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The Power of Translation

Many years ago, when I was deciding which language to take in Middle School, I was told that French is the language of love. I have always been a hopeless romantic, for better or for worse, so after hearing this, my fascination with the French language began. If French is the language of love, then surely, I must speak it! Since then, my fascination has turned into a deep appreciation for not just the French language, but world languages in general.

When I was informed that the Jane Austen Collection at Goucher College had a variety of translations of Austen’s works, I was beyond excited. During my time at Goucher, I spent so much time with the translated works that I almost did not look at the first editions! While I did look at books in other languages, I, of course, spent the most time with the French versions of Austen’s works. One translation is *Le Cœur et La Raison*, the French title for *Sense and Sensibility*. The book was translated by Jules Castier and was published in Switzerland in 1948. The title was the first thing one notices about the book. While “sense” translates to “raison”, “sensibility” translates to a similar sounding “sensibilité” in French. Why would the translator replace “sensibilité” with “cœur” (heart)? Not only this, but “heart” was put first before “reason” in the title. The second thing that I noticed about the book was the cover art. The cover displays (spoiler alert) the scene towards the end of the novel where Marianna falls down a hill, and Colonel Brandon comes to her rescue to carry her to safety. The story mainly revolves around Elinor and her thoughts, so why was Marianne and Colonel Brandon on the cover?

I, unfortunately, did not have the time to read this French translation of *Sense and Sensibility* cover to cover. However, to try and answer these questions I had about the translation, I turned the pages of the book to the scene where the love of the two sisters is most evident: the scene where (spoiler alert again) the secret engagement of Elinor’s love interest, Edward, is finally revealed. Marianne is shocked at how her sister could mask this pain for so long! One sentence in caught my attention that I do not remember in the English translation: “Marianne exprima, par un soupir, son appréhension identique; et Elinor avait le cœur meurtri de sympathie pour Edward, bravant les menaces de sa mère pour une femme qui était incapable de l’en récompenser” (299). The English translation: “Marianne expressed, with a sigh, her identical apprehension; and Elinor had a bruised heart with sympathy for Edward, braving the threats of his mother for a woman who was unable to reward him for it”. Throughout the novel, it is understood that Elinor represents reason and Marianna represents sensibility, or “heart” in the French translation. In this one line, Elinor and Marianne switch roles. Marianne, who now has the sense to understand Elinor and the situation at hand, and Elinor, who now feels her heart break for the man she loves.

Translators have a powerful and rather important role in literature. It is their responsibility to try and understand the meaning of the novel being translated and conveying it in the target language. It can be rather difficult sometimes as different languages have different words, different sentence structures, and different cultures. After reading that one line in *La Cœur et La Raison*, I had a completely different understanding of the novel than I did before. While Elinor is the heroine of the novel, it is Marianne’s love that inspires her to stay strong. It is her love for Edward that allows her to keep Lucy Steele’s secret. Love is the central theme of this novel! The translator, seeing this theme as the most important, emphasized this in their translation, so much so that they slightly altered the title of the novel altogether. The heart in this novel takes precedent over reason, even at the very end. After appreciating this translation of *Sense and Sensibility*, I can say for certain now that French is the language of love.