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# Productive paradoxes of a feminist translator: Carmen de Burgos and her translation of Möbius' treatise, *The Mental Inferiority of Woman* (Spain, 1904)

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## SYNOPSIS

In the early twentieth century, the controversial work of the German neurologist Paul Julius Möbius was published in Spain, *The Mental Inferiority of Woman*, translated it into Spanish by the feminist writer Carmen de Burgos. Despite the fact that this book was considered an important work of reference in the first three decades of the twentieth century by science historians, its translation by a feminist has been considered to be a paradoxical event. This article re-examines this paradox in the light of different primary sources that mention the translation: letters, press reviews, scientific articles or other texts which refer to Möbius' work by different authors of the time, including the translator herself. These different materials have allowed me to draw a slightly different interpretative map than the one accepted until now on this issue. Particular attention is paid to discussing the tension and pressure of the historical context which trapped the translator, both as a woman and as a feminist, within the paradigm of sexual complementarity that she defended.

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## Introduction: a controversial translation

"... My life is complex, I change constantly, so many times that it seems to me that I have lived in many different generations... and I have changed my ideas too... my thoughts... who knows!... I laugh at the idea of the unity of the "me", because I have many "mes" inside myself, men, women, children... the elderly... They would fight if I debated with any of them... but I let the strongest win, and each one do what s/he wants... all of them are good people!"<sup>1</sup> With this voluble self-portrait the Spanish feminist Carmen de Burgos defined herself, in 1909. Perhaps she was responding to the criticism that was leveled against her at that time; she was certainly as prolific a character and risky in her public life as controversial in her gestures and words for many people with whom she had to share the beginning of the Spanish twentieth century which was marked by important social transformations and public debates. This self-portrait may also appear to be a reply to the perplexity arising from recent research which has attempted to recover her historical figure from the silence

to which she was condemned during the dictatorship of Franco (1939–1975).

Carmen de Burgos (1867–1932) was not only a teacher but also a writer, journalist and translator. A research project about the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of women through medical discourse in the twentieth century led me to explore the context and the way in which a translation by Carmen de Burgos was published in 1904. It was the translation of the scientific work of the German neurologist Paul Julius Möbius (1900)<sup>2</sup>, *Über den physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes* [The physiological mental deficiency of woman], published in Germany which had great repercussion in medical discourse during the first third of the twentieth century in Europe. In Spain, Carmen de Burgos, was hired by the publisher to translate the book that appeared in 1904 with the title (including a subtitle) *La inferioridad mental de la mujer* (*La deficiencia mental fisiológica de la mujer*) [The Mental Inferiority of Woman (The Physiological Mental Deficiency of Woman)] (Möbius, 1904).<sup>3</sup>

The treatise of Dr. Möbius tried to demonstrate the biological inability of women to perform intellectual

activities. Scientific arguments, provided by burgeoning disciplines of the time such as craniology or phrenology, warned of the danger of social degeneration provoked by the emancipation demands made by women. Möbius' work is considered by science historians as a key element in the arguments developed by the medical discourses of the early twentieth century and its use in public and political debates that constantly took place around the question of the emancipation of women in Spain. In a country and at a time of economic, social and political transformation, the role that women *should* occupy was a constant concern in the political projects of conservatives, liberals or progressives. Moreover, the debate was stoked by the individual or collective action of many women around specific social demands that challenged and shook the status quo of the social order. Furthermore, the connections between scientific positivism, of growing importance at that time, and the progressives who saw in science a driving force for social progress that often turned scientific knowledge into the best ally of gender prejudices (see Aresti, 2001, 26–67). Möbius' book inspired a myriad of misogynist medical literature. As an example and because the title is indicative of how scientific arguments were used by misogynistic ideologies, I will mention the treatise of Dr. Roberto Novoa Santos, published in 1908: *La indigencia espiritual del sexo femenino (las pruebas anatómicas, fisiológicas y psicológicas de la pobreza mental. Su explicación biológica)* [The spiritual poverty of the female sex (anatomical, physiological and mental evidence of psychological poverty. Its biological explanation)]. Although Möbius' book had, at first, an impact in the Spanish scientific–medical sectors who were aware of the controversy that it had aroused in Germany,<sup>4</sup> its fame soon spread to a wide audience of men and women, without a doubt due to the publication of the translation by Carmen de Burgos which was instrumental in its notoriety, as it was published by Sempere, a publishing house which was prominent in the promotion and dissemination of secular European texts and in popularizing scientific works in a bid for progress, human emancipation and the fight against ignorance (Lluch-Prats, 2010).

The fact that the translation of the treatise of Möbius was performed by the great defender of women's rights, Carmen de Burgos, has often been considered paradoxical by scholars who have studied her life and work. The questions raised in the translation, by a feminist woman, of a work deeply offensive to women have caused great perplexity. Numerous studies have shown difficulty in interpreting this fact and Carmen de Burgos' translation of Möbius' work still baffles many researchers. For example, Catherine Davies is surprised by the inclusion of this translation among the numerous translations by Carmen de Burgos (Davies, 2000, 123). In a book on feminism of the 1920s, one of the authors, when referring to Möbius' book – which is an essential reference for the matter of feminism in Spain at the beginning of the twentieth century – also expressed his surprise: “For reasons that I do not understand, it was translated into Spanish by [Carmen de Burgos] one of the first feminists in our country” (Marina & Rodríguez de Castro, 2009, 25). The historian Carmen Simón Palmer (2010), at the end of her study also highlights this as a thorn in the biography of the writer: “We could just criticize that, despite her feminist ideology, she translated into

Spanish a work that was clearly offensive to the intellectual development of women. (...) The obvious contradiction may be explained in many ways, from economic necessity to pressure from publishers who saw in these texts a potentially large readership, precisely because she was the translator.” (Simón Palmer, 2010, 166).

There is no doubt that de Burgos was a complex and perhaps contradictory subject, but historical research does not have to show us characters of flawless thinking and congealed identities that meet the needs of our current classification categories. People, now and always, are mediated by the complex reality of their socio-cultural environment. They are characterized by contradictions, uncertainties, insecurities and conflicts. They are immersed in the construction of their own thinking and in tune with the contradictions of their time. Of course, in the case of Carmen de Burgos, there are many disconcerting questions, as we will discuss later. I also believe, however, that it is not possible to ignore the contextual situation with which our translator was faced. This situation determined her room for maneuver and her agency. I agree with Judith Butler that “What we might call “agency” or “freedom” or “possibility” is always a specific political prerogative that is produced by the gaps opened up in regulatory norms, in the process of their self-repetition. Freedom, possibility, agency do not have an abstract or pre-social status, but are always negotiated within a matrix of power” (Butler, 1993, 22).

### Writing from the margin

In my research, I have analyzed various paratextual elements of the translation of *The mental inferiority of woman*. Following the approach of Genette (1987), I assume that a translation, like any other text, is always involved in a number of different discourses and textual practices that project the text and ensure its presence in the world. These elements can be attributed to various actors involved in the process of publishing a book (author, editor and, in our case, also the translator). The process involves a transaction between text and reading, that determines the reading of the book (Genette, 1987, 7, 8). In line with Genette I distinguish two types of paratexts: the peritext, contained in the book itself and the epitext, textual materials of various kinds or textual genre that are produced outside the book published and that may also provide useful data for the interpretation of the text and the situation in which the translation takes place (criticism, reviews, interviews before or after the publication, collections of letters, diaries, etc.). I have presented elsewhere (Sanchez, 2011) the first part of the research results, focusing primarily on the peritext of the Möbius translation. In effect, the examination of the Spanish edition foregrounded the existence of important peritextual elements that incorporate clandestinely significant portions of text signed by the translator. The analysis focused primarily on the text and peritextual macrostructure, from the cover to the final index, allowing me to show how Carmen de Burgos had consciously used the opportunity provided by the translation to introduce her voice and determine how the book would be read.

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