



At the Borders Between Translation and Parody: Lydia Davis's Story about Marie Curie

Aux limites de la traduction et de la parodie : le récit de Lydia Davis au sujet de Marie Curie

Jonathan Evans

Volume 25, numéro 2, 2e semestre 2012

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018807ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018807ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

ISSN

0835-8443 (imprimé)

1708-2188 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Evans, J. (2012). At the Borders Between Translation and Parody: Lydia Davis's Story about Marie Curie. *TTR*, 25(2), 167–191. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018807ar>

Résumé de l'article

Le récit de Lydia Davis, « Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman », soulève des questions au sujet de son statut. Bien qu'on le présente comme un récit, il se compose en fait de traductions d'extraits du livre *Une femme honorable* de Françoise Giroud, que Davis avait traduit antérieurement en anglais sous le titre *Marie Curie: A Life*. Cet article analyse comment le récit met en cause les limites entre la traduction et les autres formes d'écriture intertextuelle. Dans un premier temps, l'article analyse la présentation du texte dans le magazine *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, où il apparut sous le titre « Translation Exercise #1: Marie Curie, Honorable Woman ». Dans un second temps, nous voyons comment le processus de résumé utilisé par Davis dans ce récit entre autres est similaire à la traduction. Ensuite, l'article analyse la façon de traduire utilisée dans le récit : elle exagère les traces des structures de la langue d'origine. De même que le choix des extraits, ce mode de traduction suggère que le récit est une parodie. Selon les définitions officielles et littéraires, la parodie doit garder une certaine distance par rapport au texte d'origine, ce que fait le récit de Davis. Mais il parodie un texte qui est mal connu dans la culture cible, donc il est peu probable que les lecteurs anglophones lisent le récit comme une parodie. En soi, le texte « Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman » remet en cause les relations entre la traduction et la parodie, mais de par son style et sa relation avec son texte d'origine, il remet aussi en question l'idée de la représentation.

At the Borders Between Translation and Parody: Lydia Davis's Story about Marie Curie

Jonathan Evans

Intertextual writing and translation can be very similar in form. Both produce a target text from a source text, taking material and manipulating it in order to create a new work. Gérard Genette's survey of intertextual writing, *Palimpsestes*, argues that translation is a form of transposition (1992 [1982], pp. 293-300). Other theorists, including Georges Bastin (1998) and Linda Hutcheon (2006, p. 171), have discussed how translation can be placed in the wider field of adaptation. Richard Dyer even includes translation in his study of pastiche, as he argues that it is a form of acknowledged imitation (2007, p. 34). As John Milton and Marie-Hélène C. Torres point out, the border between translation, adaptation and other forms of intertextual production is not fixed (2003, p. 14).¹ However, other forms of intertextual creation do not have such a strong "relation norm" (Chesterman, 1997, p. 69-70) as translations, which can be considered to provide "full-scale representations" (Hermans, 1998, p. 17) of their source texts. There is more expectation that there will be alteration and manipulation in adaptation (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 7).

Lydia Davis's story "Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman" (2001, pp. 99-119) is a text which problematizes the border between translation and other forms of intertextual writing, especially parody. In this article, I want to show how Davis's story is constructed through translation but at the same time is not

1 Milton (2009) has also suggested ways in which Adaptation Studies and Translation Studies address similar concerns.

a translation. I want to explore how it plays with and disrupts the boundaries between translation and other intertextual forms of writing, ultimately questioning the idea of representation inherent in these practices.

Davis is an American translator of over 20 books from French, including Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (2010), Marcel Proust's *The Way by Swann's* (2003 [2002]) and texts by Maurice Blanchot (1981a, 1981b, 1985, 1987, 1993, 1998, 1999). Davis also writes fiction. She has published one novel, *The End of the Story* (2004 [1995]) and her *Collected Stories* came out in 2009. Her production as an author has accompanied her translating throughout her career. As such, she can be considered an author-translator. Her work in general demonstrates how the relationship between writing and translation is complex, as her translations and stories share the same signature. Sometimes, she further questions the border between the two modes of production by drawing on one of her translations in a story, as is the case in "The Walk" (Davis, 2007, pp. 72-82), which quotes her translation of Proust, and the story about Marie Curie which is my focus here.

The article begins by analyzing how "Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman" is presented as a text, drawing on its publication history and the introduction provided with its original magazine publication (Davis, 2000a, 2000b) which highlights its intertextual nature. The story is then compared with other stories by Davis that are based on quotation from another writer's work, such as "Extracts from a Life" (Davis, 1996 [1986], pp. 57-61) and "Lord Royston's Tour" (Davis, 1997, pp. 84-114). These stories resemble translations in their relation to a source text. "Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman" differs from the other stories as it is constructed from translated elements, which I analyze in the next section. Yet the text is not strictly a translation, as it abridges the text. In the section "Parody and Translation," I discuss how it might be better described as a parody, drawing on legal definitions and Hutcheon's (1985) theory of parody. In the final section, I ask how the story questions ideas of representation, translation and parody.

The Presentation of “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman”

Lydia Davis’s story “Marie Curie, So Honorable” does not declare itself to be either a translation or a derivative work in the general sense. There is no source text cited in its publication history in book form (in Davis 2001, 2002 [2001] and 2009) or in its original publication in *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* [hereafter *McSweeney’s*] (Davis 2000a). The original publication was accompanied by an exchange of letters between the editors of *McSweeney’s* and Davis (Davis 2000b), where Davis alluded to a biography of Marie Curie that she once translated. Although Davis does not explicitly identify the text in the letters, she is referring to Giroud’s *Une femme honorable* (2006 [1981]),² which Davis published a translation of, entitled *Marie Curie: A Life*, in 1986. If the work is derivative, in the legal sense of being an adaptation according to British law (Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (ch. 48), Section 21(3)(a)(i)) or a derivative work according to American law (17 USCode Section 101), then it would require some sort of acknowledgement.³ Davis’s lack of acknowledgement of a source text makes the status of the story ambiguous. In this section, I will demonstrate how paratextual material accompanying its first publication reduces that ambiguity and focuses readers on the intertextual elements of the story.

Reading the story, it is difficult to divine that there is an intertextual relationship with Giroud’s biography. “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” is made up of 39 short sections, ranging from one line to around a page. There is a clear narrative, albeit a compressed one: the text tells the story of Marie Curie’s life, from birth to death. The story is marked stylistically by a certain “awkward English,” as Davis (2000b, p. 27) describes it. There are, for example, unidiomatic constructions, such as “In two months she will be twenty four years” (Davis, 2001, p. 100). There is even the incorrect use of gendered pronouns, such as “It is a daughter of

2 This biography was made into a mini-series for French TV in 1991 (Boisrond, 1991).

3 While I refer to copyright law in my analysis of Davis’s story, this article should by no means be read as actually questioning the legal status of the text.

the earth” (*ibid.*). The English throughout the text is also marked by non-standard collocations, such as “brief angers” (*ibid.*).

The editors of *McSweeney’s* felt the English to be uncomfortably strange. In response to it, they initiated the letter exchange that functions as a preface to the magazine’s publication of “Marie Curie” with something resembling a cry of despair:

Dear Ms. Davis,

We just read the first few sections of the Madame Curie piece and we think we should stop. We think we first need to read an introduction, of your devising, explaining the process by which you’ve created this. We are, because we are stupid, still unsure about the piece’s provenance—who wrote, who translated, are you abridging, etc. (Davis, 2000b, p. 27)

The awkwardness of the English in “Marie Curie” is integral to the story, which Davis had to explain to the publishers of what was considered an avant-garde journal⁴ in order for the story to be accepted. Davis provided the editors of *McSweeney’s* with an explanation of the provenance of the text:

I once had to translate a biography of Marie Curie (I’ve often had to accept jobs I didn’t like) that was written in a rather “cute” style that is not uncommon in some permutation in certain French writers/publications. As usual, though I was bored and irked by the job, I was also amused by the style and its possibilities, so after a while, I began copying out into awkward English the more absurd sequences or sentences. I always envisaged using bits like these to compose a shortened “life” of Marie Curie in awkward translationese. (Davis, 2000b, p. 27)

Here Davis provides a full explanation of the composition of the text, along with her reasons. She made an even clearer statement later in the exchange: “this Marie Curie piece is my abbreviated and deliberately awkward and literal translation of excerpts of a real book by a real French author” (*ibid.*). Davis therefore suggests

4 Albeit one which was planning to “rush headlong into the *World of Normaler* [*sic*] *Fiction*” (italics in the original, Anon., 2000, n.p).

her story is a form of appropriation which was motivated by seeing the potential for text to be something other than it was.

Davis eventually agreed that some sort of introduction to the text might be necessary, but voiced concern: “The trouble is, if there is an intro or even an afterword, the piece is radically changed: it is reduced to an exercise, something more mechanical than I want it to be” (2000b, p. 28). With a clear introduction explaining the mechanics of the piece, the story becomes reduced to nothing more than an example, appearing arbitrary and losing its narrative impact. The solution chosen by *McSweeney’s* and Davis was to create a more subtle form of introduction: the exchange of letters becomes the introduction to the piece, although separated from it by over 100 pages. It is quite possible that readers would not see the introduction, or if they did, they might choose not to read it. The story is left to stand alone, but there is an explanation available should one be necessary and should the reader take the initiative to find it. The exchange of letters is not reproduced in any of the book publications of the story, suggesting that Davis later felt an introduction unnecessary. With no introduction, readers are left with only the title as a clue to the source of the story, which obscures its status as an intertextual work.

The other concession Davis made to the editors of *McSweeney’s* was to change the title of the piece to “Translation Exercise #1: Marie Curie, Honorable Woman.” On the first page of the story (Davis, 2000a, p. 139), the title appeared like this, although in a different font:

TRANSLATION EXERCISE #1:

MARIE CURIE,
HONORABLE WOMAN

The normal title/subtitle hierarchy is reversed: the subtitle appears larger and thus more important than the actual title, which is now the significantly smaller “Translation Exercise #1.” Although the text presents itself as some form of translation, there is no reason to assume that it is, bearing in mind that it is fiction and its title may not reflect its origins. Given its context, the text could be a pastiche of the “awkward English” of “translationese” (i.e.,

English which sounds as if it is translated word-for-word from another language without regard for English norms of style or expression).

The title “Translation Exercise #1” encourages readers to approach the style of the text with suspicion: it becomes seen as a rhetorical embellishment, rather than central to the text. By reverting to the original, non-explanatory title in the book publications, Davis indicates that the style is central to her conception of the story. Indeed, in the correspondence with the editors of *McSweeney’s* she notes that what “interests [her] about this [piece] is the two forms of awkward English [...] combined with what is an interesting and moving life story” (Davis, 2000b, p. 27). The style for Davis is therefore counterbalanced with the narrative; a reasonably clear and emotionally striking story is cloaked in an awkward narration. Davis is interested not only in formal experimentation but also in some sort of narrative or emotional charge. Marjorie Perloff has noted how Davis’s fiction “renew[s], however elliptically, the contact words make with their referents” (1989, p. 21). Stories such as “Letter to A Funeral Parlour” (Davis, 2001, pp. 74-75) and “Grammar Questions” (Davis, 2007, pp. 27-29) develop around language structures but tell stories of mourning. In the case of “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman,” this emotional element appears in the real Marie Curie’s story, which is a story of overcoming adversity and losing loved ones. By removing the introduction and the title “Translation Exercise #1” in the book publications, Davis indicates that she wants readers to pay attention to the story rather than the process of its creation.

Davis’s Abridged Biographies

More is at stake here than a simple use of Giroud’s biography as a source for a story, especially considering how Davis states that it originated as translations of extracts of the biography. Davis has written two more stories which are abridgements of other texts, “Extracts from a Life” (Davis, 1996 [1986], pp. 57-61), based on Shinichi Suzuki’s autobiography *Nurtured by Love* (1969), and “Lord Royston’s Tour” (Davis, 1997, pp. 84-114), which draws upon the Reverend Henry Pepys’s memoirs of Lord

Royston (Royston, 1838). Both of these stories acknowledge their sources in their respective volumes, despite that not being strictly necessary for “Lord Royston’s Tour,” which was based on a work which was in the public domain and so legally required no attribution. The acknowledgement for “Extracts from a Life” notes that the text is “used by permission of Exposition Press” (Davis, 1996 [1986], n.p.): the process of abridgement in this text was thus viewed as creating a derivative work. In this section, I want to consider how these abridgements are similar to translations in their creation of second order texts.

Both these stories have formal similarities with “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman,” in addition to their status as abridgements of other texts. All three stories are built around multiple sections which have their own subheadings. In the case of “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman,” these subheadings are Davis’s own. All three stories also recount compressed biographies, in the first person for “Extracts from a Life,” and in the third person for “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” and “Lord Royston’s Tour.” “Lord Royston’s Tour” is different from the other extract stories as it deals with only a short period of its subject’s life, but it resembles them in other respects. The compressed narrative with section titles is a form that Davis uses in some other stories, e.g., “Mrs. D. and Her Maids” (Davis, 2007, pp. 87-111) or “What You Learn About Baby” (Davis, 2007, pp. 115-124). The form allows the texts to have narrative development and, at the same time, be discontinuous. The section subheadings have a distancing effect as they are comments upon the narrative, but they also act like inter-titles in silent film, providing a summary and introducing the next scene.

Davis’s extract stories develop from her sense of the potential in the source texts. Talking to Larry McCaffery about “Extracts from a Life” and “Lord Royston’s Tour,” Davis noted that “both started with [her] reading something with pure delight and pleasure” (McCaffery, 1996, p. 74), and that she saw a potentiality in both, “this other text [that] seemed to be there *in potential*—there was something a great deal more interesting in [them] than what [she] was reading, the same language with a different shape and intention” (italics in the original, *ibid.*). The motivation for

the two other excerpt texts is not so different from the motivation for “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman,” which also stems from an interest in the “style and its possibilities” (Davis, 2000b, p. 27). Each text, then, works through a recontextualisation of the narrative elements: each one uses its source text as raw material and Davis sculpts her story from the block of the other text. In “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” there is a second process which is the translation of the source text into English, but the selection and editing is similar to that used for “Extracts from a Life” and “Lord Royston’s Tour.”

McCaffery suggested to Davis that the process of abridgement and selection in these stories “shares a lot with translation” (1996, p. 74). While Davis agreed, she also saw a difference: “it’s obviously more of a transformation. But it must be related” (*ibid.*). Both processes entail reworking a source text into a target text which is distinct from its source but bears traces of its origin. There is a recontextualisation of the material, leading to a change in meaning, although how this change is effected is different between translation and abridgement: translation recontextualizes the whole text into a different cultural and linguistic context, while abridgement takes the material out of its original context and places into a new, reduced context without changing the language. The products of both processes can thus be read doubly: (1) as independent texts, without reference to their source texts or (2) as a reworked form of their source texts. It depends on readers’ previous knowledge of the texts in question. In the case of “Lord Royston’s Tour” and “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman,” only very erudite readers may know the original, as neither Pepys’s memoir nor Davis’s translation of *Une femme honorable* was reprinted.⁵ *Nurtured by love*, the source text for “Extracts from a Life,” was more popular, going through at least 18 printings, but may still be unknown to Davis’s readers. As such, these stories would be read in the context of Davis’s work. Translations in general, on the other hand, are more likely to be read in the context of the works by the writer of the source text:

5 Both only have records for their first editions in COPAC, a catalogue of British academic libraries’ holdings, which includes the holdings of the British Library, itself a copyright repository.

Davis's translation of *The Way by Swann's* (Proust, 2003 [2002]), for example, is more likely to be read in the context of Proust's work than as a piece of writing by Davis.

Translation in “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman”

Despite the possibility of reading the text as autonomous, as Davis's lack of paratexts in the book publications suggest, “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” can also be read in relation to a source text. In this section, I argue that it contains (mis) translations from Giroud's *Une femme honorable* (2006 [1986]) which connect it to its source, but at the same time this deliberate strategy of mistranslation makes it something other than a translation.

If an extract from “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” is read alongside to the corresponding text from *Une femme honorable*, the similarity between the two texts becomes quite clear:

Pierre Curie has come on stage in Marie's life at the precise moment at which it was suitable that he should appear.

The year 1894 has begun. Marie is assured of obtaining her license in July. She is beginning to look beyond, she is more available, and the spring is beautiful. Pierre is already captive to this singular blonde person. (Davis, 2001, p. 103)

Pierre Curie est entré en scène dans l'existence de Marie au moment précis où il convenait qu'il apparût.

L'année 1894 est entamée. Marie est assurée d'obtenir sa licence en juillet. Elle commence à regarder au-delà, elle est plus disponible, et le printemps est beau. (Giroud, 2006 [1981], p. 64)

Pierre Curie est déjà captif de cette singulière petite personne blonde. (Giroud, 2006 [1981], p. 66)

Davis's text appears to be an almost word-for-word translation of the French. Davis does make minor adjustments, such as translating “existence” as “life” (rather than its cognate term) and moving adjectives before nouns. There are, however, elements in the English which are markedly unidiomatic or non-standard.

Davis retains the perfect tense of the first sentence, although in standard English this would probably be rendered as a past simple, referring as it does to an event in the distant past. The French text uses the present perfect tense to imitate speech (as spoken French avoids the *passé simple*) in an attempt to make the register less formal. Conversely, the present perfect tense in English makes the text seem awkward and unidiomatic as it is incorrectly used. Davis also uses cognate words for French terms, which leads to phrases in the story being incomprehensible: Marie's license, for instance, is not a license but a bachelor's degree. The metaphor of Pierre being a captive seems less marked in French than in English, where the more common expression would be the phrase "captivated by," which appears 49 times in the British National Corpus (BNC), rather than the phrase "captive to," which only appears four times. The sense of these phrases is also different: "captivated by" suggests being deeply interested in something, whereas "captive to" suggests a relation that is much more negative.

Davis's story can also be seen to abridge the source text. In the above example, the sentence about Pierre Curie is found two pages later in the source text than the first part of the paragraph. Davis omitted much of the material, as the story is around 20 pages in length and the biography is around 360. Lawrence Venuti (1998, p. 64) notes that if a translation omits or alters a significant amount of material from the source text, it might not be legally regarded as a translation but rather as an adaptation or some other derivative work. As Davis's story is a heavily abridged version of Giroud's biography, it cannot legally be considered a translation. It is therefore another form of derivative writing, which one would expect to be accompanied by an acknowledgement of its source.

Davis's full translation of *Une femme honorable* fulfils the expectations of a professional translation much more than the story does. It does not abridge material in the same way. A reading of the text which corresponds to the above example also shows that Davis followed the norms of standard English usage:

Pierre Curie entered Marie's life at just the right time. The year 1894 was nearly half over. Marie was sure of receiving her degree in July. She was beginning to look ahead, she had more time on her hands, and the spring was beautiful. [...] Pierre Curie was already captivated by the unusual little blonde woman. (Giroud, 1986, pp. 48-49)

Davis translates using more colloquial and idiomatic expressions than she uses in her story. Rather than translating "licence" with its cognate "license," she uses the equivalent "degree." She avoids the marked expression "is captive to" by using the more idiomatic "captivated by." It is clear, then, that Davis's translation in "Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman" is doing something other than offering an appropriate English rendering of the text.

The prior existence of a full translation suggests a very different aim to the two texts. It could be argued that because "Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman" does not repeat the exact wording of either *Une femme honorable* or *Marie Curie: A Life* it is a new piece of writing. In copyright law, only the way a text is expressed can be copyrighted, not the ideas in the text (Goldstein, 2001, pp. 184-185). Siva Vaidhyanathan (2001, pp. 105-112) reports that a significant precedent for reading the difference between expression and ideas in copyright law is the case *Sheldon v. Metro-Goldwyn* (1934). Learned Hand, the judge in the Second Circuit Court of Appeals in New York, gave his opinion when the case was appealed (1936) that, when judging the similarity of two works, one must pay attention to the "very web of the author's expression" (cited in Vaidhyanathan, 2001, p. 109). This "web of expression" Hand clarified by suggesting different elements that combine to make up the work: "plot, character, means of revelation, setting, themes" (*ibid.*). In relation to these categories, Davis's story is in many ways significantly similar to Giroud's biography: it contains the same characters, the same plot, the same setting and the same themes. The main difference is the way in which Davis's story presents the material: it is compressed into a considerably shorter frame and it is written in a style which is marked by the fact that it is not idiomatic and even contains errors.

Davis's story "Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman" is not supposed to provide a full biography of Marie Curie in the same way as *Une femme honorable* and *Marie Curie: A Life* do. This difference in aim, intent and market clearly separates the two works. It could still be argued that Davis's story is derivative of Giroud's book, forming an adaptation or appropriation of it.

Parody and Translation

"Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman" is different from Davis's other two excerpt stories as it does not acknowledge a source text. Such an acknowledgement shows that the stories can legally be regarded as derivative. But why does this story not do so? If "Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman" was regarded as a parody, then, according to Paul Goldstein (2001, p. 300), it would be exempt from the usual requirements for authorisation. In this section, I want to argue that the story may legally be a parody, but in literary terms its status is less clear. It is first necessary to review what is meant by parody in the law and in literary theory.

Parody is one of the extensions of the fair-use rule that allows people to copy copyrighted works for certain purposes, such as personal study, scholarship or some educational uses. As Goldstein notes, "though nowhere expressly exonerated in the Berne text, [parody] is widely accepted across the Berne Union as a permitted use, presumably on the ground that it meets Article 9(2)'s standards" (2001, p. 300).⁶ Article 9(2) protects the idea of fair use:

It shall be a matter for legislation in the countries of the [Berne] Union to permit the reproduction of such works in certain special cases, provided that such reproduction does not conflict with a normal exploitation of the work and does not unreasonably prejudice the legitimate interests of the author. (Berne Convention, Paris Text 1971, Article 9(2))

The convention is vague here: it does not specify what these "certain special cases" might be and each individual country can interpret the phrase differently. In the UK, the Copyrights,

⁶ The Berne Convention is an agreement of international copyright law.

Designs and Patents Act 1988 explicitly states what the law understands as permitted uses of copyrighted material (Sections 28-76). US law also makes clear what is to be understood by “fair use” (17 US Code Section 107). Parody is not explicitly mentioned in either country’s law.

Goldstein suggests that all parodies *must* identify their source text:

In common law countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada, parody may be assimilated to the fair dealing exemption for the purpose of criticism so long as the parody meets the statutory requirement of sufficiently identifying the original work and its author. (2001, p. 301)

From a literary theoretical perspective, on the other hand, Linda Hutcheon argues that parodies *do not* normally announce their source text: “Like parodies, adaptations have an overt and defining relationship to prior texts, usually revealingly called ‘sources.’ *Unlike parodies*, however, adaptations normally announce this relationship” (my italics, 2006, p. 3). Parodies may still overtly suggest to the audience that there is a source text, even an identifiable one. For example, the film *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2004) parodies the earlier *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978), but does not announce its affiliation in another way than by the rhyme in the title: there is no explicit recognition of the earlier text as a source. Many European nations, according to Goldstein (2001, p. 300), allow parodies so long as they do not present a direct conflict with the original work’s sales or marketability, i.e. they “[do] not conflict with a normal exploitation of the work and [do] not unreasonably prejudice the legitimate interests of the author” in the words of the Berne Convention. As noted earlier, “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” is a very different work to Giroud’s *Une femme honorable*. It is therefore unlikely that the story would be confused with the biography and, consequently, would not affect its sales or reputation.

The law does not explicitly define parody as a concept, in a similar way to how it does not define translation. The landmark parody case in American law is *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc* (1994), where the U.S. Supreme Court offered the following rule-

of-thumb for deciding if a work is a parody: “whether a parodic character may reasonably be perceived” (cited in Goldstein, 2001, p. 301). In previous musical parody cases, according to Vaidhyathan (2001, pp. 146-147), courts decided whether or not a song was parodic by asking if it criticized or satirized the original song. Justice David Souter, the US Supreme court judge in the case of *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc.*, decided that Two Live Crew’s song did criticize Roy Orbison’s song (Vaidhyathan, 2001, pp. 146-148). Parody is therefore legally viewed as a form of criticism and can be accepted as form of fair use according to US law.

One of the defining characteristics of parody, then, is a critical distance from the source text. Indeed, parody is generally viewed as having “a humorous or satirical purpose” (Wales, 2001, p. 286) which would demonstrate a critical distance from the text parodied. Hutcheon criticizes the narrow range of intent normally accepted for parody in her *Theory of Parody* (1985, p. 5). Her definition offers a similar view to the legal reading of parody as a form of criticism: “Parody is [...] repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 6). This critical distance is common to the theorist’s and the jurors’ definitions. Without it, the parody is no longer a parody, but some other form of specific intertextual relationship, for example, plagiarism, adaptation or translation. Hutcheon elsewhere establishes a distinction between parody and adaptation by calling adaptation “repetition without replication” (2006, p. 7): “critical distance” is not implied by adaptation.

For Davis’s “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” to be a parody of *Une femme honorable* there should be some sort of criticism apparent of that text. In its magazine publication, a critical reading is facilitated by the introduction in the letters pages. In the book publications, however, the text appears as a narrative piece, without commentary or explication. Therefore there must be something within the text itself that encourages readers to interpret the text as a parody.

The translation in “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” suggests the parodic intent of the story, as it is hyperbolic. As

I discussed earlier, the text uses cognate words (so-called “false friends”) and non-standard syntax, emphasizing the influence on its structures from the source text (i.e., showing what Gideon Toury has termed “*negative transfer*” (italics in the original, 1995, p. 275)). The title itself, “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman,” already shows that there is a tendency in the text to use non-standard English. If it is compared with the title of Giroud’s biography, *Une femme honorable*, an element of distortion is already present: the *so* of “So Honorable Woman.” This *so* is not present in the title of the version published in *McSweeney’s*, “Translation Exercise #1: Marie Curie, Honorable Woman” (Davis, 2000a). The *so*, therefore, can be read as subtly announcing the parodic intent of the piece. As an intensifier, it pushes the text toward hyperbole, which is also what much of Davis’s translation strategies do in the story.

“Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” also becomes parody in its selection of material. Rather than fairly representing Giroud’s book, Davis selects only those bits which appear awkward or amusing to English language readers. Davis’s introduction supports this reading, as she remarks that she copied out “into awkward English the *more absurd* sequences or sentences” (my italics, Davis, 2000b, p. 27).⁷ The following example shows a moment of high pathos in the text, but the serious nature of the narrative events is undermined due to the way it mixes the trivial and the profound:

The body is removed to a police station. An officer picks up his telephone. But Pierre Curie no longer has ears to be annoyed that he belongs, in death as in life, to the number of those for whom one disturbs the Minister of the Interior. (Davis, 2001, p. 108)

The small details seem incongruous: why is it important that an officer picks up his telephone? Pierre’s humility is described here, but the expression “no longer has ears” is not common in English, as there is no record of it in the BNC, which contains a sampling

⁷ In conversation with Larry McCaffery, Davis also mentions writing down “an absurdly accurate translation of a sentence that was already sentimental and stupid” (McCaffery, 1996, p. 75).

of over 100 million words. The strangeness it represents derails the reader's concentration. There are two records in the BNC for "in death as in life," but it appears uncommon and possibly too formal for the context. The French text that this extract is based on shows that "in death as in life" is another example where Davis has translated in a hyperbolic manner:

Et il [le commissaire] prend son téléphone. Mais Pierre Curie n'a plus d'oreilles pour s'agacer d'appartenir, même dans la mort, au nombre de ceux pour qui l'on dérange le ministre de l'Intérieur. (Giroud, 2006 [1981], p. 181)

Here the expression is "même dans la mort," which could be translated as "even in death." There is, therefore, an element of caricature in the story. In addition to this, Davis has added the detail of Pierre's being moved to the police station: in the French text he is still lying dead in the street. The removal of any other context and the cumulative effect of so much "awkward English" forces readers to pay attention to the style, especially how it seems inappropriate, in English at least, to the narrative it is telling.

So it seems that "Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman" could be considered a parody in the legal sense: it demonstrates a critical distance to the source text and at the same time represents no threat to a "normal exploitation of the work and does not unreasonably prejudice the legitimate interests of the author" (Berne Convention, Paris Text 1971, Article 9(2)), as it in no way tries to compete with Giroud's text as an authoritative (if somewhat *sui generis*) biography of Marie Curie. This would account for the lack of acknowledgement in book form, as acknowledgement would not strictly be necessary. The text still uses translation as means of composition, but cannot strictly be considered a translation due to its abridged form and its tendency to exaggerate the interference from the source.

In artistic terms, the status of the text as a parody is less certain. Hutcheon stresses how parody relies on the reader's recognition of the parodic text as parodic, which entails their knowledge of the text being parodied:

When we speak of parody, we do not just mean two texts that interrelate in a certain way. We also imply an intention to parody another work [...] and both a recognition of that intent and our ability to find and interpret the backgrounded text in its relation to the parody. (1985, p. 22)

For Hutcheon, the reader should have access to the source text and be familiar with it to be capable of seeing how the parodic text is critically distanced from it. Davis's "Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman" is a parody of a biography in a different language which is nowhere referred to by name. For the reader to recognize it as a parody, they must find the French text and compare it with Davis's story. Monolingual English readers would not be able to complete this exercise and so for them "Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman" cannot be said to be a parody of Giroud's *Une femme honorable* in Hutcheon's sense.

Davis's Story as a Disruption

The status of Davis's story is problematic. It could legally be considered a parody, but it does not make clear its relationship with its little known source text. As such, it can be seen to produce a text that is double coded—both independent and referring to another text—but where the source side is barred. Readers only have access to the target text, unless they find out the provenance of the text and can read it in French.

A better description of Davis's story is an appropriation of Giroud's text. Appropriations, according to Julie Sanders, do not always explicitly acknowledge their sources (2006, p. 26). She argues that appropriations in literature often stem from a "political or ethical commitment" (*ibid.*, p. 2) on the part of their creator. Sanders can be read as suggesting that appropriations should be judged on their capacity to fulfil that commitment. This is similar to the ethics of translation Venuti has proposed. The foreignness of the source text, according to Venuti, "demands cultural innovation" (2011, p. 246). He argues that translations should be evaluated by asking how they "initiate an event" (*ibid.*, p. 240) in the target culture by challenging accepted ideas and proposing new forms. Venuti draws this ethics of translation from Alain Badiou's "ethics of truths" (2001, pp. 40-57), which

proposes an ethics based on fidelity to a disruption of the status quo (“an event” in Badiou’s terms). While I have reservations about this ethics, to criticize it in depth would go far beyond the scope of this article. However, it does offer the possibility of placing Davis’s story in an ethical framework. As such, it is worth considering how the text challenges accepted ideas and proposes new forms.

As I have already argued, the presentation of Davis’s story in its book publications as “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” draws attention away from the intertextual origin of the story to focus on the subject of Marie Curie’s life. However, readers cannot fail to notice the style of the text, which is marked as awkward and unidiomatic. Readers are therefore guided to question how style affects representation.

The story can be read as asking readers to reconsider the framework of what Andrew Chesterman has called, in relation to translation, an “ethics of representation” (2001, pp. 139-140). This approach suggests that translations should give a fair representation of their source texts. More widely, it suggests that texts should fairly represent their subjects, be they human or non-human. “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” shows how style affects representation: the story it tells is inseparable from the style in which it is told. Both Giroud and Davis present different interpretations of Marie Curie’s life story. “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” highlights how their representations of that life story always show evidence of their interpretations. The text demonstrates, in its very construction, that any representation is always a form of interpretation. In a similar way, as Hermans (2007, pp. 27-51) among others has shown, translations always contain traces of their translator’s interpretive choices. The reference to translation in the story’s title when it was published in *McSweeney’s* highlights its criticism of the idea of translation as a fair representation.

Davis’s own appropriation of Giroud’s text in “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” questions further this “ethics of representation.” The story does not fairly represent its source text, but it does intend to do so either. As a parody, it intends to

criticize the source text. It never hides that it is an interpretation and does not fulfil the criteria that are expected of translations, despite containing translations. The story does not follow an “ethics of representation.” Instead, it brings into question those very ethics.

Davis’s text is an appropriation of another text, but it criticizes not only that text but wider cultural assumptions, even about the form of the text itself. As I have demonstrated, Davis’s story questions the reader’s understanding and expectations in relation to (1) representation, (2) translation, (3) parody, (4) the use of intertextuality, (5) the correct use of the English language, among others. The story unsettles readers rather than comforts them, presenting a challenge to accepted ideas. It proposes a hybrid form that mixes translation, parody and abridgement. Its importance lies in the capacity it has for generating discussion and causing a rethinking of what is expected, not only of translation, but of texts in general.

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ABSTRACT: At the Borders Between Parody and Translation: Lydia Davis's Story about Marie Curie—Lydia Davis's story "Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman" poses a number of questions related to its status. It is presented as a story, but it is constructed from translations of extracts of Françoise Giroud's *Une femme honorable*, which Davis had previously translated as *Marie Curie: A Life*. This article analyses how the story questions the borders between translation and other forms of intertextual writing. First it analyses how the text was presented in its magazine publication in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* under the title "Translation Exercise #1: Marie Curie, Honorable Woman." It then discusses how Davis's use of abridgement in this story and other stories is similar to translation before analysing the translations in the story, which exaggerate the interference from the source language. Along with the choice of extracts, this translation strategy suggests that the story is a parody. It follows the legal and literary definitions of the parody because it exhibits a critical distance from its source text. But it is parody of a text which is not well

known in the target culture and so it is unlikely to be recognised as a parody by readers. As a text, “Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman” questions the relationship between translation and parody, but it also questions ideas about representation through its style and its relation to its source text.

RÉSUMÉ : Aux limites de la traduction et de la parodie : le récit de Lydia Davis au sujet de Marie Curie — Le récit de Lydia Davis, « Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman », soulève des questions au sujet de son statut. Bien qu'on le présente comme un récit, il se compose en fait de traductions d'extraits du livre *Une femme honorable* de Françoise Giroud, que Davis avait traduit antérieurement en anglais sous le titre *Marie Curie: A Life*. Cet article analyse comment le récit met en cause les limites entre la traduction et les autres formes d'écriture intertextuelle. Dans un premier temps, l'article analyse la présentation du texte dans le magazine *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, où il apparut sous le titre « Translation Exercise #1: Marie Curie, Honorable Woman ». Dans un second temps, nous voyons comment le processus de résumé utilisé par Davis dans ce récit entre autres est similaire à la traduction. Ensuite, l'article analyse la façon de traduire utilisée dans le récit : elle exagère les traces des structures de la langue d'origine. De même que le choix des extraits, ce mode de traduction suggère que le récit est une parodie. Selon les définitions officielles et littéraires, la parodie doit garder une certaine distance par rapport au texte d'origine, ce que fait le récit de Davis. Mais il parodie un texte qui est mal connu dans la culture cible, donc il est peu probable que les lecteurs anglophones lisent le récit comme une parodie. En soi, le texte « Marie Curie, So Honorable Woman » remet en cause les relations entre la traduction et la parodie, mais de par son style et sa relation avec son texte d'origine, il remet aussi en question l'idée de la représentation.

Keywords: Lydia Davis, author-translators, parody, limits of translation, paratexts

Mots-clés : Lydia Davis, écrivains-traducteurs, parodie, limites de la traduction, paratextes

Jonathan Evans

School of Languages and Area Studies

University of Portsmouth

Park Building

King Henry I Street

Portsmouth, PO1 2DZ, UK

jonathan.evans@port.ac.uk