The Translation of Proper Names

in Measure for Measure

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The past three decades have witnessed an exceptional development in translation studies. Very few authors, however, deal with the practical issues of translation work proper, and prefer to discuss more abstract theoretical issues such as literal or communicative approaches, foreignising or domesticating solutions, conservative or post-colonial translation. Even books that claim to help translation students or practising translators lack that practical component with concrete examples that the translator might use as support on the frequent occasions when doubts assail him. The exception among the publications I know is Peter Newmark’s work, especially his 1981 *Approaches to Translation*, where he does not obfuscate, but presents the reader with a number of relatively simple rules of thumb that can be applied to practical work.¹ Some such rules refer to the translation of proper names, be they anthropic, geographical, historical, or institutional. I have found these particularly helpful for my translation of Measure for Measure.

Before I turn to the translation of Measure for Measure in greater detail, let me make a few observations on the nature of proper names and the role they play in normal communication. According to Manini – and his opinion cannot be easily contradicted – proper names are not normally ruled by morphological rules. Since their task

is to identify, they have no synonyms. Also, they “do not convey any descriptive content or connotations and do not specify any physical or personal traits of the person referred to, which makes it possible for totally different people to have the same name.”

2 Asked if these principles fully apply to proper names in literary works, the answer would be “yes” and “no.” It is “yes” because in numberless cases the writer gives his characters their names by choosing them from the list of names available in his language or in any other he knows. Apparently the chosen name is neutral, merely conventional, as happens when we take a novel like D. H. Lawrence’s *Love Among the Haystacks*, whose characters may be called Geoffrey, Maurice, Nellie, or Banford; or a play like Arthur Miller’s *A View From the Bridge*, where we are introduced to Mike, Louis, Catherine, Alfieri, and Marco. At this point, however, one may ask whether the writer’s choice is really so free from any influence, if he was not conditioned by any preferences, by personal taste, or even by having known people with the names he uses in his writing and associating them positively or negatively with the characters he creates. The answer is “no” when authors clearly choose what Theo Hermans calls “loaded names.”

3 In this case the purpose of the names is not merely to identify people but to characterize and connote them.

With regard to proper names, Newmark in his *Approaches to Translation*, writes:

> The principle stands that unless a [...] person’s name already has an accepted translation it should not be translated but must be adhered to. (70; italics added)

The opaque word here is “accepted.” It is difficult to determine exactly what it means. Does the author simply refer to existing trans-

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3 Cited by Manini, “Meaningful Literary Names,” 163.