

Fflur Dafydd

WRITING ACROSS LANGUAGES

You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse.

Caliban, *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare

Like Caliban, stranded on the rock in *The Tempest*, I often feel that all my life, I have been using a language imposed upon me by others; but the use of which, has enabled me to “profit on’t” in a number of ways. And, unfortunately, I’m not talking here about financial gain, but less tangible types of profit, the kind which won’t buy you a swimming pool but will certainly help you make friends with an Englishman who *does*, smiling all the while a Caliban-esque demonic smile behind his back.

I have lived my entire life between two languages. I was raised in a Welsh-language household, by Welsh-language-activist parents, in a predominantly Welsh-speaking part of Wales. But of course, English was also part of my reality from day to day, as Wales has been colonised by the English for centuries. But living between languages has undoubtedly been an enriching experience for me as a writer. While there is no time now for me to give you a comprehensive etymological account of the differences between Welsh and English, I will perhaps briefly illustrate this using an example which would make Caliban proud. Caliban uses the new language given to him by Prospero disrespectfully, in order to “curse.” And when a Welsh speaker swears, they usually do so in English, because swearing in Welsh is a complicated affair. We tend to use all the words in the world just to tell somebody to “buzz off”. Even our new modern English/Welsh dictionary suggests that if we are really angry with someone we should say something like: *twill dy din di Ffaro, cer getre ti di cael dy gyfle!* Which loosely translates as “Up yours, Pharaoh, you’ve had your chance and should maybe think about going home now.” Try shouting that in the heat of the moment. As you can see here, our language is often digressive in nature, and rhythmically driven by hard hitting consonants. (Only yesterday I received a letter from my sister-in-law remarking on how nice it was to write down a name without consonants – IOWA!) Sexual vocabulary, too, is rather limited in Welsh, and is of an overly euphemistic nature, with female genitalia, for example, being referred to as “y llawes goch” (the red sleeve) and *The Vagina Monologues* having recently been translated into *Shinani’n siarad*, or *Little Jane Talks*. So if you want to talk dirty, I would suggest doing it with someone who speaks English. That way, you won’t run the risk of bursting out laughing in the middle of an intimate act.

And with this in mind, how does one then begin to translate a text from Welsh into English? How does one make the shift from this highly literary language, albeit one with many limitations and boundaries, to a vaster, broader language, where no word, no phrase, is unutterable? Certainly it is not impossible, and has been done countless times before. I have faced this challenge as a translator of Welsh poetry, and have found ways of manoeuvring the meaning across the divide. But when I began translating my *own* Welsh-language novel, *Atyniad (Attraction)* into English, the results were drastically different. Once I realised that I was

working with a completely different set of linguistic tools, and that I needn't be afraid of upsetting the original author of the text, my language began to run away with itself, adding new images, metaphors, and even characters to the story. Although I was using the same setting and location – Bardsey, a small island in North Wales – by the time I had finished the first chapter I realised that I was not writing a translation but rather a completely different novel. My motivation changed, too, and I realised with urgency that the novel needed to be *about* the Welsh-language experience this time, rather than merely *being* a Welsh-language experience. Like Caliban, I was attempting to “profit” on the language my colonisers had taught me, using it boldly, rebelliously, to regain my power, to shed light on the colonial experience. The novel therefore needed a new title and a new identity, and became *Twenty Thousand Saints* – a title that in Welsh would seem wordy and clichéd, but created intrigue and anticipation in English.

And then, suddenly, my linguistic tools became scalpels, and I went about giving my characters rather ruthless lobotomies so that they could fulfil their new roles. The writer-in-residence of the island, who in the Welsh original was a short blonde fiction writer whose narrative was relayed in 1st person, became Mererid, whose narration is confined to 3rd person. Not only did I make her a poet, but I also gave her nicer hair, making her the sleek brunette I always wanted to be, and sat back to watch her gain several inches in height. For reasons beyond my comprehension, the sex she had was much less satisfying, but at least I had the vocabulary to explain why.

Several other characters also underwent trans-language-surgery. The ecologists in the Welsh version, Sioned and Cadi, became compressed into a character named Elin, and she was bestowed with the body of the former and mind of the latter. Justin Bowen, my satirical take on Welsh-language presenters, lost his identity as a heterosexual male and was transformed into two lesbians in one afternoon. The characters of Dic, Anni and Telor were killed outright, pushed off the cliff-edge of the page, never to be seen again. The character of Bela, who in Welsh had been a hard-nosed, asexual gardener, became a rhubarb-pilfering heretical nun with a political background. And out of the spare parts, I was also able to construct a bilingual dog to take the place of two monolingual goats.

Interestingly, because of all these changes, *Twenty Thousand Saints* received better reviews by my Welsh-language critics than any of my Welsh-language novels. A production company (which showed no interest in the Welsh-language original) is now interested in dramatising the book for the screen - but bizarrely wants to turn it into a Welsh-language screenplay! If this were to happen, the novel will have made a full circle from Welsh into English and then back into Welsh, which means I would need to get the scalpel out again, and prepare my characters for another transformation. Already they are clinging to each other in terror. But such sacrifices would have to be made, for if this novel *were* to make it to the screen, then that, as Caliban says, *would* be profit!