La Vocifère. Translating Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker*

Saraé Durest

Abstract: In Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker* (1994), reality and supernaturality crash into one another on the stage as well as in the characters' language. As such, the play presents a riveting challenge for both translation and analysis. My research approached these two fronts by proposing a full translation of the play together with a commentary, and I became interested in the way in which the translation process and the hermeneutic process fuelled each other. The following essay sums up my findings, from thematic contents to dramaturgy, as I worked my way through these questions: what does the playwright mean? Is meaning more important than what words, rhythms, sounds are used to convey it? If not, how does all this carry over in translation, especially when confronted with the eponymous character's shape-shifting, elusive language? The goal was also to produce a translation that carried the potential for a stage production. The translation strategy was built accordingly, into a method that prioritises rhythm and sound over meaning in order to engage the audience's feelings rather than their rational understanding.

Résumé : Dans *The Skriker* (titre traduit : *La Vocifère*) de Caryl Churchill (1994), le réel et le surnaturel s'entrechoquent sur la scène autant que dans le langage des personnages. En ce sens, la pièce constitue un défi passionnant, à la fois de traduction et d'analyse. Ma recherche aborde ces deux aspects en proposant une traduction intégrale de la pièce complétée par un commentaire. La manière dont le processus de traduction et le processus herméneutique s'alimentent mutuellement a attiré mon attention. Le présent article résume le résultat de ces recherches, depuis les horizons thématiques jusqu'à la dramaturgie, animées par une volonté de répondre aux questions : que veut dire la dramaturge ? Le sens est-il plus important que les mots, rythmes et sons employés pour l'exprimer ? Dans le cas contraire, comment tout cela est-il pris en charge par la traduction, en particulier face au parler sonnant et trébuchant du personnage éponyme ? L'objectif était

également de produire une traduction qui contienne les germes d'une production scénique. J'ai construit mon projet de traduction en ce sens, en plaçant la priorité sur le rythme et les sons plutôt que sur le sens, de manière à interpeler la sensibilité des spectateurs plutôt que leur compréhension rationnelle.

Keywords: Churchill, Skriker, translation, logorrhoea, alterity, folkore, aesthetics, orality, musicality, formal constraint, dramaturgy

Mots-clés : Churchill, Vocifère, traduction, logorrhée, altérité, folklore, esthétique, oralité, musicalité, contrainte formelle, dramaturgie

Caryl Churchill's 1994 play *The Skriker* is a striking illustration of the playwright's taste for formal innovation and stylistic creativity through constraint. As such, it was immediately suggested to me by my tutor Pr. Elisabeth Angel-Perez when I presented my ambition to work on a play whose translation would represent a technical challenge. The following pages encapsulate the research that ensued and the findings that I developed in the resulting thesis, under the joint supervision of Pr. Angel-Perez and Pr. Florence Naugrette in a crossover between the departments of English Studies and Compared Literature at Sorbonne Université.

My goals were to produce both a translation and a literary analysis of the play, with a mind to show how each of those processes fuels the other. The hermeneutic qualities of the act of translation thus came to be at the core of the analytical part of the research, particularly the modes of translation specific to drama. The translation process itself led to reflections on the nature of theatrical writing, on the role of the subconscious in the author's process as well as the translator's. By dealing with language, the research went after something outside language in Caryl Churchill's process. The prism of translation served to parse the light spectrum of *The Skriker*, aiming at an analysis of its aesthetics and dramaturgy.

The Skriker is dominated by rhythm. As the eponymous character deliquesces into apparently whimsical logorrhoea, she (or it) lets the audience hear of decay through strings of words missing more and more syllables into oblivion, of fear and anger through staccato outbursts of roaring consonants, of raging despair through heart-wrenching accelerandos, of childhood and monsters through strange names and rags of nursery rhymes peeking up from the subconscious abyss like bubbles in a boiling cauldron. In contrast, the other two main characters, women in their late teens, speak a modern, natural, conversational language that struggles to keep up with the effects of magic on reality. The play is brimming with contrast to the point of contradiction, with politics and poetry, with magic and rationality. It deals with modernity through folklore and with individual identity through the collective consciousness of what defines alterity. Translation was a constraint used as a point of entry into this epic piece of drama.

My early findings pulled the focus more and more toward the intrinsic relationship between translation and interpretation, and the structure of the research arose accordingly: the discussion of the play's main themes was comprised in the preliminary first part, followed by the complete translation. The interpretative third part was dedicated to the reflections that the translation process itself had allowed, as well as my attempts at defining how translating the text affected analysing it.

I would like to start by giving a few samples of the text in my translation, to serve as a basis and an illustration of the translation strategy that I discuss further below. If possible, these should be read together with the corresponding passage in the original text. The excerpts will be referred to in Roman numerals, followed by the line number from the French version in Arabic numerals.

EXCERPT I. This is the opening of the play, the first paragraph of a monologue about five times as long in total. A bravura piece for the performer, this liminal monologue is an immediate deep dive into the Skriker's splashy and slippery manner of speaking.

> Read it in the original English: Churchill 2015: 9

VOCIFÈRE. J'ouïs la fille rire braire se frire un piffreur d'armes, elle savait filer filon filer droit parfait impec' la plus vulgaire paille de blé en or, de clé en mors, venaison dorée et venise au fond des eaux, donjons au fond du château des cailloux fous ge-nous et vous non plus. N'épouse jamais un royal de luxe bien-aimé. Brèche brise-reins brûle-doigts bruissement bruissement bravo va-t'en tu n'avances pas. Pleure plisse plante son joli gâteau à la crème soufflé trou dans le cœur à cœur ouvert. Voit une petite chosette sale noirôdeuse avec une longue longue queue ne sait quand reviendra. Au secours, s'écrie-t-elle, osse-laide-mande mon aide. Donc je file les fuseaux fusils fusions en or en aura en dorure et si elle ne peut pas devinette et fond du trouver mon nom alors je l'emporterai sans faute sans frauder sans frotter sans faux s'en fout s'en fut sans. Est-ce William Gwylliam Guillaume ? Est-ce Pierre Paul Jacadi a dit est-ce Jean-Blague ? Est-ce Alexandre Sandro André de Draguignan ? Méphistophélès Christophe Cristobal Cymbale Chérubin Bain-moussant ? C'est pas ça, je dis, c'est passage clou-t'es libre ce soir fais voir ce que tu sais faire. Puis pointant du doigt elle dit Tracassin ! Tratra petit ca joli sein sein ! De ses levrettes chevillettes rosettes, de sa bouche d'égout, de là sortit ma sécrétion nectar fleur de ma jeune et belle et la bête de trou trou troie n'aura pas lieutenant colonel gaz moutarde. Glapisse ! rapetisse ! repoussé à un réduit, raide, rassis, risque un somme suave salve dans le noir pour me sauver pêle-mêle, un gronde un fronde un monde plus loin.

EXCERPT II. This dialogue is taken from the second scene of the play, in which we first encounter the two human protagonists, Lily and Josie. It goes to show both the more naturalistic language used in the play, as well as how that everyday language tries to work around the supernatural.

> Churchill 2015: 16

JOSIE. Je croyais que c'était une patiente parce que si tu les voyais tu comprendrais ce que je veux dire, il y en a j'ai l'air de rien à côté. On dirait que je suis pire parce que j'ai fait quelque chose mais il y en a qui croient qu'ils sont quelqu'un d'autre et moi je sais… Qu'est-ce que je disais ?

LILY. Tu croyais que quelqu'un était / une patiente.

JOSIE. Oui mais elle a des centaines d'années. Et puis j'étais impressionnée par la magie mais maintenant je crois qu'elle a quelque chose qui ne tourne pas rond.

LILY. Quand tu dis des centaines d'années, tu veux dire genre quatre-vingts ans ?

JOSIE. Elle a l'air d'avoir la cinquantaine mais elle a je sais pas peut-être cinq cents ans ou un million d'années, je ne sais pas l'âge de ces trucs-là.

LILY. Quand tu dis magie ?

JOSIE. J'ai pensé que peut-être elle pourrait rentrer avec toi.

LILY. Josie, tu seras bientôt sortie. Il vaut mieux attendre qu'ils t'autorisent.

JOSIE. Elle voudrait me faire souhaiter que le bébé revienne mais je ne le ferai pas parce qu'elle rendrait ça horrible.

EXCERPT III. Josie has now been taken to the underworld by the Skriker. In this passage, rational language and fairy tongue come together with a bang as the Skriker, in a still mostly intelligible speech, starts leaning again towards her idiosyncratic mode of expression.

> Churchill 2015: 36

VOCIFÈRE. À la tienne, Josie, mariée ou pendue.

JOSIE. Je n'ai pas soif.

VOCIFÈRE. Soif qui fouette, gosier séché sec comme du sablier.

JOSIE. Oui, mais je ne…

VOCIFÈRE. Tournis torcha fraîchi faudra.

JOSIE. Oui mais je ne veux pas…

VOCIFÈRE. Ne veux-tu pas te sentir réchauffement et heureuse pour toujours ? Réchauffe les caquets de ton écœuré. Te rendre bravoure et bavure. Regarde le multicoloré, respire la savoureuse. Tu boiras bien une trinquette avec moi, Josie, après tout ce qu'on s'est fait prendre ?

EXCERPT IV. A sample of stage directions. Even though none will be uttered on stage in a full-blown stage production, being true to the technical language of the author is key to giving directors tools to understand the author's intentions – and how to navigate them, be it to follow or transgress them. In the case of *The Skriker*, much depended on the translation of the silent folkloric creatures' names to echo from one culture to another.

> Churchill 2015: 46

De nombreux couples en train de danser. Parmi eux, le KELPIE et la FEMME, la DAME VERTE et l'HOMME AU SEAU, qui est faible, l'ELFE DOMESTIQUE, la VOCIFÈRE en homme, CROC-EN-SANGLANT-OS-CRAQUANT, le MOLOSSE NOIR, JOHNNY PIEDS-AU-CARRÉ, MIMI LONGBRAS. Il y a une grosse chaussure et, lorsqu'ils ont fini de danser, ils y grimpent. Elle est identique à la chaussure de LILY qu'elle a jetée d'un coup de pied. Elle est assise sur le canapé avec un HOMME d'environ trente ans. C'est la VOCIFÈRE. JOSIE coupe des légumes. Le BÉBÉ est dans un couffin.

The politics of *The Skriker*

The political element resonates through the play and through its eponymous creature itself, in a mostly pessimistic underlying perspective. Politics here are what rules, what unites, what concerns all, but also what divides and excludes. *The Skriker* says something of the relation to otherness, materialised by the paradoxically super-natural forces of nature that have become both a victim and an executioner of the human characters, but also of interpersonal relationships.

The main character's talent for narcissistic manipulation tells a tale of perverted relationships between humans, with one and all attempting to use the others as a means to an end. Human presence is regarded as a self-destructive force by the Skriker herself. Such an invasive degradation tampers with all the layers of dramatic and fictional space. Everything is dislocated: time is elliptic and possibly non-linear; space is pervaded by human and supernatural behaviours alike; language and human interactions are manipulated as weaknesses by the Skriker.

The overarching notion of dislocation crosses over from the thematic to the stylistic as it pervades language itself. Because Caryl Churchill focuses on formal creativity, her words do not simply express their point – they are the point. In *The Skriker*, the truth value of language is put into question as several truth systems collide. In the Skriker's logorrhoea, Churchill develops a ludic yet menacing

use of lapsus (see I, and III, 1, 9-10), pointing towards an unsettling form of predestination: the ancient fairy tells the whole story from the very beginning, converting the whole play into a mere iteration of an endless cycle, whose insignificance is counterbalanced only from our point of view, because we happen to be witnessing it. All engage in the war of each against all and in the self-centred quest for supposedly universal happiness. All fail. All die. Generation after generation (four of them in *The Skriker*), individual after individual, the cycle goes on. The Skriker's language is bursting with an infinity of those iterations. As she imposes the treacherous gift of wishes come true upon the human characters, once again the boundaries of reality and those of language break apart. Language, relationships, truth and even reality corrode into a damaged system that barely holds together.[1]

Amidst the failing relationships symbolically depicted in the play emerges a focus on the feminine and feminist voice. The Skriker's feminine incarnations reveal broken forms of femininity falling victim to the pressure of social constructs. They are mere puppets created by and for another. The two human characters, Lily and Josie, appear violently real in comparison to the fabricated, impressionistic characters invented by the Skriker. The empathic focus in the play, the two young women left to their own devices facing the challenges of womanhood and maternity appear incapable to express tenderness or love. Lily and Josie's seemingly unconditional love, clues of which transpire in their all-forgiving behaviour towards each other, is never explicitly stated. But it is our contention that the audience, as they perceive a silent and gauche desire to express tenderness, is all the more emotionally involved since the characters fail at expressing their own emotional engagement. Lily can barely formulate her willingness to sacrifice herself in an ultimate act of love at the end of the play. Lily and Josie's failure is that of tragic characters falling victim to destiny, both strengthened and doomed by their flaw, each a different form of clumsy love. Through that prism of tragedy, the Skriker becomes an incarnation of fatality, beyond the notions of good and evil, radically outside all human value systems, playing with good and bad intentions alike.

The Skriker engages the audience in a reflection on their own intrinsically lonely experience of the world. The political and metaphysical reflections brought on by the play are not brought on so explicitly, and that is what makes them effective. Each audience member converts their own reception of the play into something personal and hence particularly relevant to their own experience. In the words of R. Darren Gobert: "[The play] works expressionistically, to be sure, giving form as it does to whatever unconscious drives or murky forces of history or ideology. But part of what it expresses must always elude understanding for its visceral impact to register" (30). Caryl Churchill herself had already confirmed that strategy, stating that "Playwrights don't give answers, they ask questions" (Churchill 1960: 446).

Folklore in *The Skriker*

The study of Caryl Churchill's choice of characters shows an emphasis on the grotesque quality of folkloric aesthetics on the one hand and on figures materialising danger and death, embodied mirrors of primary fears, on the other hand. The tension between the grotesque, provoking incredulity and even amusement, and horror, provoking involuntary adhesion, creates a contact point with buried individual interiority. The audience is made to face their own belief system. The Skriker thus becomes the otherness that opens the door to the self through its own weaknesses.

Many of the "spirits" assembled by Churchill are bogeys: supernatural embodiments of childhood fears but also of parents' fears regarding their children (see characters named in IV). The folkloric imagery is in broad terms a representation of the obscure menace that a person identifies with what is unknown to them in the world. The supernatural explains away the unintelligible, helps them cope with the unacceptable. Churchill's discordant crowd of creatures epitomises the presence of something other to which everyone reacts in accordance with their individual history. The playwright's final choice of staging these characters exclusively through dance and music plays a crucial part in the eerie atmosphere of the play. Devoid of

traditional dramaturgical stakes, the supernatural characters become non-persons just as they are given bodies on stage. They become pure presence, and thus a canvas ready to reflect the unsettled audience's memories and fears. They seamlessly take over from individual mental representations.

The tension between the common ground that is folklore and each individual's personal take on these folkloric roots is particularly valuable to the playwright as it builds reception at both a collective and a personal level. The responsibility for this collective and personalised imagery is passed on to the translator. I chose to convert the original reference system into the French "langue-culture" (Meschonnic 50) in order to awaken similar associative effects in the French audience by drawing from familiar folklore and culture.

Hermeneutics and translation strategy

The translation process enriches the translator's understanding of the text as much as it requires an understanding. Confronted to the Skriker's associative language, the translator must create a new frame for meaning, which necessarily reflects their subjectivity but whose effectiveness relies on the translator's receptiveness to the author's and the audience's subjectivities. Translating a piece of drama also implies putting the text on a mental stage and hearing it rendered by imaginary actors. The hermeneutic process thence is sharpened by the necessity for the translator to multiply their interpretative stances.

As a result, I had to angle the French text towards its eventual transmission to an audience. This transmission is about enabling the spectator to create their own meaning rather than offering up ready-made rational meaning. The translation had to tend towards Rancière's emancipation of the spectator. My translation strategy leaned towards having the text heard rather than understood, aiming at an aesthetic rather than intellectual reception. This priority on sound over meaning sprang from the analysis of the original text as much as it helped deepen that analysis.

In the more naturalistic dialogues (see II), that same sense of an aural and ephemeral quality of the text led me to favour what Antoine Vitez calls "le mouvement du sens": not the semantics of words, but what guides and encompasses them, what pulls them towards an interstitial place of meaning.[2]

In order to acquire a conversational quality in the naturalistic dialogues, a certain amount of distancing from the original text was necessary. Marks of orality, of hesitant epanorthosis, of interruption create a rhythm that is far from random. The translation had to attain the same degree of precision but also of confusion to sound as natural as the original. In that regard, I systematically put my translation to the test of orality, saying the sentences aloud as I went on, and then having actresses read the text out loud as well. The creation of a performance-reading of the play at the end of the academic year was the ultimate realisation of that journey towards the achievement of orality.

A problem that arose in the naturalistic passages was the incursion of the supernatural in language. How can grammar rule over what breaks the rules of reality? Syntax suffers particularly around the verb *wish*, the pillar of the Skriker's magic reality (see II, 14-15). English is more amenable than French to such distortions, and the resulting French versions sound considerably more circumvoluted than the original. At least these somewhat awkward formulations highlight Caryl Churchill's attention to the limits of what language can express, particularly when it comes to experiencing the unknown.

The Skriker's speeches, spilling over on all sides, set the focus on rhythm and poetry against semantics (see I). The spirits' singing subordinates language to music: words become mere evocations, bundles of sounds to be interpreted freely. I proposed a systematic nomenclature of the associative sound and meaning effects, based on the musicological repertory of nonchord tones. This allowed for a precise analysis of concordance between original and translated effects, and went to show that, stylistically, nothing is left to chance in the character's seemingly random logorrhoea. Some *sensation* of randomness, however, had to be retained. As Julie Vatain puts it, referring to the

interpretative work of the actor rather than the translator here, "dire ce texte ne saurait correspondre à l'expliquer" (75). Translation and analysis function in conjunction, but the latter cannot show through the former in the end.

In order to translate the Skriker's glossolalic lines (see I), I started by reading every passage many times out loud, in order to grow accustomed to the sounds and rhythms that transpired. Only as a second step did I go on to look for meaning in the text. Once I interpreted the overarching meaning of a given passage, I started translating, prioritising rhythm and sound, but as a means of expressing the idea, the tale, the atmosphere or the emotion behind the text. I was keen to let my mind ramble freely on some passages, in semi-automatic writing, guided only by my cultivated familiarity with the rhythm and sounds of the original text. Some lines were therefore translated very quickly in that manner, embracing the sensation of creative overboil that the playwright might have felt during the original process.

Building the aesthetics of *The Skriker*

Caryl Churchill creates a form that essentially materialises the themes that she wants to touch upon. In *The Skriker*, meaning is to be grasped emotionally, in a deeper, more intense, less controllable manner than that of analytical understanding. The playwright is possibly borrowing from the surrealists and letting the work escape her grasp. This schizophrenic stylistics blurs the boundaries of self and other. The Skriker's glossolalic lines conjure the fear of demonic possession, materialising the fear of radical alterity within the self.

Language escapes the speaker and becomes something other. On the political level, that other language is possibly that which is free from domination: there is language outside, there is femininity outside of the patriarchal system of representation carved into the language of domination. Cloistered for too long, the runaway language rips at the seams of the dominant language and its syntax (see I, 4 and 13-15 for symbolical references to patriarchal femininity). In an optimistic light, that resurgence of the self opens a common ground between

newfound self and other, towards a malleable horizon of renewed intersubjectivity.

The Skriker is not producing logos: her point is not what she has to say but the fact that she is speaking. She is saying "listen to *me*", listen to what I am. Her choice of starting the play with the story of Tom Tit-Tot, on whose secret name the whole tale depends, is revelatory of a language that syncretises a search for the truth of identity (see I). With such a goal in mind, how could she not burst into an infinity of words? Caryl Churchill crafted a formal constraint that obscures rational meaning, accumulating linguistic signs in order to let something outside language be heard. As rationality loses its footing, emotion and cognition take over. Caryl Churchill gives the best key to understanding this hybridisation poetics and aesthetics, by writing about opera: "When I'm listening to sung words I like taking their meaning in without any effort, and I'm also happy to hear them just as sound" (2008, author's note to *Hotel*). In that sense, *The Skriker* is an opera, a stage beyond rational language.

Dramaturgic horizons

The final part of my research revolved around staging *The Skriker* and the dramaturgy that could be built towards achieving a convincing production. I argued that the challenge of turning the text into visual poetry was best tackled by projecting the creative team's successive subjectivities on top of the author's (and of the translator's), rather than proposing a minimalist, symbolist staging open to the audience's projections. Caryl Churchill was careful to name all the silent creatures haunting the stage, with nothing but their appearance to speak for them since they are never mentioned in the spoken lines. This bestiary calls for an exploitation of folklore on the director's part, including the latter's own subjective experience of the imagery, thus mixing together collective and deeply personal imagination.

In order to best complement this argument, I put together an appended glossary of all folkloric creatures mentioned by Churchill,

including comments on my translation of the names (and thus how those reflected my own subjectivity).

My translation of the stage directions (see IV) also aimed at representing Caryl Churchill's technical language as much as her aesthetics in the text. Neither nuance nor vagueness were converted into more straightforward technical indications, so that the highest possible number of clues left by the playwright as to her dramaturgic aesthetics might carry over into the French version. Hence, for instance, her constant use of the verb *go* instead of *exit* was rendered by *s'en aller* instead of the conventional *sortir*.

My final proposal was that *The Skriker* invites a dramaturgic aesthetics similar to fireworks, involving an ensemble of fragmented units in such rapid succession that it creates a glare of bedazzling continuity.

WORKS CITED

Primary Sources:

CHURCHILL, Caryl. *The Skriker*. Londres, Nick Hern Books, [1994], 2015.

Secondary Sources:

Actes des sixièmes Assises de la traduction littéraire (Arles 1989). *Traduire le théâtre*. Arles, Actes Sud, 1990. <www.atlas-citl.org/assises>
Antoine Vitez, le devoir de traduire. Collective. Arles, Actes Sud – Papiers, 2017.
ASTON, Elaine. *Caryl Churchill*. Plymouth, Northcote House, 1997.
CHURCHILL, Caryl. "Not Ordinary, Not Safe: A Direction for Drama?" *The Twentieth Century,* n° 168, Nov. 1960, pp. 443-451.
—. *Plays: Four*. Coll. NHB Modern Plays. Londres, Nick Hern, 2008. [*Hotel*, *This is a Chair*, *Blue Heart*, *Far Away*, *A Number*, *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?*, *A Dream Play*]

GOBERT, Robert Darren. *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill*. Londres, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014.
MESCHONNIC, Henri. « Propositions pour une poétique de la traduction. » *Langages* 28 (« La traduction »), 1972: 49-54. <persee.fr/issue/lgge_0458-726x_1972_num_7_28>
PERRAULT, Katherine. "Beyond the Patriarchy: Feminism and the Chaos of Creativity." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, vol. 17, n°1, 2002, pp. 45-67.
RANCIERE, Jacques. *Le Spectateur émancipé*. Paris, La Fabrique, 2008.
SIMPSON, Jacqueline and Steve Roud (ed). *Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore*. Oxford, OUP, [1998, 2000], 2017.
VATAIN, Julie. *Traduire la lettre vive. Duos anglais sur la scène française*. Coll. Dramaturgies. Bruxelles, P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2012.

The full text of my translation is available from the catalogue of unpublished manuscripts at L'Arche Éditeur.

---

1 On damage in *The Skriker*, see Aston 97 *sq*.

2 See Vitez 31 (italics in original): "[…] ce qui compte dans le phénomène de la traduction – et du spectacle, et de tout ce qui se fait dans le temps, tout ce qui court –, c'est la hiérarchie des signes. Je suis toujours scrupuleux quant au sens littéral, mais il faut aussi tout le temps se poser la question du « si » magique de Stanislavski : *qu'aurais-je dit, qu'aurais-je fait, si… ?* Je parle là du traducteur des dialogues de théâtre, de dialogues rapides."