In 1993, I sat down to translate *The Dining Room* by A.R. Gurney into French. Having seen several high-profile productions in Canada, England and the United States, I was surprised to discover that no French language translation of this play existed. I gave myself the mandate to make available to francophone audiences what I felt was an essential piece of Gurney's *oeuvre* and a significant play—if only for its popularity within the contemporary American repertoire. Despite my respect for the play, its author, its structure, its content, its themes, despite my intentions to recreate the specificity of the original version, it still amazes me how quickly I began to adapt the piece rather than to translate it. When confronted with expressions and terms without equivalents in my target language, with cultural references that I knew would be difficult for francophone audiences to understand, with the irreconcilable philological differences that divide any two systems of communication (including the lack of elasticity of the arguably more regulated French language), I rewrote, I cut, I censored, I changed characters’ names. In short, I appropriated the piece in the name of supposed accessibility for an audience and a market I knew well. A year later, when I attended the public reading of my supposed translation at the Théâtre du Nouvel-Ontario in Sudbury, it was clear that I had created an original work, albeit inspired by Gurney’s text. It left the distinct impression that the play had been written for a contemporary French Canadian audience. Gurney had given way to Beddows and the culture and language he represented.

Such adaptations of plays, often referred to as tradapta-tions, adaptations-translations, or even translations at the time, were the norm in francophone Canada until the late 1980s, as Annie Brisset describes:

Naturalization of foreign plays is a prerequisite for their acceptance into [Québec’s] ... literary institution, as well as their relevance in a wider field of the discourse permeated by the nationalist dora. To give a text from outside Québec a profile that conforms to the symbolic representations of the Québécois collectivity in social discourse, the translator "forgets" markers of alterity, obliterating them through transference of the context of the utterance.

In other words, the translator reverses the normal communication in translation. The translator’s task is no longer to introduce the receiver to that which is unusual or original in the foreign work, but rather to turn the foreign work into a vehicle for representing the "Québécois fact." (196)

The tendency to adapt source plays, often associated with ethnocentrism, exists elsewhere in the Western world. However, the legitimacy of this approach is often questioned by foreign theatrical institutions, free from the cultural insecurities that permeated French language practices in this country until recently. Translation in Québec, being synonymous with nationalism in the 1970s, was exploited as one tool among others to affirm a new collective identity. In such a context, the "foreign" was seen as a negative to be eclipsed by a celebration of the local. The English-speaking world is not immune to such phenomena, for francophone Canada’s postcolonial mentality echoes those among theatre practitioners in Britain’s former colonies. One has only to think of Brian Friel’s Irish adaptations of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*: Friel’s Irish-inspired lexicon is a deliberate and self-admitted attempt to transpose the piece towards a local discursive space.

However, nationalist discourses were not alone in contributing to the predominance of adaptations over translations during this period. Francophone Canada’s embryonic theatrical institution was collectively learning how to translate plays. Even today, a mature local practice is only beginning to take root. The challenges it still faces are immense, for it will continue to exist, at least in the short term, in the shadow of practices in France, much as anglophone Canada’s translators work in the shadow of English and American practices.

Since no school of theatrical translation exists in Canada, few translators were (or are) aware of the writings of specialists in the field of translation studies. There is no equivalent in Canada to France’s Maison Antoine-Vitez, which serves as a centre for debate among practitioners, commissions the translation of important plays and sets about finding producers for the works translated.
Montreal’s Centre des auteurs dramatiques (Cead) has only sporadically played such a role. However, Cead has established a workshop-residence for translators in Tadoussac as the first step towards a more systematic and institutionalized approach to the translation of plays.

Also, a new understanding of the specificity of the dramatic text allows translators, more than ever, to minimize semantic and stylistic losses. I am referring to the work of semioticians such as Anne Ubersfeld, Patrice Pavis and André Helbo, among others, whose studies have brought about a new understanding of the structural, linguistic, dialogic, monologic and discursive specificity of the dramatic text, particularly in relation to the role played by mise en scène in the postmodern creative process. Translators today can better identify appropriate choices to translate texts because of this more rigorous, if not more scientific, understanding of the very nature of the source text. Unfortunately, much of their work is still not available in English; Ubersfeld’s seminal Lire le Théâtre 1, 2 and 3 were only very recently translated into English by Frank Collins, as Pavis’s Dictionnaire du théâtre was by Christine Schantz. Ubersfeld’s notion of the permeable playtext, the script as a structure that allows for a limited and quantifiable number of scenic readings – despite its quasi-cliché status in the French-speaking world – has barely made the jump to translation studies. Susan Bassnett-McGuire, in her book Translation Studies, makes only a brief mention of it. Identifying and defining such readings allows translators to better preserve them, or to make conscious choices about which to preserve and which to abandon.

Finally, the myth of the existence of a Québécois language, as proposed by Léandre Bergeron in his Dictionnaire de la langue québécoise, has been put to rest. Bergeron’s well-known pamphlet, La Charte de la langue québécoise (The Charter of the Quebec Language) attempted to elevate francophone Canada’s vernacular to the level of an autonomous language, to break with what he perceived to be French domination through the Académie française. Politics and linguistics joined forces here, albeit briefly, as did politics and translation during the same period, to
Integral to Maryse Warda, the designated house at maturity on international theatrical scenes. Larger sub-

have made use of Canadian translators, including Michel Tremblay himself, does, however, remain problematic for a society increa-

sions for this is that aesthetic preoccupations began to replace those linked to nationalism. For example, the the-

atre of images, the first indigenous French Canadian aesthetic movement to gain international acclaim (through Gilles Maheu, Robert Lepage, Jean Asselin, and others), contributed to the creation of simulacra, texts that used canonized authors' reputations to legitimize innovative scenographic-centric approaches to theatrical practice. It is no accident that Normand Chaurette is Robert Lepage's preferred translator; Chaurette's lexicographically simpli-

fied adaptations of Shakespeare have allowed Lepage to create productions that defy normative text-centrism. When asked why he chose to use François-Victor Hugo's very dated translation of Shakespeare's Hamlet in his Else

enur, Lepage replied: "Because Normand Chaurette was not available." Another example: in his movement-

based productions of Shakespeare's Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V, Jean Asselin of Théâtre Omnibus did not hesi-

tate to censor semantic content that he felt he could render through movement: "Any bit of text I was able to translate into movement was cut."

But the dice have been cast, and a true translation ecol-

ogy has begun to emerge in francophone Canada that is similar to that found in other Western cultures. In short, a process of normalization has occurred. As in France, Germany and England, a plethora of discourses - aesthetic, political, linguistic and other - govern and influence the decoding and encoding of scripts. To return to the case of Shakespeare, Antoine Maillot, in her translations of The Tempest and Richard III, adopted strategies that echoed those of her French contemporaries, including Jean-Michel Déprats, whose work is produced regularly in larger state institutions such as the Comédie française and the Festival d'Avignon. Maillot's translations, in a manner of speaking, compete for discursive space with those of Normand Chaurette and others. The discursive space allotted to Maillot's type of translation, arguably greater than ever before, is symptomatic of a society's ability to tolerate the "foreign" on its stages.

Today, when the source text integrates a vernacular, the use of joual, francophone Canada's vernacular, as made famous by Michel Tremblay - the most logical of equivalents to source text vernaculars - creates less of an effect of spatial or temporal transposition. All vernaculars are extremely site-specific, and, this being the case, French Canadian translators, including Michel Tremblay himself, have made use of joual in order to naturalize or québec-

cize" source plays. Maryse Warda, the designated house translator at Montréal's Théâtre de Quat'sous, chose to integrate into Traces d'étoiles, her translation of Cindy Lou Johnson's Brilliant Traces, certain expressions drawn from a French Canadian lexicon ("C'est correct" for "that's ok," "Sacrament" for "God damn," "Tins," instead of "Tiens," for "take it"), but preserved all references to the Alaska hinterland where the play is set. In the present, less politi-
cized environment, Warda obviously felt that audience members would be able to reconcile a lexicon they knew to be French Canadian with a play set abroad. The credibili-
ty of the script is not questioned, as it would not be had it been translated into German or Italian.

If a phenomenon of blurring still exists between the practices of translation and adaptation, it is in part because theatres make little or no distinction between the two when promoting productions. Examples abound, but one of the best known was perhaps Marco Micone's adapta-

tion of The Taming of the Shrew, as directed by Martine Beauline, during the 1995–1996 season at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde (TNM). Despite major changes brought to the text, Micone and Beauline were told by Lorraine Pintal, the TNM's Artistic Director, that she would promote the work as a translation of Shakespeare's piece because "Shakespeare sells; Micone does not." There is indeed a question of prestige at work here, particularly for an insti-
tution often referred to as Québec's National Theatre: Why would a national theatre produce an adaptation and not a translation, since the second is still considered more presti-
tigious than the first?

Let us not forget that most translators in Canada are still first and foremost playwrights who, wishing to increase their annual income, translate the occasional play. For the most part, they have not followed any sort of train-

ing program in translation, nor is translation the main focus of their artistic endeavours. It is not surprising, therefore, that the creative process typical of playwriting often influences one that is more scientific by its very def-

inition. The National Theatre School's French language playwriting program still does not offer courses in the translation of plays. CEAQ, in its most recent catalogue - Canada's principal reference for scripts in French - still places translations and adaptations by playwrights side by side, as if there were no difference between the two.

One must also mention the influence of the scenic auteur, who has replaced the traditional director and who subjugates all composing elements of the theatrical event to a scenic vision, which may or may not be in accordance with possibilities in the original playtext. This helps explain why many directors (in both France and Canada) commission new translations for their projects: by doing so, they can ensure that the translation, or adaptation, fits their vision. In other words, many contemporary directors in francophone Canada have no interest in seeing a clear differ-

tentiation surface between translation and adaptation.

It is doubtful that the practice of adapting plays will disappear from Montréal's, Ottawa's or Québec's theatric-
al landscapes, nor should it. It exists in every other Western theatrical milieu, principally in private, for-profit theatres. The presence of adaptations in large state theatres does, however, remain problematic for a society increasingly trying to assert its autonomy and its new institutional maturity on international theatrical scenes. Larger subsi-
dies are therefore required for non-profit state theatres that wish to produce significant works selected from the international corpus without being dependent on ticket
Marco Micone’s “tradaptation” of Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew at Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in spring 1995, directed by Martine Beaulne, was promoted as a work by Shakespeare because, in the words of the theatre’s artistic director, Lorraine Pintal, “Shakespeare sells; Micone does not.”

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sales for revenue. Elements deemed to be foreign, yet preserved in translations, may make such productions less attractive to local audiences, but they always will: Western societies have always maintained a certain level of ethnocentrism. Even the recent rise of institutionalized and state-condoned urban cosmopolitanism, under the guise of multiculturalism, will not change any society’s wish to protect its borders, both cultural and political. But the authenticity of plays produced will aid francophone Canada in attaining the international credibility it is presently seeking.

Notes

1 The expression “francophone Canada” is meant to be an inclusive term that allows me to draw upon examples in practices found both inside and outside Québec. In the following paper, “francophone Canada” and “Québec” are used interchangeably.

2 The term “hexagonal” – from the roughly hexagonal shape of France’s borders – is often used in French academic writing to describe and distinguish France in relation to other members of La Francophonie, including Canada.

Works Cited


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