

THE RE-WRITING OF A WELL-READ MAN, OR WHAT HAPPENED TO WEXFORD

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Ruth Rendell's fictional Chief Inspector Wexford is presented to source-text readers as a man who frequently expresses his thoughts and feelings by using preformed literary material. This paper discusses his use of allusions and the translation strategies adopted by Rendell's Finnish translators. An analysis of some examples shows that the strategy of minimum change does not support the consistent characterization of Wexford as witty, empathetic and grounded in his own culture. The strategy may be linked to presumed reader expectations as Rendell's type of crime fiction, where psychological and social factors are as important as the plot, seems to have few target-cultural parallels.

Keywords: translation strategies, cultural literacy, allusions

1 INTRODUCTION

The *of*-construction in the title is an objective genitive; the well-read man is Ruth Rendell's fictional Chief Inspector Wexford. The question of what happened to him refers to the translation process, the process of re-writing whereby a character who is delineated for both British and international readers in English, turns into one who speaks and appears to think in Finnish, even while operating in a world that is clearly not Finnish, as shown by such things as the names of the characters, places and institutions.

Reginald Wexford and his foil, Michael Burden, make their first appearance in Rendell's detective story *From Doon with death* (1964: referred to below as *Doon*). Wexford is introduced as "the very prototype of an actor playing a top-brass policeman", fifty-two years old, living most of his life in one part of Sussex (*Doon* 21). The story starts out as a run-of-the-mill police procedural, so that the Victorian verses used as mottos for each chapter even seem a little pretentious. But half way through (*Doon* 71ff.) the Victorian verse turns out to be linked to the plot, and Wexford is comfortable with it, even modifying a line as he cites it, to question its truth value (*Doon* 73). Regular readers will soon discover that quotations,

comparisons and allusions of all sorts occur quite frequently in the Wexford books, and practically all of them center around Wexford himself.

As book follows book, both Wexford and the community he serves become fleshed out, so that we learn more and more about them. In this paper I will concentrate on one aspect only: Wexford's cultural literacy and its treatment in Finnish translations of six of the novels. I want to see to what extent the translation strategies adopted for allusions support the characterization of Wexford and whether the functions of the allusions in the source texts have been taken sufficiently into account.

Rendell has written sixteen Wexford novels over thirty years; so far twelve have been translated into Finnish.¹ With one exception the translations have all come out in the 1990s; all in all, five translators and three different publishers have been involved. The target texts examined for this paper are the work of three translators (Annika Eräpuro, Pasi Junnila, Jorma-Veikko Sappinen) and published by two different publishers.

2 WEXFORD'S USE OF ALLUSIONS

Wexford is a cultured, well-read man. The comparisons that strike him bear this out: interviewing an affluent couple, he senses a sexless affinity between them that makes him compare them in his mind to Ptolemy and Cleopatra, brother and sister in a dynastic marriage (*Doon* 140). A face in a photograph of schoolgirls evokes La Gioconda facing Leonardo (*Doon* 149). Indeed, most of the proper-name (PN) allusions in the novels are comparisons, giving us an indication of the scope of his general knowledge, with the visual arts heavily represented (*Murder* 21; *Ravens* 40; *Veiled* 4, etc.), but including literary comparisons too (*Ravens* 90; *Veiled* 207, etc.). He rarely uses PN allusions in dialogue though the occasional example of this can be noted:

His temper for an instant got the better of him. 'You're not Antigone, however much you may have played her. You're not Bunyan. Don't keep saying you *had* to do it. (*Veiled* 51; emphasis original)

Key-phrase (KP) allusions (that is, those that contain no proper name) and quotations occur both in dialogue and in Wexford's indirectly expressed thoughts: "Wexford liked to hit on an apt quotation [...] when he could" (*Doon* 136). Rendell quite frequently gives us source references for allusions and quotations (*Murder* 12, 45; *Shake* 18; *Sleeping* 84-85, *Ravens* 70, 146, etc.). Plausibility is stretched quite far when Wexford recites a passage of close to 60 words of informative text. The author does make him "falter for a moment" in the middle of the passage and explain

¹ This paper bypasses screen translations done for Finnish television and any translations of Rendell published in Finnish magazines.

why he had learned the passage by heart, but that is the only indication that this feat of memory might be unusual - apart from Burden's reaction: 'Did you make that up?' (*Veiled* 48). Somewhat shorter recitals of quotations with sources attached occur elsewhere, too (*Shake* 73, 108-109; *Sleeping* 40; *Veiled* 105, 213; *Simisola* 298), but it is difficult to escape the niggling suspicion that these reveal the author's reading habits rather than the character's.

The most interesting, from the point of view of characterization, of Wexford's allusions are the KP allusions, such as lines of poetry, that are used to express his thoughts or emotions. In this he differs from such characters as Rumpole of the Bailey, the QC in John Mortimer's stories, who recites well-known British poetry in a way that suggests a light-hearted wish to demonstrate his cleverness. Wexford is impelled to talk to himself in allusions for instance when viewing a murder victim (*Murder* 129; *Ravens* 77) or a murderer (*Murder* 189; *Shake* 118; *Sleeping* 178; *Ravens* 262); or watching the actions of suspects, bereaved persons or others whose lives his work brings him briefly into contact with (*Murder* 135, 165; *Shake* 18, 67; *Sleeping* 18; *Ravens* 215, 223; *Simisola* 18, 286). Alluding may be his response when a beautiful woman takes an interest in him (*Shake* 183; *Simisola* 164). Natural beauty may comfort him at stressful times (*Murder* 190), as may his happy marriage (*Sleeping* 21; *Ravens* 268; *Simisola* 68); both of these find expression in allusions. Some of his use of allusions is humorous (*Murder* 9; *Sleeping* 48), but that is not a vital element in Rendell.

Does Wexford use allusions to show off? Is there a touch of oneupmanship in his contacts with colleagues? I would say no, or rarely. True, in *Murder*, while on sick leave, he exchanges competitive literary chitchat with a relative, "to assert his intellectual equality" (*Shake* 73), but that is clearly a measure of his desperation at the time. More often, when he plays games with allusions, there is a feeling of friendship and equality (*Sleeping* 27, 76; *Simisola* 68), though he is of course aware of his friend Mike Burden's comparative lack of sophistication and scant general knowledge (*Sleeping* 112; *Ravens* 65, 250) and appreciative of the latter's attempts to develop in this respect in the later books (*Simisola* 195, *The Speaker of Mandarin* 118).

What about the sources of his allusions? They would seem to be fairly orthodox schoolroom memories, some biblical (*Feeling like Ahab in Naboth's vineyard, Am I my brother's keeper?*); some classical (mostly PNs, those: *Medea, the Styx, a Cyclops eye*); some Shakespeare (the best-known plays) and the Romantic poets (*season of mellow fruitfulness*). Occasionally he utters in French (*tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*) or Latin (*mater pulchra, filia pulchrior*). He also remembers nursery rhymes, and the White Queen in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and Chaucer's Wife of Bath. He is thus presented as a man of a certain age,² schooled in Britain, grounded in his own language, society, and culture, but not

² After alluding to the Bible in his conversation with a teenage girl, who does not recognize the source of the allusion, Wexford observes regretfully: "The Authorised Version was unknown to them,

unrealistically widely read. For the translator, who is planning to re-write him for Finnish readers, the task is difficult.

3 EXAMPLES OF RE-WRITING

A review of the local (micro-level) translation strategies chosen for allusions in the six target texts considered in this paper shows examples of most of the strategies listed for KPs in Leppihalme (1994: 101), and no examples of any other strategies. As in the target texts of that study (Finnish translations of six middle-brow novels in English by different writers), the most common strategy for allusions in these target texts too is minimum change, in other words, literal translation with no regard to contextual meaning or attempt to transfer connotations. For reasons of space I will not present the whole range of strategies chosen by Rendell's Finnish translators, but I would like to examine a few instances where in my view the translator's choice does not support the characterization outlined above.

I have chosen three examples for closer attention. In one of them, the minimum change strategy chosen for Wexford's allusive thoughts makes them paler and less dramatic, as roots to the evoked text (term suggested by Ben-Porat 1976) are cut:

'... and one day when they was all in church we got a ladder and stuck it up at the window and down she come. Like a play it was.'

The orchard walls are high and hard to climb and the place death, considering who thou art, if any of my kinsmen find thee here... 'It must have been,' he said. (*Murder* 165)

... ja yhtenä päivänä heidän kaikkien ollessa kirkossa otimme tikapuut ja nostimme ne ikkunaan ja Rebecca tuli alas. Se oli kuin näytelmästä.

Puutarhan muurit ovat korkeat ja vaikeat kavuta ja paikan nimi kuolema, riippuen siitä kuka olet, jos yksikään sukulaisistani löytää sinut sieltä... - Uskon sen, Wexford sanoi. (*Laulu* 184)

Apart from the language error (*riippuen siitä* 'depending on'), it is surprising that the translator has not seen fit to use an existing, more poetic version for the quotation in blank verse from *Romeo and Juliet* (Act II, Scene 2).³ She cannot be in principle opposed to such a strategy as she uses it for example in *Unta* 30-31, where a line from *King Lear* is rendered by Paavo Cajander's translation of it.⁴ A more clearly

lost to their generation as to the one before, a dusty tome of theology, in every way a closed book" (*Ravens* 215).

³ "On muuri korkea ja työläs nousta,/ Ja paikka kuolema on Montaguelle,/ Jos kohtais joku heimostain sun täällä" (Paavo Cajander's translation, first published in 1881).

⁴ '[... N]ow how did he describe her?'
'A thwart disnatured torment?' (*Sleeping* 27)
- Odotas, millä sanoilla hän kuvailikaan tytärtä?
- Inha, luonnoton tuska...? (*Unta* 30).

A mention of Lear a few lines later is given a footnote in the target text, identifying the quotation

performed translation would have been appropriate, revealing how the old woman's colloquial story of parental disapproval of a daughter's suitor and its outcome evokes Shakespeare's great love story for the listening Wexford.

In the second example, the translator adds an explanatory footnote:

'... I could call myself Waterford tomorrow and you could call yourself Fardel without infringing a hairsbreath of the law.'

Looking puzzled, Burden said, 'I suppose so. Look, I see the Waterford thing, but why Fardel?'

'You grunt and sweat under a weary life, don't you? ...' (*Sleeping* 76)

- ... Minä voisin kutsua itseäni huomenna Waterfordiksi ja sinä voisit kutsua itseäsi Fardeliksi rikkomatta lakia hiuskarvankaan vertaa.

Burden näytti olevan ymmällään. Hän sanoi: - Niin kai. Kuule, ymmärrän kyllä Waterfordin, mutta minkä takia Fardel?

- Sinähän muriset ja hikoilet taakkasi alla.* ... (*Unta* 89)

**Fardel* on vanhastava [sic] sana, joka merkitsee sekä kuvaannollista että konkreettista "kantamusta", "kuormaa", "taakkaa", kuten *burdenkin*. (suom.huom.)

The footnote explains what Wexford is talking about, the synonyms of their names, but bypasses the fact that Wexford, in this chat with his friend and colleague, is alluding to Hamlet's soliloquy where the word *fardel* occurs immediately before the line cited.⁵ The allusion is given a minimum change translation, which makes it sound like a rather odd comment on a detective inspector's work (*muriset* 'you growl' especially seems strange in connection with the idea of carrying heavy burdens). What is more, the rendering completely obscures Wexford's witty appropriation of the Shakespearean line to justify his joking choice of a new name for Burden. A performed version of Hamlet's words and a source reference added to the footnote would give Finnish readers a clearer idea of what is going on in the conversation.

The third example does not involve Shakespeare but a much less well known source, a black American of the 19th century, Sojourner Truth. She is identified by name by Wexford, who is investigating the murder of an unidentified black girl:

'Sojourner, we'll call her,' Wexford said, 'after Sojourner Truth, the "Ain't I a woman?" poet. And maybe... well, I somehow see her as impermanent, homeless, alone. "I am a stranger with thee and a sojourner", you know.'

Burden didn't know. He wore his deeply suspicious uneasy look. (*Simisola* 180)

"Vieras, sen nimen me hänelle annamme", Wexford sanoi, "Totuuden Vieraan, Olenko mä nainen?"-runon tekijän mukaan. Ja ehkä...no, minä jotenkin näen hänet väliaikaisena,

cited and naming Cajander.

⁵ "Who would fardels bear, / To grunt and sweat under a weary life, / But that the dread of something after death / [...] makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of." (*Hamlet*, Act III, Scene 1). Compare Cajander's translation (first published in 1879): "Ken nuo haitat kärsis / Ja hikois, voihkais elon kuorman alla, / Jos pelko, mitä tulee kuolon maassa, / [...] niin ei huumais mieltä [...]".

kodittomana, yksinäisenä. 'Minä olen muukalainen ja vieras teidän keskuudessanne', tiedäthän."
Burden ei tiennyt. Hänellä oli syvästi epäluuloinen, vaivautunut ilmeensä. (*W & Simisola 200*)

The translator, however, appears not to have recognized that a real-life person was being discussed as he "translates" the name Sojourner Truth as *Totuuden Vieras* 'Guest of Truth'. The cited passage is an important moment - morally - in the book: the dead girl who is being discussed by the investigators of her murder is unknown to everybody. She is named after someone who was also black, and a woman, and a slave (the last being a central motif in the book as it turns out). The translator recognizes the religious echoes: "For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers" (1 Chron. 29:15). Apparently, however, he does not know about Sojourner Truth's memorable speech at a women's rights convention in 1851 (Tanner 1971:61), as *Ain't I a woman?* is not a poem (Wexford's description of her as a poet may refer to her rhetorical style) nor should it be rendered as *Olenko mä nainen?* 'Am I a woman?' but as *Enkö minä ole nainen?* 'Am I not a woman?' with stress on the pronoun in reference to the point of her speech.⁶ The victim is thus being given a measure of dignity denied her in life, and as questions of racism, slavery and human rights are the theme of *Simisola*, the passage would need careful attention to detail to come out right.

In comparison, it can be noted that the Swedish translators of the novel chose a different, superficially smooth but emotionally bland, strategy, or replacement by other source-cultural material with a source reference added:

"Gästen ska vi kalla henne", sa Wexford, "efter *Henrik VI*: 'Objudna gäster är ofta mest välkomna när de är borta'. På något sätt verkar det passa in på hennes öde [...]" (Rendell 1995c)

"We shall call her The Guest," said Wexford, "as in *Henry VI*: 'Unbidden guests are often welcomest when they are gone'. In some way it seems to fit in with her fate [...]" (Gloss RL)

4 CONCLUSION

The discussion above is intended as translation criticism from a functional and pragmatic point of view. The renderings are not criticized for being errors but for not conveying what the use of allusions is meant to and does convey in the source texts: a consistent presentation of the central character of the novels, a man who thinks in memories of poetic lines, a quick-witted man who can joke with a less cultured friend without giving offence or patronizingly avoiding the great literature of their language, a man who can empathize with victims and give them some dignity with

⁶ Her point was that women are denied political rights because they are seen as too frail to take on such a burden - but that slave or working-class women are still expected to do back-breaking physical labour: yet are they not women? Two nineteenth-century reports of the speech can be found on the Internet (<http://www.digitalsojourn.org/speech.html>).

his words. His use of borrowed, preformed material is an important part of what makes Wexford a round character, someone with thoughts and feelings, with a past, with a place in the world; but a perfunctory treatment of this aspect of him makes all of it less evident for target-cultural readers.

Perhaps what we have here is a slight difference in genre for the source and target texts, affecting the translators' global (macro-level) translation strategy. If we consider the titles of her books, we see that Rendell favours allusive titles, often bringing the sources of the titles into the books themselves, either as mottos for the whole book (*Sleeping* 6), lines cited at the beginning of chapters (*Murder* 176) or recited in dialogue (*Shake* 109; *Veiled* 135). Critics have commented on Rendell's skill in widening the constraints of the genre of crime fiction; and indeed, the characterization, the interest in moral issues and the social commentary in the Wexford books go beyond that perhaps expected by most readers of Finnish and translated crime fiction in Finland.⁷ In contrast, some of the target texts have names that sound like any cheap crime stories bought for an evening's entertainment: *Kalman laulu* 'Song of death', *Verhottu murha* 'Veiled murder'. It is also striking that only one Wexford novel was translated into Finnish before the 1990s (this was *A new lease of death*, 1969, translated as *Kuoleman pitkä varjo* 'The long shadow of death', 1978) and that the publisher, Otava, chose not to bring out any more titles; this suggests some difficulty in identifying a receptive readership. (Otava did reprint the 1978 translation in 1994, after a serial based on the Wexford stories began to appear on Finnish television and found an audience of 600,000 viewers in Finland.) Most of the target texts have come out in a paperback series called *Jännityksen mestareita* 'Masters of suspense', which name also obscures the special character of Rendell's crime fiction.

The novelist John Carey (1996) recently wrote: "Rendell combines intelligence with emotional depth to a degree rare among modern novelists" and compared her to Charles Dickens. Perhaps target-cultural readers interested in whodunnits are not thought by either Finnish publishers or translators to deserve special attention to the allusions that contribute to the appeal of Rendell's "whodunnits" for those who read her in English. A more careful source-text analysis leading to a recognition of the function of the allusions, of the part they play in characterization in the Wexford novels, would doubtless make translators look for more successful local strategies.

References

I Primary sources

- 1 The corpus

⁷ A recent reviewer of two newly published examples of Finnish crime fiction (Aitio 1996) deplores their lack of credibility and sees the characters as "unsurprising caricatures".

(In chronological order. Each target text is listed after its source text.)

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