



# PLEASURE ERASED

The Clitoris Unthought

CATHERINE  
MALABOU

Translated by Carolyn Shread

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# **Pleasure Erased**

## **The Clitoris Unthought**

Catherine Malabou

Translated by Carolyn Shread

polity

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# **Dedication**

*In memory of Anne Dufourmantelle,  
echoing her meditation on gentleness*

Clitoris, mysterious ruby, swaying, jewel-like shimmer on  
the chest of a deity.

(Pierre Louÿs, *Poesies érotiques : La femme; La trophée  
des vulves légendaires; Pybrac*, Paris: Editinter, 2010)

# Translator's Preface

## Translating the Emergence of the *Point Médian*, or Clitoridian Anarchy in the Text

In Lori Chamberlain's "Gender and Metaphorics of Translation" (1988), she drew attention to the many phallogocentric ways in which translation was conceptualized, citing George Steiner's references to penetration as just one of too many paradigms of domination. Given my past theorizing as I translate Catherine Malabou, it would be no surprise if I were to propose here that we consider translation from a clitoral perspective. I could describe how the translator combs through the text, stroking it over and over in an act of love and care to find its *gioia* in a new language. It's an obvious metaphor, another to add to our collection, since these tropes are of the trade. But might I find more than another analogy? What does this most recent Malabou offer for thinking translating and its pleasures, inked or erased?

In this translation, it was a moment of hesitation that opened new plasticities: what to do with the *point médian*? The *point médian* is one of several new linguistic phenomena emerging as French grapples with its grammatical sexism. Reworking a male bias deep in the structures of the language, some French speakers have sought to resolve the dilemma, shared with other Romance languages, by which linguistic norms produce a hypervisibility of gender along with a privileging of the masculine. This is all the more imperative because French schoolchildren are taught, over and over, *le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin* - that is, "the masculine prevails



over the feminine” – since, in verb conjugations and agreements, the masculine is always the default: girls learn that, even if there are 100 of them and 1 boy joins the group, the adjective must be changed from the feminine to the masculine form. One solution has been the *point médian*, or mid·dot punctuation mark, as, for instance, in the greeting “*Cher·e·s ami·e·s*” in which masculine (*ami*) and feminine (*amie*) forms of “friend” are combined. The mid·dot gesture is an improvement on the previous use of parentheses “ami(e)s,” implying as it does a lesser importance to the enclosed feminine. This embedded sexism is experienced as problematic on multiple fronts, not least of which is the necessity to specify a binary male/female gender. While English is adopting the “they” pronoun, French equivalents such as the neologism *iel*, which appears just twice in this book, are having more difficulty establishing themselves. The decision of the renowned *Petit Robert* dictionary to add *iel* to its online edition in November 2021 is indicative of an early institutionalization of the term, even as it provoked furious debate. Another French strategy is to search out gender neutral language through those rare nouns that can be used with either gender, as in “*Chers destinataires*,” or “*dear addressees*.” Either way, these contortions – including the not insignificant keyboard challenge presented by finding the mid·dot that consequently often slips down to become a period – indicate a need to shape language, and our language technologies, to better hold all of our experiences.

The brand-new translator’s dilemma is whether to signal this effort by French to be more inclusive, or else to use gender neutral terms readily available in English. In this translation, to acknowledge the way the French reforms itself through the plastic explosive of the mid·dot, I often alert the reader with the phrase “be they he or she,” a

concatenation of pronouns that echoes debates in English while avoiding the implied essentialist binary in “man or woman.” I thus opted to retain and highlight the presence of these moments of revolt rather than using the suppleness of English to hide that awkward move reminiscent of the “he/she” that I have since replaced with “they” in other recent translations. After all, if I erase the visual shock of the controversial mid·dot, I lose the challenge to the normativity of French as determined by authorities such as the Académie française, which is firmly against such innovations: in 2021, it declared that *l’écriture inclusive* is an aberration – such a mortal threat to the French language, indeed, that it was banned in schools. This may be the view of the *Immortels*, as members of the Académie are known, but language is notoriously plastic, shaping and shaped by our realities, and here it is, the mid·dot, already present on 15 occasions in this latest Malabou. I read these moments as textual clitorises, a tentative touch ing in spite of censure. Is it the influence of the Anglophone environment in which her thought circulates and engages – perhaps even a translational effect? No doubt partly, but Malabou is also shaking up French on her own account – after all, as she states, unforgettably, here: “The clitoris is an anarchist” (p. 119). So, it may well be that the venerable institution of the Académie française, founded in 1634 to protect, foster and celebrate the French language, with its 737 members over the centuries – yes, 10 of them women – is, so to speak, missing the point.

Turning to the anarchist clitoris, the punctuated pleasure represented by the mid·dot is symbolic of the stakes at play in this book, Malabou’s most recent reflection on plasticity. Here, she works through the systematic unthinking of the clitoris in philosophy. In so doing, she develops the structuring concept of *l’écart* in concert with the clitoris. It

is important to distinguish her conception, translated here as “caesura,” from the use of the same word by Jacques Rancière, in whose work it is translated alternately as “interval” or “gap,” as well as from Jacques Derrida’s *différance*. Malabou is bringing new forms to light, forms that relate time, space, politics and power in their own distinctive manner. We look forward to her next book on anarchy to further develop the role of the clitoris as a plastic opportunity that might – indeed, must – herald the caesura of our era. Certainly, if we are to respond to the existential threat of climate change, it will be on condition of establishing permaculture in place of clear cutting, a reclaiming of pleasures erased as fields for new modes of thought.

Malabou directs us toward the newly emergent forms that artists such as Sophia Wallace are bringing to popular consciousness. Revealing the beautiful form of the clitoris, thanks to the research of Australian urologist Dr. Helen O’Connell in 1998, Wallace’s first anatomically correct sculpture of the clitoris, *Ἀδάμας* or *Unconquerable* (2013), takes down the invisibility and moves us toward a new understanding of clitoral bodies and pleasures, disarming the status quo as she does so since “democracy without cliteracy is phallusy” ([www.sophiawallace.art](http://www.sophiawallace.art)). Or, to deploy the potent term imported by translators of the 1970s Italian radical feminist Carla Lonzi, whose thought Malabou productively engages here, this aesthetic reformulation is a “clitoridian” act.

The affirmation of the neologism “clitoridian” as a self-consciously politicized alternative to the standard medical “clitoral” is an important contribution to this new body of thought, signaling its distinctiveness. While *clitoridea* exists in Italian, just as *clitoridien·ne* exists in French, the English clips the end of the word to the short “clitoral.” Other English translations – for instance, of the work of

Luce Irigaray by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill – respect the English term; here, I seek to reinforce “clitoridian” as a second available term that offers us a productive and generative neologism. Our translations both track and advance our histories and epistemologies: here, we look to a clitoridian future.

Feminist translation studies could well use the distinction between a clitoral and a clitoridian translation theory, with “clitoral” revealing the other side of a binary and “clitoridian” establishing a realm of sexual difference along with the political determination to find another relation to power, one that is “not a power relation” (p. 119). These two alternate approaches might be helpful as feminist translation evolves and builds momentum, from its emergence as a creative practice in Canada from the 1970s, and theorization from there globally from the mid-1990s onwards. Just as translators have worked alongside changing feminisms, so too they have plasticized the ways we think about translating strategies, goals and effects. In the moment of radical digital communication revolution we are living, as artificial intelligence increasingly takes hold of our linguistic and translational practices, now is the time for a return to our plastic bodies and brains to foment clitoridian anarchy in translation.

*Carolyn Shread*

# Foreword

by Alexandra Kleeman

Life in the twenty-first century unfolds beneath a ceaseless, anxiety-ridden gaze that is fixated on the body: how should it be fed, how should you optimize its sleeping and waking, how can you burn the fat from it, how can you sculpt it into the shape of a beach body or an hourglass? As a pandemic swept the world, this fixation on restoring visibility to the physiological has moved inward, to the nasal passageways and lungs and immune system, to the surveillance of its interior spaces and contemplation of its openness to infection. Several decades devoted to the body's reincorporation within scholarly thought and practice have brought corporeality back from the periphery, both as a holistic unit and as a collection of important parts. But, curiously, a crucial part has been left out of these analyses: the clitoris, the existence of which is glimpsed in elision, as though something dangerous would happen if one were to linger too long upon it.

Catherine Malabou devotes this volume to locating and relocating the clitoris in the various discourses – sociopolitical, physiological, philosophical, psychoanalytic – in which it has appeared, touching upon these furtive or dismissive instances and putting them into contact with feminist thinkers such as Irigaray, Lonzi and de Beauvoir who articulated a vital role for the clitoris within thought, subjectivity and society. Malabou writes: