Breasts are Best? Translation and the Ovidian Female Body

In *Gender in Translation*, Sherry Simon asks, "What…are the processes through which translation maintains and activates gender constructs?" One salient means by which English-language translators of Ovidian poetry have achieved this is through language that demarcates and sexualizes the female body. Indeed, this goes beyond the objectifying language that Ovid himself employs to describe female bodies, particularly in scenes that activate the reader's male gaze by breaking down the female body into its constituent parts. Because translation necessarily creates something new that reflects the culture of its own time period, it can shed light on modern constructions of the female body. Focusing on the rendering of *pectus* (and similar words) in major modern (1955-2014) English editions of Ovid that are widely read and taught, this paper considers how translators have injected—and continue to inject—a sexualized focus on the female breast into Ovidian poetry.

Whereas in English men have a "chest," women have a "breast," "bosom," or "breasts." The effect of this is that for women, chests (often thought of as the seat of one's identity) disappear altogether, conflated with those parts of the female body that have been routinely sexualized under the male gaze. To quote Iris Young, "In the total scheme of the objectification of women, breasts are the primary things." In Ovid's Latin, however, the chest/breasts binary is hardly felt. Both men and women simply have a *pectus*, "chest," and women may *additionally* have "breasts."

Yet translators routinely conflate "chest" with "breasts" in Ovid's poetry. In the story of Pygmalion in the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid presents the objectified woman *par excellence* in the form of Pygmalion's statue. Her *pectus* is first mentioned when the artist streams ribbons (*redimicula*, 265) down from it. While some translators here employ the English "breast," which

can also (though less frequently) denote the male *pectus*, many use highly gendered words such as "décolletage" (Lombardo), "bosom" (Humphries), and of course "breasts" (Gregory, Raeburn). Others transform the ribbons into a "corset" (Alison) or a "lacy brassier" (Martin). Later, when Pygmalion animates the statue by "touching her chest" (*pectora temptat*, 282), translators describe how he "touched her breasts" (Mandelbaum), "stroke[ed] her breasts" (Raeburn), "touch[ed] a breast" (Alison), "touched her breasts and cupped them in his hands" (Gregory), and "excit[ed] her breasts with both hands" (Martin). Ovid may *imply* breasts here, but translators often make this explicit, producing a scene in which a woman's first sentient experience is unambiguously one of being sexually fondled without her consent.

In the Daphne story, we also see the introduction of "breasts," particularly in the transformation scene when the bark encircles her *praecordia*. Although this word can mean "chest" (*OLD* s.v. 2), it more likely indicates her "trunk" or "torso" (s.v. 1). Yet here too translators often equate *praecordia* with her "bosom" (Raeburn, Melville) or "breasts" (Humphries, Alison). In each of these episodes, the conflation of "chest" with "breasts" amplifies the scene's sexual content in ways that resonate with the epic's larger themes of objectification and rape. It is not always clear, however, whether such translations offer implied commentary on these themes or, by creating something that strikes modern ears as sexually titillating, become complicit in them.

Ovid does in fact think of the "chest" and "breasts" as discrete parts of a woman's body. In *Amores* 1.5, Ovid praises Corinna's various body parts, including her *papillae* and *pectus*. As parallels with passages from Ovid's *Remedia Amoris* and Martial show, the word *papillae* here certainly indicates her "breasts" and *pectus* her "chest." Translators, however, tend either to equate the two (Melville, Alison); omit her *pectus* as superfluous (Slavitt); or render *pectus* here

as “bosom” or “breasts” and *papillae* as “nipples” (Lee, Green, Bishop). Yet rendering the body parts accurately (as in, e.g., Hejduk) better reflects how Ovid plays with movement, shape, and texture when describing Corinna’s body.

The paper exhorts translators to interrogate critically his or her own “male gaze” for two key purposes: a) to more faithfully render the Latin being translated and b) to better reflect our changing understanding of gender and women’s bodies, through which the rigorous gender categories that the English language imprints (often unwelcomely) on the body are being questioned and destabilized. This latter goal does more than merely compel the translator to conform to an activist agenda. It better recognizes how Ovid himself (particularly in the *Metamorphoses*) often blurs rigid gender lines, and it helps readers see more accurately how Ovid’s gender constructions differ from our own.

## Bibliography

Simon, S. 2003. *Gender in Translation*. Routledge.

Young, I.M. 2005. *On Female Body Experience*. Oxford.

Full bibliographical references for translations will be provided at the conference.