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Translating ambiguity in “D’autres que les hommes” by Chantal Danjou

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Chantal Danjou is a prolific French author and literary critic. She has published over thirty works, including prose, poetry and essays. I had the privilege of translating an extract of her upcoming novel “*D’autres que les hommes*” [Other than men] as an entry into the AALITRA translation awards for 2024.

The extract is strange, unsettling and at times dream-like. Reading it, I was immediately struck by its atmosphere, poetic language and particularly by its ambiguity. I aimed to preserve these elements in my translation, not simply because they stood out to me as a reader, but because they contribute to the aesthetics, tone, impact and meaning of the work, and are, thus, vital to its expressive function (Reiss) and therefore overall purpose (Munday).

Ambiguity is a particular challenge in translation. As a communicative act, the purpose of translation is to reveal the meaning of the source text to the target-language reader, and therefore, often, to reduce ambiguity (Baker). Ambiguity is routinely seen as something that must be resolved (Boyarskaya) or even avoided at all costs (Grice). In a different kind of text, an instruction manual for instance, the role of the translator might indeed be to minimise ambiguity, rather than preserve it (Reiss). Here, the ambiguity appears to be intentional and a key characteristic of the text. It performs the function of creating atmosphere, sparking the reader’s curiosity, and communicating the character’s experience and mind-state. Therefore, my strategy was to maintain the veil of mystery the author places over certain aspects of the story, while still communicating that story to the reader, in an attempt to create a functional equivalence between the experience of the source and target-text readers (Munday).

As mentioned above, the ambiguousness of the text contributes to the atmosphere of mystery and also performs an important narrative function: it plunges the reader into the mindset of the protagonist who is deep in the forest, surrounded by darkness that the author describes as “uncertainty”. “(*Dès qu’on s’éloignait d’un mètre de ses murs tout plongeait dans l’incertitude.*” [A few short steps from its walls, all was plunged into uncertainty.]) An unusual lexical choice that highlights the confusion in the protagonist’s mind.

The title itself is a prime example of the text’s ambiguity. “*D’autres que les hommes*”, which I translated as “Other than men”, presents a range of possible meanings. Specifically, are we to understand the “*hommes*” as being male, or is the term used to refer more broadly to humans? In other words, is the distinction between men and women, or between humans and nonhumans: animals, ghosts or even aliens? The men mentioned in the extract do indeed have an otherworldly quality. They speak in an odd manner and vanish, ghostlike: “*Ils disparurent. Ils s’effacèrent.*” [They vanished. Faded.] One seems to disappear not simply into the forest, but in and out of existence: “*Elle eut l’impression qu’il s’éclipsait. Ou s’éteignait.*” [he seemed to slip away. Or snuff out.] This man is even called “*l’homme des frontières, entre forêt et hameau... entre bêtes et humains.*” [the man of the borders, between forest and village ... between animal and human.]

Equally, the title could refer to the fact that the majority of characters in the extract are male, aside from our female protagonist, Lonie.

“Mais il n’y avait qu’elle et ces hommes étranges qui venaient avec le soir et la pluie. Elle eut un frisson.”

[But there was nothing save herself and these strange men who came with the night and the rain. She shivered.]

The gender dynamic in the text appears to be significant, particularly since the men are depicted as somewhat menacing. That is why I finally chose to translate “hommes” as “men”, even though the strangeness of the text suggested to me that the otherworldliness of the characters was also a key element. Furthermore, the author could have chosen to entitle the text: “D’autres que les humains” [other than humans], yet Danjou did not go as far as to talk explicitly of nonhumans, indicating that she wanted to preserve this ambiguity and raise these same questions in the minds of readers as we have been discussing here. Since in English, the word “men” is also sometimes still used to refer to people in general, I was able to carry the ambiguity across into the English text.

Similarly, “D’autres que” could have been rendered as “aside from” or “apart from”, however the word “other” seemed more appropriate in this context, as it evokes the concept of “otherness”, which is a key part of the mystery, tension and ambiguity of the text.

Another challenge in translating this extract was the scientific vocabulary. Surprisingly for a piece of literature, the text contains some technical biological terms, such as “*stylommatophores*” (stylommatophora – an order of air-breathing snails and slugs) and stylets (the eyestalks of these slugs). There was a temptation to simplify these terms, so that their meaning would be immediately apparent to the, presumably non-expert, English readership. However, the unusual decision to include scientific terms was clearly deliberate on the part of the author, and the intended French readership was likely also made up of general readers, rather than experts. The choice of vocabulary was therefore clearly intended to enhance the mystery of the piece and provide information on the expertise of the characters depicted. Clearly, the author does not use the technical language to facilitate comprehension; on the contrary, the language is used to *disconcert* the reader. Again, even through precision, Danjou remains deliberately ambiguous. This fact is also apparent in the fragmented manner in which the technical information is presented:

“Mais les voilà qui s’interrogeaient : stylommatophores ?
L’un d’eux parla de stylet ; un autre de voir ; « l’œil au bout de deux de leurs tentacules »
précisa en criant un troisième qui restait à l’orée du bois.”

[Now they were wondering aloud about stylommatophora.
One spoke of stylets; another of sight; “an eye on each tip of one pair of tentacles” added a third, who remained at the edge of the woods]

I therefore chose to translate the technical terms strictly accurately, without using everyday vocabulary or explanation in order to preserve the confusion created by the source text.

Contrary to the idea that translation always elucidates, preserving ambiguity can actually be desirable in a literary text when that ambiguity is part of its aesthetic and expressive function. The purpose of translation is not to explain the source text, but rather to recreate it with the tools of the target language. In this extract, ambiguity is a tool, wielded by Danjou to great literary effect. To reduce the ambiguity of this particular text would be a disservice to the work, given the purpose and function that the ambiguity serves: creating an atmosphere, giving clues to the mindset and knowledge of the characters and creating a particular impression and experience in the mind of the reader. In short, ironically, the ambiguity itself communicates information, which must be carried over into the target text.

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D'autres que les hommes
Chantal Danjou

Other than men
Chantal Danjou

Translated by Alice Heathwood

La profonde et profonde forêt entourait la maison, une si petite maison qui aurait presque eu l'air d'un champignon couleur de limace mûre.

Limace mûre ?

Ils regardèrent autour de la maison et échangèrent quelques clins d'œil, d'un air de dire qu'on n'avait jamais vu ni entendu parler du mûrissement des stylommatophores. Il valait mieux d'ailleurs ignorer que de telles choses pussent se produire. Il n'empêche que son toit de lauzes, bombé, avait pris avec l'humidité une teinte plus foncée, brune sous laquelle un ocre un peu rouge osait percer à la faveur des premiers rayons de soleil après l'averse.

Mais les voilà qui s'interrogeaient : stylommatophores ?

L'un d'eux parla de stylet ; un autre de voir ; « l'œil au bout de deux de leurs tentacules » précisa en criant un troisième qui restait à l'orée du bois. Il fallait être trois pour parvenir à une conclusion. Élever la voix parfois pour se faire entendre. Un mince filet de fumée sortit de la cheminée, sorte d'aboutissement de réflexion.

Ils disparurent.

Ils s'effacèrent.

Le vent.

Les gerbes d'eau qui tombaient des arbres.

La gouttière qui sifflait.

La maison s'enfonça.

La terre toute gonflée. La moindre empreinte se creusait. D'épais bourrelets et bien gras brillaient de chaque côté. Il n'y avait vraiment plus que la maison. Ce quasi noir autour. Dès qu'on s'éloignait d'un mètre de ses murs tout plongeait dans l'incertitude. Et ces limaces sur le toit, sur les chemins, ces rubans de limaces. Toute cette longueur

The deep, deep forest surrounded the house. A house so small it almost looked like a mushroom, the colour of a ripe slug.

A ripe slug?

They looked around the house and winked at each other, seeming to say that ripening stylommatophora were never seen nor heard of, and that it would be better in any case not to know that such things could occur. The fact remained that the bulging, stone-shingled roof had darkened in the wet to a brown hue, under which a reddish ochre peeped out in the first rays of sunlight after the rain.

Now they were wondering aloud about stylommatophora.

One spoke of stylets; another of sight; "an eye on each tip of one pair of tentacles" added a third, who remained at the edge of the woods. It took all three of them to find an answer. At times a voice was raised so as to be heard. A thin stream of smoke escaped from the chimney, a kind of conclusion after deliberation.

They vanished.

Faded.

Wind.

Water showering down from the trees.

Whistling from the gutter.

The house slumped.

The earth all bloated. The slightest footprint sunk. Bulges, thick and fat, glistening at the sides. Nothing left but the house. The near dark outside. A few short steps from its walls all was plunged into uncertainty. And those slugs, on the roof, on the paths, those ribbons of slugs. Long, improbable stretches of slugs. What did they smell like? A little sweet no doubt. The man

invraisemblable de limaces. Quelle odeur avaient-elles ? Un peu sucrée sans doute. L'homme qui était resté à la lisière de la forêt réapparut. Il acquiesça : « Oui, un peu sucrée. ». Il se tint immobile un moment. Seul et roide. Un peu penché sur la droite. Aussi sombre que les troncs qui s'alignaient à côté de lui.

Lonie pencha légèrement la tête vers la gauche. Elle eut l'impression qu'il s'éclipsait. Ou s'éteignait. Elle hésita. Une silhouette à peine détachée de celles des arbres portant au front la loupiote rouge d'une lampe frontale. C'était ça. Effrayant. Mais puisqu'il s'était volatilisé... Lui, oui. Pas ce sucré qui lui sembla envahir la pièce. Elle regarda à nouveau à l'extérieur. À quoi bon ? La nuit tombait brusquement. Le soir était peu marqué. Tout se jouait dans la pièce à présent. Les rafales et le ruissellement incessant tambourinaient si fort sur le toit que le salon paraissait rempli de bâtons de pluie toujours renversés. Une odeur d'humidité avec son irrésistible note sucrée imprégnait les murs, la fenêtre à petits carreaux avec son rideau à damier blanc et bleu, le canapé.

Du bois.

Il lui aurait fallu trois ou quatre bûches de plus.

L'idée de ressortir... « Ressortir » – répéta en écho l'homme des frontières, entre forêt et hameau, bien que les autres maisons soient vides, entre bêtes et humains. Mais il n'y avait qu'elle et ces hommes étranges qui venaient avec le soir et la pluie. Elle eut un frisson.

who had remained at the edge of the forest reappeared. He nodded: "Yes, a little sweet." He stood still a moment. Alone and stiff. Leaning a little to the right. As dark as the tree trunks lined up beside him.

Lonie tilted her head slightly to the left and he seemed to slip away. Or snuff out. She hesitated. A silhouette barely distinguishable from those of the trees, the red light of a headlamp shining from its forehead. That was it. Frightening. But then, since it had evaporated... He had. Not that sweet that seemed to flood the room. She looked outside again. What for? Night was falling suddenly. Evening barely came. Now the room was the world. The incessant downpour and gusts battered the roof so hard that the living room seemed filled with ever-turning rainsticks. The smell of damp with its irresistible hint of sweetness pervaded the walls, the small-paned window with its blue and white checkered curtain, the sofa.

Wood.

She should have gotten three or four more logs.

The thought of going back outside... "back outside" echoed the man of the borders; between forest and village (although the other houses were empty), between animal and human. But there was nothing save herself and these strange men who came with the night and the rain. She shivered.