. I have also retained the term "*Shabbes-moytse*-knife", which refers to the knife traditionally used to cut the *khale* [challah, the plaited bread eaten on *Shabbes*] when reciting the *moytse* blessing over bread.

אַ שבת-גרויל
מרים אולינאָוער

שטום געלעגן איז אַ מידער
שבת-פֿרידן אומעטום,
אין דער לופֿט אַ שבת-ניגון
איז געגאַנגען ציטריק אום.

פֿלוצלינג בלאָזט אַווינט אַ קאַלטער,
ס'וואַקסט אַ יאָמער גרויס, אַלץ גרעסער:
ס'האָט אַ ייִד געקוילעט ס'וויַבל
מיט דעם שבת-מוציא-מעסער!

A Shabbes-groyl
Miriam Ulinover

Shtum gelegn iz a mider
Shabbes-friden umetum,
In der luft a Shabbes-nign
Iz gegangen tsitrik um.

Plutsling blozt a vint a kalter,
S'vakst a yomer, groys, alts greser:
S'hot a Yid gekoylet s'vaybl
Mit dem Shabbes-moytse-meser!

A *Shabbes*-Terror
Miriam Ulinover
Translation by Hinde Ena Burstin

Drowsy *Shabbes*-peace lay resting
Still and soundless everywhere.
As tender *Shabbes*-melodies
Wafted gently through the air.

Suddenly, a cold wind blows,
A howl grows loud with news of strife:
A man has just butchered his bride
With the *Shabbes-moytse*-knife!

Miriam Ulinover's poem "A *Shabbes*-groyl" is one of a number of Yiddish poems by women published in the 1920s on the theme of family violence. "A Shabbes-groyl" is significant because it depicts domestic violence from a distinctly Jewish perspective. It is clear that both the victim and the perpetrator of the violence represented in this poem are Jewish. Moreover, the *Shabbes* scene that Ulinover paints establishes the couple as religious Jews, who keep *Shabbes* and say prayers before cutting and eating *khale*. Thus, Ulinover highlights the existence of domestic violence within religious Jewish families, and demonstrates that extremes of violence against women are as much a feature of Jewish life as of any other community.

This poem, which portrays the ultimate expression of men's power over women, is shocking in its unexpected conclusion. The juxtaposition of the peaceful *Shabbes* and the violent slaying of the young wife is powerful. The centrality of *Shabbes* in the poem is exemplified by the use of a hyphen, binding *Shabbes* with *fridn* [peace] and *groyl* [horror, terror]. In choosing to hyphenate these words, the poet creates a specific and indissoluble connection that visibly links *Shabbes* with the expected peace and with the unexpected terror. The butchering of the bride on the peaceful *Shabbes* intensifies the violation, linking the

murder with the desecration of *Shabbes.* Using a sacred object (the *Shabbes-moytse khale* knife) to commit murder highlights religious hypocrisy – a theme in many of Ulinover's poems. Ulinover's ironic tone is palpable in her inference that the most horrifying aspect of the *Shabbes* terror is that a sacred knife was used to commit the murder, implying that the violation of Sabbath is more shocking than the violation of women. The title of the poem – "A *Shabbes*-Terror" and not "A Domestic-Terror" or "A Family-Terror" – further emphasizes this implication, giving primacy to the violation of the S*habbes*, over the violation of the young bride. These crucial aspects of the poem may have been obscured if the poem had seemed to be about Saturday or a generic Sabbath, and the type of knife had not been specified in the translation.

Similarly, the bride is described as having been "gekoylet", meaning "butchered" or "slaughtered". The use of this term alludes to the objectification of woman as a piece of meat – an important and long-standing feminist concern. This objectification is reinforced in that the woman is only described in terms of what is done to her. She is an object of the poem, rather than the subject. The cultural connotations underlying the term "gekoylet" are also significant. "Gekoylet" is generally used when describing non-kosher slaughter, in contrast with "geshokhtn" which is used in reference to slaughter according to *kashres* or *kashrut* dietary laws of religious Jews. This is another example of differentiation language. Ulinover's use of "gekoylet" is again an ironic inference to religious hypocrisy, portraying a preparedness to break religious decrees in order to overpower women. In drawing on the laws of animal slaughter, rather than the commandment against killing people, Ulinover highlights religious Jewish women's lower status, resonating again with the implication that the violation of religious laws surrounding killing of animals (*kashres* or *kashrut*) is considered more shocking than the violation the young bride's life.

The nuances of the term "gekoylet" are difficult to convey within the confines of a poem, as there is no equivalent or parallel term in English. To some extent, the underlying message is articulated through retaining the culturally-specific terms *Shabbes* and *Shabbes-moytse*-knife. Translation is a delicate balancing act. Any further explanation within the poem would distort the poetry. Yet, too little explanation would distort the cultural contexts of the text. Thus, this translation too benefits from the "instructive embrace" of supplementary clarification.

The conscious translational choice to follow the stylistics of the source text impacts on word choice and may result in new nuances or elements being introduced in translation. The original Yiddish "S'vakst a yomer, groys, alts greser" [literally, "A lament grows big and even bigger"] has been translated as "A howl grows loud with news of strife" in an attempt to replicate the rhythm and rhyme of the source text. The insertion of the word "news" may suggest the broadcasting of a bulletin through the community. This is not present in the original, and is therefore important to note as part of the "instructive embrace" accompanying the translation. Furthermore, in the original, it is not clear who is wailing. The lament is the subject of the sentence – and hence, more significant than the (unknown) person/s doing the howling. The translation consciously preserves the passive tone of the original. While the passive voice is more common in Yiddish than in English, it is used very deliberately in this poem to depict a disembodied voice. The growing howl remains nameless and faceless. The anonymity of the cry reflects the all-too common, impersonal and indirect response to family violence.

Notably, the murderer is referred to as a "Yid", which literally translates as a Jew. Yet this is not the sense in which the word is used in the poem. "Yid" can also be used to mean "person". This usage was more customary at the time that the poem was published, as Jewish lives were then, of necessity, more clearly differentiated from those of non-Jews. The context

determines whether the term is meant as “Jew” or “person”. In this instance, it is not necessary to name the murderer as a Jew, as the poet has provided other cultural markers to signify his Jewishness. Furthermore, translating “Yid” as “Jew” could introduce pejorative nuances that were not applied to the term “Yid” at the time that the poem was published. Because Yiddish signifies gender of all nouns, it is clear in the original that the murderer is a man. Gender is an important variable to transmit, because the violence depicted is gendered violence. Hence “Yid” has been translated as “man”. The term “man” captures the meaning, colloquial usage and rhythm that best corresponds to the original “Yid”, and is thus the most appropriate translation. It is noteworthy that the victim is described as a “vaybl”, a young bride – a term also used in the previous poem. Both women are therefore described in terms of their relationships to their husbands, rather than as individuals.

While this poem utilizes a *folkstimlekh* rhythm, it includes Gothic elements, in the unanticipated and macabre conclusion of the poem. The unexpectedness heightens the powerful message, raising interesting dilemmas in the translation of the word “groyl” which appears in the poem’s title. “Groyl” can mean shock, horror or terror. Using the milder term “shock” supports the surprise element of the poem, as opposed to the unambiguous term “terror”. Yet, “terror” links the poem to present-day discourse around family violence, emphasizing the unbroken chain of violence against women over the past century, and has therefore been the translational choice.

Conclusion

The two translated poems highlight women’s resistance in divergent ways. “A Vaybele” illustrates a subversive form of resistance against limits imposed on women’s education and reading material. It signifies a substantial path of social change in the struggle for women breaking free from oppression. Translating this poem into English also functions as a form of resistance by dispelling stereotypes, and by highlighting this historical moment. “A Shabbes-groyl”, on the other hand, depicts the brutal oppression of women through domestic murder. In and of itself, it does not appear to be a poem about empowerment, but rather, of the ultimate loss of power and agency. Yet, the poet calls out violence against women, and draws attention to the coexistence of religion and domestic murder – the most extreme expression of violence against women. Naming the violence is a significant act of agency. The poet makes a daring and powerful statement highlighting religious hypocrisy, and resisting the pressures brought to bear by those in power to maintain the silence and pretend these problems don’t exist, or don’t occur in Jewish families. Because the poem is explicitly Jewish, translation signals a broad message that violence is perpetrated in Jewish homes, in the same way as it is perpetrated in homes of every culture. Violence against women is thereby recognized as a crosscultural form of oppression. Translation also highlights the courage of the poet in speaking out, bringing her powerful images and words to a new audience. Just as Ulinover breaks the silence through depicting domestic murder, translation of her poem breaks the silence by reproducing an important representation and bringing it into new realms.

Social, sexual and historical differences are significant in the publishing and translation of literature. It is therefore critical to examine texts within their historical and socio-cultural contexts, and to transmit historical, social and sexual differences in translation. Distortions or reductions may occur where translations disregard these differences.

A number of strategies are available for conveying these differences. Prefacing and supplementary notes can provide an “instructive embrace” that clarifies and contextualizes critical components of the text. Retaining culturally specific terms from the source language and replicating elements of the stylistics of the source text can situate translations within their social, cultural and historical settings. Close attention to contextually embedded meanings of

words can reveal critical differences that warrant reproduction in translation. These strategies fulfil an important task in making gender and culture more visible. They are supported by a self-reflective approach to translation that acknowledges the specificity of time, space and culture, identifies principles underpinning the translations, articulates dilemmas confronted, and illuminates decisions made in crafting translations.

Yiddish literature is being increasingly translated in response to a decline in the number of Yiddish speakers, as a direct result of the Holocaust and its aftermath. While women have been pivotal in the development of Yiddish literature, women writers, and particularly, Yiddish women poets, have been grossly underrepresented in translation. There is thus an urgent need for retrieval and translation of Yiddish women's poetry. It is crucial that these translations highlight historical, cultural and gender differences. Making these differences visible is a vital aspect of the corrective process that seeks to reinstate Yiddish women's voices in translation.

Glossary

Ashkenaz	Jews of European descent
khale	challah, plaited bread eaten on *Shabbes*
folkstimlekh	a folk-song-like genre of Yiddish poetry
folkstimlekhe poezie	folksong-like poetry, poetry of the *folkstimlekh* genre
gekoylet	non-kosher slaughter of animals for food (past tense)
geshokhtn	kosher slaughter of animals for food (past tense)
kest	a Jewish custom whereby newly-married couples live with their in-laws for several years, so that the husband can continue to study free from financial concerns.
kashres or *kashrut*	dietary laws of religious Jews, determining which foods are kosher
kidesh	the custom of proclaiming the holiness of *Shabbes* by making a communal blessing over the wine
mame-loshn	colloquial name for Yiddish [lit. mother-tongue]
moytse	the blessing made over bread
Shabbes	the Jewish day of rest and reflection, from Friday evening to Saturday night
Shabbes-moytse-knife	the knife traditionally used to cut the *khale*
Shmoyneh-esre	a long prayer that is recited silently, and that concludes with taking three steps back.
tkhine	a supplicatory prayer poem

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