



“(MIS)TREATERS”: TRANSLATING THE TREATS AND MISTREATS OF OLD AGE

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Perhaps few literary pieces could have captured the traditional reality of the upper-middle class of Brazil's older generation as Ana Maria Machado's "Tratantes" does so succinctly. An elderly widow, feeling utterly forlorn and helpless, whose only joy is the visit of her daughter and grandchildren. A stubborn lady who adamantly insists on living by herself in a now-too-big house where she and her late husband had raised their children. This could be the story of my grandmother, of my friends' grandmothers, of everybody else's grandmothers, who have outlived their husbands and are fortunate enough not to be sent off into a nursing home. These are aged, proud humans, who cling to the last remains of a bygone sense of independence just as they cling to the beloved legacy they will leave behind: their children and grandchildren.

Lydia used to make breakfast herself when her husband Earnest was still alive. Now, she relies on the help of a "maid" (translated directly from "empregada", a word choice which denies any possible interpretations of this figure being a nurse or caregiver). Lydia relishes in the fact that "the meal need not be prepared by herself anymore" – even the papaya's seeds are picked out for her. Such small luxuries paint the picture of an erstwhile Brazilian society which has significantly changed its attitude towards maids and housework over the last fifty decades, whereas its living representatives have trouble adjusting to the contemporary reality of political sensibilities in which housemaids are an extremely controversial topic. This is a muted questioning that unmistakably lies behind Machado's detailed descriptions of an everyday breakfast, silently prepared by the maid whose voice is only heard when she announces the arrival of Lydia's grandchildren. If not directly criticising Lydia for her lack of class consciousness, the strictly descriptive narrator seems to kindly allow her this social faux pas in light of her frustrating circumstances.

How do the well-to-do elderly enjoy (or not) their retirement elsewhere in the world? This is a question which non-Brazilian readers must confront, likely with some amount of cultural shock, while exploring the reality Machado describes. In order to render the scene into English as precisely as possible, while retaining the sense of casual normality which markedly envelops the Portuguese text, my translation of these passages preserved most of the original syntax and grammar. The linguistic compromise is found where the translation rejects most Brazilian names (with the exception of the maid, Herminia, whose unusual name would strike even Portuguese speakers). Instead, I have adopted popular English names wherever possible to minimize the sense of foreignness which might not fit in with a domestic motif. Hence, the names of Lídia and Ernane became Lydia and Earnest. Both maintain their implicit suggestion of old age considering the fact that such



names are not common among the younger generations in either language. Similarly, the flowers in Lydia's garden – which are all very typical of Brazilian flora, and which are mentioned by their popular Portuguese names – were translated into the nearest equivalent flowers intended to be more recognisable to the reader. For example, “busy lizzies” provides a very close translation of “marias-sem-vergonha” (since both denote the *Impatiens walleriana*). However, my choice of using yesterday-today-and-tomorrow (*Brunfelsia pauciflora*) for the evocative colour-changing flowers in Lydia's garden is actually only one subtype of the original text's “manacá” – a plant so widespread in Brazil that it has multiple variations. Its close relative, “manacá-de-cheiro” or *Brunfelsia uniflora*, which shows the same colour change process, would have been another potential candidate for the translation if it were not for its arguably less poetic, and less befitting name.

Machado's use of free indirect discourse in the original text moves seamlessly from the omniscient narrator's point of view into an appropriation of the grandmother's perspective and vice versa – a writing technique which does justice to the genre convention of snappy, fast-paced, and syntactically fragmented sentences which is typical of the short story. In order to preserve these features in the translation, my initial instinct was to omit personal pronouns at the beginning of sentences where the narrative seemingly adopts Lydia's own mental voice as she goes through her habitual motions. Where the narration apparently returns to an omniscient perspective, the sentences would regain their syntactical subjects before the verbs. Yet the pithy subject-less sentences, while very well known to Portuguese speakers, were too alien for the intended English reader. Hence the decision to ultimately adapt Machado's syntactical structures through a more familiarizing translation, by adding the appropriate subjects into the sentences with only a few exceptions, namely: ‘Decided to read for a while’ (p.1); “Checked on the jasmine which had fallen during the night;” and “Stirring up the soil, planting seeds, cleaning up a flowerbed”.

An amusing instance where free indirect discourse successfully blurs the distinction between which perspective is adopted appears in Lydia's reflection about songbirds registering the different periods in the morning. In my first draft, I had translated “passarinhos” literally into “birdies”. I had interpreted this passage as showing the grandmother's perspective incorporating her granddaughter's vocabulary – a choice with which most of my colleagues at the translation club agreed until Machado herself surprised us all. It was not the granddaughter's word choice there, Machado claimed: those were the grandma's own words rendered by the omniscient narrator, who casually adopts the diminutive “passarinhos” as a universally accepted form of addressing birds in Brazil. As it turns out, this passage nods to the cultural tendency of using diminutive suffixes in Brazilian Portuguese when referring to something small, cute and adorable as, indeed, a songbird. I was more than happy to defer to the voice of authorial intention, as Machado was luckily present when the club gathered to discuss my attempt at translating this short story. Therefore, the final translation printed



in this edition shows “birds” instead, as this more accurately signifies the cultural standard by which such animals are referred to in the English language.

Finally, the most enthusiastic debate among the club members revolved around the issue of how to translate the wordplay in the title. It refers to the children’s mispronunciation of the word “hidratante” (moisturiser), which they call “tratante” (a “rogue”, an unreliable person). The problem is that “verbal humour travels badly”, as Delia Chiaro explains, “as it crosses geographic boundaries humour has to come to terms with linguistic and cultural elements which are often only typical of the source culture from which it was produced, thereby losing its power to amuse in the new location” (CHIARA, 2012, p.1-29). To resolve this linguistic conflict, the majority of my colleagues agreed to make use of creative license and render the title as “Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow”, since Lydia’s eponymous flowers, whose colour fades over time, symbolically convey the interconnected ideas of aging, mortality, legacy and the passage of time, which permeate the entire narrative. Yet, such a choice would incur a complete loss of the wordplay which connects the beginning and ending of the story. Machado’s tale opens with Lydia’s frustration at the unreliable “tratantes”, who mistreat her by setting up appointments only to never show up later. However, its ending conveys a distinct sense of emotional healing after Lydia spends a delightful day with her grandchildren. In the original, the kids tell their mother that they played at being “tratantes”, by which they mean, they played at being masseurs using moisturiser. Their mother and grandmother smile because, while the children may have gotten their pronunciation wrong, they got their grandma’s much needed soul treatment very right.

Beyond the physical relief to her frail body, Lydia remembers her own youth as she receives a boost of life from the kids’ presence. She hopes they will use storytelling to pass on these memories to their own grandchildren someday – a tradition which would symbolically keep Lydia as alive as she feels in that moment of pure loving bliss, and which is exactly what Machado is doing by writing this story.

REFERENCES

CHIARO, Delia. Translation and humour, humour and translation. In: CHIARO, Delia. *Translation, humour and literature: Volume 1*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012, pp. 1-29.