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ARTICLE

## Colouring *écriture féminine* in Peter Manson's translations of Mallarmé

Rebecca Varley-Winter

University of Cambridge, UK

[rvarleywinter@gmail.com](mailto:rvarleywinter@gmail.com)

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This article considers the possibilities of *écriture féminine* in Peter Manson's translations of Mallarmé, particularly focussing on the use of colour in *Hérodiade*, 'Don du Poème', and 'Les Fenêtres'. In this work, I firstly trace an association between colour and the erotic in feminist theory and art, which can be seen in works such as Audré Lorde's 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power' (1978), Pipilotti Rist's 'Ever is Over All' (1997), and in Meiling Cheng's 'The Unbearable Lightness of Sight' (2003), in which she writes: the image seized for view, however deliberately designed, exists in a state of indifference, whereas the viewer is most likely already overdetermined by his/her interpretive desire. Perhaps the best we can do is to bypass the conundrum by pursuing the liberating potential of that discrepancy, recognizing the being of an image as light/intangible and the core of desire as heavy/matter-producing. In translation, the translator negotiates with their source text, and with the sensual dimensions of the source language, in a manner that is comparable to this interpretation of colour vision. Julia Kristeva argues that Mallarmé's work exemplifies *écriture féminine* because it draws the reader into a state anterior to language, which she compares to the pre-linguistic communion between mother and infant. In Mallarmé's work, colour reveals the materiality of light, transforming it into a bodily force that Mallarmé initially codes (perhaps too simplistically) as feminine. I begin by reading reds and purples in *Hérodiade* as allusions to blood, then the golds of coloured glass in 'Les Fenêtres' and 'Don du Poème' as a way of making conflicts between bodily abjection and transcendence visible (the pane of glass becoming a coloured body between the lyric 'I' and the sky). I finally consider Mallarmé's use of the word 'Azur' as a metaphor for virginity (azure being associated, through lapis lazuli, with the blue of the Virgin Mary). Manson's translations are particularly attuned to Mallarmé's combinations of the 'heavy/matter-producing' and the 'light/intangible', and I argue that Manson's word choices emphasise an erotic force in Mallarmé's use of azure, treating this colour as a reservoir that, in Manson's translation, threatens to 'drown' the 'self-coloured cinders' of Mallarmé's speaker, colouring symbolic boundaries between languages and genders, and between self and other.

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**Keywords:** translation; poetry; gender; Stéphane Mallarmé; Pipilotti Rist; *écriture féminine*; David Batchelor; visual culture; Kristeva; Cixous; Irigaray; colour

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This article considers the possibilities of *écriture féminine* in Peter Manson's translations of Mallarmé, particularly focussing on the use of colour in *Hérodiade*, 'Don du Poème', and 'Les Fenêtres'. I firstly trace an association between colour and the erotic in feminist theory and art, which can be seen in works such as Audré Lorde's 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power' (1978), Pipilotti Rist's 'Ever is Over All' (1997), and Meiling Cheng's 'The Unbearable Lightness of Sight' (2003), in which she writes:

the image seized for view, however deliberately designed, exists in a state of indifference, whereas the viewer is most likely already overdetermined by his/her interpretive desire. Perhaps the best we can do is to bypass the conundrum by pursuing the liberating potential of that discrepancy, recognizing the being of an image as light/intangible and the core of desire as heavy/matter-producing.<sup>1</sup>

In translation, the translator negotiates with their source text, and with the sensual dimensions of the source language, in a manner that is comparable to this interpretation of colour vision. Julia Kristeva argues that Mallarmé's work exemplifies *écriture féminine* because it draws the reader into a state anterior to language, which she compares to the pre-linguistic communion between mother and infant.<sup>2</sup> In Mallarmé's work, colour reveals the materiality of light, transforming colour into a bodily force or, in Barbara Johnson's words, a 'nourishing non-language' that can be coded (perhaps too simplistically) as feminine.<sup>3</sup> I begin by reading reds and purples in *Hérodiade* as allusions to menstrual blood, then read the golds of coloured glass in 'Les Fenêtres' and 'Don du Poème' as a means of making conflicts between bodily abjection and transcendence visible (the pane of glass becoming a coloured body between the lyric 'I' and the sky). I finally consider Mallarmé's use of the word 'Azur' as a metaphor for virginity (azure being associated, through lapis lazuli, with the blue of the Virgin Mary). Manson's translations are particularly attuned to Mallarmé's combinations of the 'heavy/matter-producing' and the 'light/intangible', and I argue that Manson's word choices create a particularly stony and threatening force in Mallarmé's use of azure, treating this colour as a blue reservoir that, in Manson's translation, threatens to 'drown' the 'self-coloured cinders' of Mallarmé's

speaker, colouring symbolic boundaries between languages and genders, and between self and other.

N

Madame, allez-vous donc dormir?

H

Non, pauvre aïeule,

Sois calme, et, t'éloignant, pardonne à ce cœur dur,

Mais avant, si tu veux, clos les volets: l'azur

Séraphique sourit dans les vitres profondes,

Et je déteste, moi, le bel azur!

N

Madame, are you going to die?

H

No, poor grandmother,

be calm, and as you leave, pardon this hard heart,

but first, if you will, close the shutters: the seraphic

blue smiles in the deep window-panes,

and I hate the beautiful blue!

– Stéphane Mallarmé, *Hérodiade*, Part II: 'Scène';

Peter Manson's translation.<sup>4</sup>

In this 'Scene' from Stéphane Mallarmé's *Hérodiade*, Hérodiade (a girl entering adolescence) argues with her nurse, who is urging her to think of marriage. Hérodiade is determined to stay singular and virginal: 'who would touch me? I am respected by lions./Besides, I want nothing human'.<sup>5</sup> Her nurse likens this choice to death, and the seraphic, smiling blue also seems to foretell this fate. Hérodiade asks her to shutter the windows against this threatening azure expanse.

In Biblical accounts, Hérodiade is better known as Salome, the girl who dances before King Herod. Charmed, Herod promises her a gift of anything she desires, and

Salome, on the vengeful instruction of her mother, demands the head of John the Baptist, who is duly executed, and his head brought in on a platter. Salome's story is therefore one of anxiety about erotic power (Salome's dance) leading to emasculation (John the Baptist's beheading). Symbolist and Decadent works such as Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* and Oscar Wilde's *Salome* portray Salome as an archetypal *femme fatale*, who is also, in Aubrey Beardsley's iconic illustrations of Wilde's work, subversively androgynous. In Mallarmé's version of the story, Hérodiade professes to 'love the horror of being virgin' in part to reject any outside influence, in favour of her own authority and interiority.<sup>6</sup> Peter Manson notes that in all Biblical accounts of Salome and John the Baptist, Salome is nameless:

Mallarmé follows an alternative tradition in which the girl is given the same name as her mother, Hérodiade. This serves to emphasise his Hérodiade's flight from sex [...suggesting] that she arose from a process more like duplication or cloning than sexual reproduction. In a letter to Eugène Lefébure of 18th February 1865, Mallarmé wrote: "The most beautiful page of my work will be the one which contains only that divine name Hérodiade [...] that sombre word, red as an open pomegranate"<sup>7</sup>

Because she is apparently a 'clone' of her mother, Hérodiade mimics Mallarmé's vision of poetry itself, as an art that 'reproduces' asexually. Virginal figures recur in his work as a metaphor for poetic creation, often in association with self-negation and coldness (his poem 'Le Cygne' is an example of this). However, Peter Manson's translations, as David Lloyd notes, accentuate a more heated 'turbidity' and 'turbulence' in their versions of Mallarmé.<sup>8</sup> Mallarmé's description of the name *Hérodiade* as 'red as an open pomegranate' evokes to some extent the dead head of John the Baptist, but is also erotic, the jewel-like name sensually open to his gaze. Attempts to read Mallarmé's work as 'feminine' are complicated and troubled by this male gaze that is absolutely evident in *Hérodiade*, and extends to the seduction of language itself. Mallarmé sees female figures in his work through the prism of desire, which saturates them in colour.

Colour, even in written form, carries a sensory force: reading the word 'red' may not be the same as seeing the colour red, but the presence of that unseen colour still moves the reader and creates a semiotic response. Colours therefore attract desire, and this is only accentuated by their elusiveness. In her essay 'Touchy-Feely Colour', Mazviita Chirimuuta notes that an Aristotelian understanding of colour as *intrinsic* to material things was challenged in the seventeenth century by 'a revised scientific ontology which posited that the only qualities belonging to material things were quantitative or mathematical ones, not qualitative ones like colour':

This, in essence, is the metaphysical problem of colour: *how can it be that we see a world full of colours, if no such properties could belong to the world?*<sup>9</sup>

Chirimuuta is probably referring here to John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1671–1690), in which he writes 'For the power in fire to produce a new colour, [...] is as much a quality in fire, as the power it has to produce in me a new idea or sensation of warmth or burning'.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Locke understands colour as a sensory quality of light, rather than as a quantifiable property contained inside the object we are looking at. For Chirimuuta, colour emerges *through* our field of vision, in much the same way that the sense of touch moves through our skin: colours are revealed by the *contact* of our gaze *with* the visual world. They are not intrinsic, and Maggie Nelson argues that the objective reality of colour is extremely dubious: a honeybee sees a poppy as a 'gaping violet mouth', not a red or orange flower.<sup>11</sup> According to Frederick A. A. Kingdom, researchers in visual perception argue that colour vision may 'fill in' the blank areas left after 'the structure of the image has been encoded using luminance information, a view dubbed by McIllhagga and Mullen (1997) the 'colouring book' model of colour vision'.<sup>12</sup> In light of this, colour is itself a delineation of a more diffuse, unseparated glimmering: Nelson writes that 'it is the business of the eye to make colored forms out of what is essentially shimmering'.<sup>13</sup>

Guy Deutscher notes that human beings share our trichromatic vision with apes and Old World monkeys, whereas most mammals have only dichromatic vision. 'The

position of the two new receptors', he writes, 'was optimal for detecting yellowish fruit against a background of green foliage. Man's colour vision seems to have been a co-evolution with the development of bright fruits.'<sup>14</sup> Our scale of colour perception may therefore correlate with our hunger, as sensations of desire and fear 'colour' the world according to what we most need to see. Red is the first colour, aside from dark and light shades, that we usually perceive, and its signals of sex and danger are present in Mallarmé's description of Hérodiade's name as an 'open pomegranate'. However, there are also more particular connotations to Mallarmé's use of red. Hérodiade's red is 'sombre', dark, and Manson notes that 'A number of fragments of *Les Noces d'Hérodiade* suggest images of menstruation, at least as much as they suggest hymeneal blood, or the blood of the Baptist'.<sup>15</sup> Menstruation makes the body more physically weighted; each step feels more anchored to the earth, as if being dragged down through the solar plexus, and a heavy flow tends to disrupt the ability to remember names, losing bits and pieces of language. The pomegranate of Hérodiade's name evokes the myth of Persephone, held in the underworld by her uncle, Hades (and there are shades of incest in the story of Salome, too). Hérodiade may be determinedly virginal, but colours seep into the work as potential kidnapers, threatening her enclosure.

In some ways, colour is one of the least malleable elements of translation, because colour *can* remain visible through many versions, unlike other aspects of rhyme and form. Sappho has gone through multiple transformations, but her rosy-fingered dawn stays, like a fingerprint, marking the song or poem as hers. However, Mallarmé's work is especially apt to treat every element, including colour, as a metaphysical substance that is malleable in the poet's – and thus also in the translator's – hands. He is repeatedly preoccupied with the work of art as an unnatural conception, and uses colour to convey its birth. In 'Don du poème' ('Gift of the Poem', 1865), the poem's gift bursts through stained glass as 'the child of an Idumaeen night!'.<sup>16</sup> Manson notes that 'The kings of Idumea (the biblical Edom), according to the Kabbala, were sexless beings who reproduced without women.'<sup>17</sup> Thus Mallarmé uses the text to subvert physical sex; the immaculate conception, or

'gift' of the poem, carried by dawn, crashes 'through the glass burnished by spice and gold,/through the frosted panes' (ll. 3–4), making the glass appear to blow hot and cold. The poem concludes with 'lips famished by virgin azure air' (l. 14), again making blue or *azur* a powerfully physical, yet negating, force. Mallarmé's poems are often preoccupied with this act of giving birth to death.

'Don du poème' echoes 'Les Fenêtres' ('The Windows', 1863), in which a patient drags himself to the windows of a hospital, 'avid of azure blue': 'a virgin skin, long gone! befouls/the lukewarm golden panes with a long bitter kiss.'<sup>18</sup> Robert Greer Cohn states that this poem uses the windowpane as a 'pure source, limpid as air and light, from which it was born, but caught and frozen in a palpable concretion of earthly being'.<sup>19</sup> I would argue that there's nothing pure about it; the horizon is 'gorged' with light, 'gorgé' deriving from the throat, as if the sky itself is a mouth. Disgusted by the patient's sensual nostalgia, the speaker of 'Les Fenêtres' ultimately tries to flee from this appalling material world. Compared to 'art, or the mystical', the windowpane acts as a golden body standing between material and immaterial being, as the speaker wants 'to smash the crystal insulted by the monster' (D'enforcer le cristal par le monstre insulté).<sup>20</sup> The word 'monstre' (monster) puts the body on show, as if the hospital patient, in his sickness, brings abjection too clearly into view.

In *Hérodiade*, colour is similarly polluting, famishing, or threatening. The poem's 'Ouverture' opens with Dawn, likened to a swan (often a symbol of virginity in Mallarmé's work), suffering in a pool that reflects the 'purple' sky:

Crime! bûcher! aurore ancienne! supplice!  
Pourpre d'un ciel! Étang de la pourpre complice!

Crime! immolation! ancient dawn! torture!  
Purple of a sky! Pond complicit in purple!<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to these bleeding purples and reds, *Hérodiade* likens herself to metallic golds, as if she has developed from precious stones, or is a living jewel. She is aware



of her body as a commodity, and exercises what little power this status allows by refusing sex:

Oui, c'est pour moi, pour moi, que je fleuris, déserte!  
 Vous le savez, jardins d'améthyste, enfouis  
 Sans fin dans de savants abîmes éblouis  
 Ors ignorés, gardant votre antique lumière  
 Sous le sombre sommeil d'une terre première,

Yes, it's for me – for me – that I flower, deserted!  
 You know it, amethyst gardens, buried  
 endlessly in dazzled, learned gulfs,  
 unknown golds, hiding your antique light  
 under the sombre sleep of a primal earth,<sup>22</sup>

Sexuality therefore appears in the poem as a lustrous colour, carefully guarded and sealed underground. This colour is also hidden as an echo in Mallarmé's line: 'Ors' resounds inside 'ignorés', a pun that Manson cannot replicate in the English translation.

This reading of Hérodiade as a figure whose sexuality is represented *through* colour prompts me to draw on what might seem incongruous sources, asking how feminist theory speaks to the use of colour in Peter Manson's translations of Mallarmé. In making this argument, I am influenced, firstly, by the concept of *écriture féminine* (feminine writing), advanced in divergent ways by Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, and secondly, by feminist thinking on colour, particularly the use of colour to articulate bodily sensations that would otherwise remain hidden.

In 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975–6), Cixous argues that 'feminine', embodied writing is suppressed within 'masculine' value systems, which aim to escape or transcend the body. For Cixous, 'feminine' writing translates an embodiment that the 'masculine' ignores or is simply oblivious to:

Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst – burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world.<sup>23</sup>

Cixous describes the voice as a luminous paint, and argues that women should *write in white ink*. Of course, white ink on a white page would be invisible, and theorists of *écriture féminine* approach what may seem an impossible and contradictory task, by representing *in writing* that which is supposedly opposed to language altogether. Cixous knew that her theory of *écriture féminine* was necessarily incoherent: 'It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, [...] for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.'<sup>24</sup> Monique Wittig has argued against Cixous, suggesting that, in fact, the feminine *doesn't* exist, critiquing the whole notion of 'feminine writing' and indeed womanhood itself ('the making of women is like the making of eunuchs, the breeding of slaves, of animals').<sup>25</sup> For Wittig, the 'feminine' is by default an oppressive category, used to deny 'universal' humanity:

That there is no "feminine writing" must be said at the outset, and one makes a mistake in using and giving currency to this expression. [...] "Feminine writing" is the naturalizing metaphor of the brutal political fact of the domination of women, and as such it enlarges the apparatus under which "femininity" presents itself: that is, Difference, Specificity, Female Body/Nature [...] the words "writing" and "feminine" are combined in order to designate a sort of biological production peculiar to "Woman," a secretion natural to "Woman."<sup>26</sup>

However, femininity is not by default dehumanised and reductive; it is only seen as such through a patriarchal lens. My internal sense of 'the feminine' is sensory and visual: I feel it when I read Virginia Woolf's translucent, ecstatic descriptions of her earliest childhood memories in 'Sketch of the Past',<sup>27</sup> or when I watch the films

of Agnes Varda and Pipilotti Rist, though it may be more accurate to describe this as the joy of recognition. I am against narratives that treat 'the feminine' only as a diminished counterpart to 'the masculine', a quality that we must discard in order to be fully human. However, it is true that 'femininity' should not be tied absolutely to fertility, pregnancy or childbearing (not all women menstruate, ovulate, or bear children), and my association of 'the feminine' with fertile/lush landscapes, bursting colour, bliss, and oceanic childhood experiences may be an internalised cliché. Perhaps I noticed these sensations so powerfully in work by women because I had never seen them expressed from my subject-position before, and felt their expression as a release. Beneath differentiation there is a diffuse shimmering. In their essay 'Terminology', Callie Gardner writes of trans and non-binary experiences of gender:

The way people with vaginas, uteruses and periods have their daily practical needs and pain dangerously invisibilised leads some to circle the wagons and say that the needs of the 'female body' are ignored in favour of an ideology that 'gender is a feeling'. This is in some ways an understandable reaction, and a politics that elides the material conditions of people's lives in favour of abstract notions of identity is a vicious weapon of neoliberalism. But of course those needs that are made invisible and shameful are not needs only of the female body – they are the needs of the bodies of trans men and many nonbinary people as well, and made all the more invisible in those cases. Gender is at once a material condition and a psychological state.<sup>28</sup>

Rigidly binary ideas of 'the feminine', and visions of womanhood as a soft, sensual maternal flower (as if childbirth was a delicate experience) are inevitably limiting, and do not correspond to the full spectrum of gender and sex as it is really lived. However, theories of *écriture féminine* do expand the scope of meaningful communication or expression, by valuing non-linear modes of thinking and feeling. In 'This Sex Which Is Not One' (1977), Luce Irigaray argues that the 'feminine' embraces multiple internal divisions, becoming increasingly plural: 'her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is

commonly imagined – in an imaginary rather too narrowly focussed on sameness.<sup>29</sup> Judith Butler writes, in *Gender Trouble*, that in Kristeva's work, 'phallogentric', 'Symbolic' language repudiates 'the primary relationship to the maternal body.' This 'Symbolic' language system 'structures the world by repressing multiple meanings [...] and instating univocal and discrete meanings in their place.'<sup>30</sup>

Translation, which cannot help but engage with 'multiple meanings', occupies the space that Kristeva designates 'feminine'. She connects *écriture féminine* particularly to Mallarmé's poetry, due to his preoccupation with immanent, mysterious rhythms within the structures of language, and his creation of multiple meanings:

Mallarmé calls attention to the semiotic rhythm within language when he speaks of 'The Mystery in Literature' ['Le Mystère dans les lettres']. Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation;<sup>31</sup>

This 'semiotic' force corresponds to the aspects of poetry that are most difficult to translate: musical rhymes, rhythms and meters that cannot move unaltered between languages. Whether or not we accept that this force is feminine (and I would rather call it foetal or infantine, as it corresponds to the earliest stages of infancy), it asserts the value of diffuse, undifferentiated sensation. Feminist theorists use colour in order to reveal or heighten such sensations. In Irigaray's essay/story 'The Looking Glass, from the Other Side' (1977) this bodily focus becomes violent, as she re-imagines Lewis Carroll's Alice scratching her eyes as she breaks through the looking glass, mingling the red of blood with the blue of her irises: '*her violet, violated eyes. Blue and red. Eyes that recognize the right side, the wrong side, and the other side: the blur of deformation.*'<sup>32</sup> As colours spread and mingle, they make this 'blur of deformation' visible.

In Audre Lorde's 'Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power' (1978), she colours a less violent, more soothing, erotic sensation in the following way:

During World War Two, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncoloured margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow colouring perched like

a topa just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the colour had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly colouring it. I find the erotic such a kernel within myself.<sup>33</sup>

Pipilotti Rist, a video artist, states that she allows 'colour noise' into her films for similar sensory reasons. In her short film *Ever Is Over All* (1997), a woman walks cheerfully down a city street, wearing a pale blue dress and red shoes, breaking car windows with an enormous red flower.<sup>34</sup> Rist states that she deliberately gave the video a soft-edged, painterly quality, allowing 'colour noise' to create a fuzzy 'coreille' that diffuses 'out of the form', much as the red flower breaks through the brittle pane of glass. Noting that critics often call her work 'colourful', Rist compares her film-making to painting on glass, and states:

I am not more colourful than life is. We are just already used to images that have less colour [in them...] because we are so fearful that the white skin will look tinted. So if Africa would have developed celluloid or video it would look different [...] in our society the written word, the line, has much more value than formless colour.<sup>35</sup>

Colour might not be completely 'formless', but it does tend to work against binary 'black and white' and linear thinking. Referencing David Batchelor's *Chromophobia*, Rist notes that colour is often suspect within 'better educated', intellectual, artistic circles, because colour is seductive, attracts attention, and is often used in advertising. David Batchelor writes:

this purging of colour is usually accomplished in one of two ways. In the first, colour is made out to be the property of some 'foreign' body - usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer

or the pathological. In the second, colour is relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic. [...] Colour is dangerous, or it is trivial, or it is both. [...] Either way, colour is routinely excluded from the higher concerns of the Mind. It is other to the higher values of Western culture. Or perhaps culture is other to the higher values of colour. Or colour is the corruption of culture.<sup>36</sup>

According to Batchelor's theory, colour is associated with an exoticised, 'othered' physicality, supposedly opposed to 'higher' intellectual values. Batchelor's artworks aim to subvert this division. In *Cluster Silhouette* (2016), bright sprays of colour diffuse around sharply outlined black shapes.<sup>37</sup> Although the black shapes are not letters, this painting resembles an alphabet or language, as the lines underneath the shapes make them look like writing on a ruled notebook page. The colour helps to create the illusion of personalities within the shapes, imbuing them with moods, from melancholic to curious to joyful. The shapes become dark 'silhouettes' on the page, and the aura or halo of colour around them becomes their mode of communication. The few shapes that do not have a coloured aura either appear to be silent, listening to the other shapes, or isolated, creating a vivid impression of *colour noise* as a conversation. The colours convey emotion, and therefore speak a 'language' of sorts, but the viewer could not guess what the shapes in this painting are 'saying' to each other, only the 'feeling' that they express, much like the tone and timbre of a voice. This incoherent but immediate communication is the attraction of colour, the idea that it is beyond discipline, as when a child is either unable or unwilling to stay inside the lines of a colouring book.

In her essay 'The Unbearable Lightness of Sight', Meiling Cheng compares feminist theory itself to 'a set of colors infused into an undulating pond [...] of suspended visions':

The colors, [...] offer a certain vibrancy to the visions, coating them with an additional texture and seemingly making the phantasmic floating sights

more focused, hence more “materialized,” especially at the earlier moments when the colors are first introduced to the pond one by one.<sup>38</sup>

Cheng connects this pouring of colours to the interpretation of an image:

the image seized for view, however deliberately designed, exists in a state of indifference, whereas the viewer is most likely already overdetermined by his/her interpretive desire. Perhaps the best we can do is to bypass the conundrum by pursuing the liberating potential of that discrepancy, recognizing the being of an image as light/intangible and the core of desire as heavy/matter-producing. We allow the heavy to impinge on the light, not to deaden the light, but to turn it into a certain illuminating matter.<sup>39</sup>

Looking is not – quite – the same as reading, but these theories of colour re-enact *écriture féminine* in a visual context, and this ‘heavy/matter producing’ quality is pertinent to our activities in literary interpretation. The translator works with their source text, bringing their desires and preferences to it, so that each translation is ‘coloured’ by its translator, as well as by its source.

I will now return to the most central colour in Mallarmé’s work, *Azur* (azure), and its treatment within Peter Manson’s translations. Azure derives from lapis lazuli, a precious metamorphic rock that was used in the Renaissance as a powdered ultramarine dye. Ultramarine was the most expensive colour, used to paint angels and the Madonna; Victoria Finlay notes that the stone in its raw state contains ‘specks of iron pyrite – fool’s gold – and it makes the best stones look like the firmament’.<sup>40</sup> The mystery and holiness attached to lapis lazuli and to ultramarine pigment derived in part from its distant origin, in a set of Afghanistan mines ‘collectively called Sar-e-sang, the Place of the Stone’:

part of the mystery of lapis was that although for millennia it travelled to Europe and Egypt it was always known to come from a mythical land so far away that no European or Egyptian had actually been there.<sup>41</sup>

Finlay quotes Cennino Cennini on this 'most perfect' ultramarine pigment, 'beyond all other colours; one could not say anything about it, or do anything with it, that its quality would not still surpass'. The intensity of this colour being beyond interpretation, she concludes that 'to get paint from the stone was almost as hard as getting blood.'<sup>42</sup> Mallarmé associates azure strongly with the Virgin Mary, who, like Hérodiade and the Idumaeen kings, reproduces without sex. These holy connotations make azure transcendent in some respects, yet it is also presented, through Mallarmé's gaze, as stony and horrifying. In Mallarmé's 'L'Azur', it haunts and attacks, becoming a premonition of death, or eternity, that emerges from ringing church bells as a coloured sound, 'and exits the living metal in a blue angelus!' (Et du metal vivant sort en bleus angelus!):

Il roule par la brume, ancien et traverse  
Ta native agonie ainsi qu'un glaive sûr;  
Où fuir dans la révolte inutile et perverse?  
*Je suis hanté. L'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur!*

Ancient, it rolls with the fog, and penetrates  
your native death-throes like a sharpened sword;  
o where to fly in pointless and perverse revolt?  
*I am haunted. The Blue! The Blue! The Blue! The Blue!*<sup>43</sup>

Angelus are bells rung for evening prayers that commemorate the 'Incarnation' or conception of Christ as both 'God' and flesh, both immanent and transcendent. Ultimately, Mallarmé's use of *azur* complicates any reading of colour as a 'feminine' force in his work. This blue is *hard* and becomes a sharpened (or sure/certain) sword (glaive sûr), very much *unlike* the variously fuzzy, lively, fearlessly-coloured coreilles that I see in the work of Audre Lorde or Pipilotti Rist. Yet this fearfulness of azure, which Mallarmé associates repeatedly with virginity, is still erotic. For Mallarmé, poetry is a labour of redirected eroticism, and Barbara Johnson argues that he seeks, in *Hérodiade*, 'to make poetry speak as a female Narcissus, self-reflexive and self-



contained'.<sup>44</sup> Like Narcissus, Hérodiade appears unable to turn outwards, and there's also something mechanical about her metallic edges, as if she doesn't represent a real girl at all. Her power being constructed through a male gaze, she plays a fearful muse. Mallarmé's writing of *Hérodiade* coincided with the conception and birth of his daughter, Geneviève,<sup>45</sup> and Johnson notes that he constantly associates poetry with a 'feminine' presence, but 'the fact remains that the poet is consistently male and the poem female'.<sup>46</sup> In Mallarmé's thought, the 'masculine' poet is *consciously* creative, while the 'feminine' source is *unconsciously* so.<sup>47</sup> His inability to see femininity as *actively* creative challenges Kristeva's entire definition of his work as 'feminine'. Hérodiade expresses agency through refusal and a hermit-like solitude, but cannot create, only gaze upon herself. Female and androgynous figures who refuse sex are, within Mallarmé's gaze, implicitly aberrant or tragic, yet, for him, they also represent the condition of the poem itself. Mallarmé's 'gift of the poem' replicates metaphors of conception and labour, but does not produce a living child.<sup>48</sup>

David Lloyd, in his review of *The Poems In Verse*, argues that Peter Manson's translations reveal this central conflict between embodiment and disembodiment in Mallarmé's work with exceptional insight:

One of the great virtues of Manson's translations is that they do not obscure the turbulence, even at times the turbidity of Mallarmé's poetry. There is a tendency in English translations of his work to imagine a greater degree of purity and abstraction than is actually there. [...] Manson, on the other hand, captures continually the dimensions of Mallarmé that are so often overlooked, so powerful is his reputation for asceticism and otherworldliness. Mallarmé is, in fact, a highly erotic poet, given, as Manson's scolia often enough point out, to double entendres and to a quite systematic meditation on the relation between erotic desire and poetic creation.<sup>49</sup>

For example, in *Hérodiade*, Manson translates 'froides' – cold – as 'frigid', linking Hérodiade's chill explicitly to her refusal of sex, as well as echoing some of the sound of the French word in English: the f, r, i, and d. In 'Azur', Manson translates 'traverse' – to

pass through – as ‘penetrates’, making the Blue’s wielded sword emphatically phallic. In this sense Manson’s version of the Blue takes on both ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ roles, moving azure beyond a Symbolic reading in which it only represents, for example, the Virgin Mary. The blue begins to act as an element that can play various and even contradictory parts: we might project certain ideas on to the sky, but it will ultimately silence them. In ‘L’Azur’, as the speaker tries to defend himself against the encompassing Blue, Manson translates:

Brouillards, montez! versez vos cendres monotones  
Avec de longs haillons de brume dans les cieux  
Que noiera le marais livide des automnes,  
Et bâtissez un grand plafond silencieux!

Assemble, fogs! Pour your self-coloured cinders  
with long rags of mist into the sky  
that the livid autumn marsh will drown  
and build a great silencing ceiling!<sup>50</sup>

What Manson translates here as ‘self-coloured cinders’ could more straightforwardly translate as ‘monotonous cinders’ or ‘monotonous ash’. Manson’s choice of ‘self-coloured’ conveys a whole interpretation of Mallarmé’s poem in one line, suggesting that the speaker’s fear of immersion in the blue involves a fear of losing his definition, his self-colouring, much as Hérodiade fears the ‘seraphic’ blue that seems to smile at her from the window panes. In Manson’s version of Mallarmé, colour is indeed dangerous.

Kristeva’s idea of *écriture féminine* takes its concept of language-less intimacy from the first contact between child and mother, and, in their responses to this subject, Manson and Mallarmé converse. In an essay for *Enclave Review* titled ‘Girl born without a mother: the posthumous Mallarmé’, Peter Manson discusses Mallarmé’s unfinished drafts of *Hérodiane*, which remained incomplete at his death.<sup>51</sup> He describes a text that Mallarmé wrote in the 1890s, titled ‘The Wedding of Hérodiane: A Mystery Play’. Its fragments feature an added ‘Intermediate Scene’, in which

Hérodiade complains about her Nurse's refusal to leave the room, and leave her alone. The Nurse persists in the text as a '(Dark empty secret still there on its feet)' (Manson's translation). Manson concludes:

There's an obvious pathos, [...] in the figure of the nursemaid who never leaves the room. It's as if Mallarmé, whose mother died when he was five years old, can't quite bring himself to cling to the memory of a real mother, only an almost-mother. [...] I think the truth is more direct, though no less moving. Mallarmé had been put out to nurse: his first recorded memory is of being with his grandmother shortly after his mother's death, and becoming aware that he wasn't feeling the grief people expected from him. In his embarrassment, he decided to throw himself down on the tiger-skin rug and tear at his own long hair. His first memory of grief was of his own staging of its simulacrum<sup>52</sup>

Manson reads this moment in *Hérodiade* as an uneasy negotiation of grief, however submerged and redirected, as Hérodiade's gemstones break apart:

J'attends une chose inconnue  
Ou, peut-être, ignorant le mystère et vos cris,  
Jetez-vous les sanglots suprêmes et meurtris  
D'une enfance sentant parmi les rêveries  
Se séparer enfin ses froides pierreries.

I await an unknown thing  
or, perhaps, not knowing the mystery and your cries,  
you emit the supreme, bruised sobbing  
of a childhood sensing among daydreams  
its frigid gemstones separate at last.<sup>53</sup>

In Manson's reading of Mallarmé, Hérodiade's state of being is represented by the *froides pierreries* (cold or frigid gemstones), which finally separate as she leaves her

childhood behind. Manson's choice of the word 'frigid' here relates, however crudely, to the idea of Hérodiade as a being produced without sex – as a clone of her mother – but is also, perhaps, chosen for the word 'rigid' contained inside it. Manson accentuates and even, on occasion, *creates* a stony hardness in his translations of Mallarmé's work, corresponding to the fact that *azure* is made from lapis lazuli, like blood from a stone. In this sense, Manson's colourings of Mallarmé contrast markedly with the fluidly erotic colouring I have referred to in the work of Pipilotti Rist and Audre Lorde, and challenge any reading of Mallarmé's work as 'feminine' in Cixous' sense of the word. Mallarmé's colours are often lustrous *threats*, contained in cold, luxurious gems, and liken Hérodiade's sex to a resource to be mined, guarded or bought. The figures in these poems are most potent when they await the unknown, or dissolve their self-coloured cinders in dreams. Manson notes of Mallarmé's use of the word 'pierreries' in *Hérodiade*, that, 'grammatically, the "pierreries" can't separate: according to Littré, the word is never used in the singular.'<sup>54</sup> Therefore, in the line 'Se séparer enfin ses froides pierreries', Mallarmé separates what, grammatically, cannot be separated. Through some serendipity, the translator's name is hidden, here, inside his source text: 'Pierre', meaning 'stone', is the French form of 'Peter'. In his own poem, 'Birth Windows' – the title of which may well be influenced by Mallarmé's glazed windowpanes in 'Don du poème' and 'Les Fenêtres' – Manson writes of a 'fearful' process in which he both 'mirrors' and 'alters', and this is also an apt metaphor for the cross-influence between poet and translator. Manson's translations create a 'kinship in across', as self-coloured cinders drift between translation and source. A mother of 'nacre', or mother-of-pearl, gleams in iridescent rainbows of blue, pink, and green on the surface of Manson's 'Birth Windows': 'I saw you expecting me'.<sup>55</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Meiling Cheng, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Sight', in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. by Amelia Jones (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 29–31 (p. 31).
- <sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language' (1974), in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 89–136 (p. 97; p. 122).
- <sup>3</sup> Barbara Johnson writes that the question of gender 'haunts him [Mallarmé] from the very beginning: is writing a gendered act? [...in 'Don du poème'] The opposition between male and female is an opposition between half-dead language and nourishing non-language. But while many writers have valued the woman as something extra-textual, such non-language is valued in Mallarmé's system not

because it is outside, but because it is *within*, the poetic text.' – Barbara Johnson, 'Les Fleurs du mal armé: Some Reflections on Intertextuality', in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. by Chaviva Hosek & Patricia Parker (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 264–280 (pp. 278–279).

- <sup>4</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Hérodiade*, in *The Poems In Verse (Poésies)*, trans. by Peter Manson (Oxford, Ohio: Miami University Press, 2012), pp. 60–89 (p. 83), ll. 118–122. Throughout this article, the translations I quote are Manson's.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79, ll. 81–82.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81, l. 103.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- <sup>8</sup> David Lloyd, 'Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Poems In Verse* Translation with notes by Peter Manson', first published in *Enclave Review* (Summer 2012), pp. 7–9. Text from PDF, copyright David Lloyd, p. 6. <<https://enclavereview.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/lloyd-peter-manson.pdf>> [accessed 1 January 2019].
- <sup>9</sup> Mazviita Chirimuuta, 'Touchy–Feely Colour', in *New Directions in Colour Studies*, ed. by Carole P. Biggam, Carole A. Hough, Christian J. Kay & David H. R. Simmons (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011), pp. 27–37 (p. 30).
- <sup>10</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 135.
- <sup>11</sup> Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Seattle & New York: Wave Books, 2009), p. 15.
- <sup>12</sup> Frederick A. A. Kingdom, 'Illusions of Colour and Shadow', in *New Directions in Colour Studies (ibid.)*, pp. 3–11 (pp. 3–4).
- <sup>13</sup> *Bluets*, p. 20.
- <sup>14</sup> Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (London: Arrow Books, 2010), p. 247.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Poems In Verse*, p. 220.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59, l.1.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 217–218.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26–29 (pp. 26–27), ll. 9–12.
- <sup>19</sup> Robert Greer Cohn, 'Mallarmé's Windows', *Yale French Studies* No. 54, Mallarmé (1977), 22–31 (p. 22).
- <sup>20</sup> *The Poems In Verse*, pp. 28–29, l. 38.
- <sup>21</sup> 'I: Ouverture ancienne d'Hérodiade', *Ibid.*, pp. 60–67 (pp. 60–61), ll. 17–18.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 'II: Scène', pp. 68–85 (pp. 78–79), ll. 86–90.
- <sup>23</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (Summer 1976), 875–893 (p. 876)
- <sup>24</sup> 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 883.
- <sup>25</sup> Monique Wittig, 'The Category of Sex' (1876/1982), in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 1–8 (p. 8).
- <sup>26</sup> 'The Point of View: Universal or Particular?' (1980), in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, pp. 59–67 (pp. 59–60).
- <sup>27</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past' (1939), in *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), pp. 78–160 (pp. 78–80).
- <sup>28</sup> Callie Gardner, 'Terminology', *Granta* 144: The Online Edition (14 November 2018): <<https://granta.com/terminology/>> [accessed 1 January 2019].
- <sup>29</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'This Sex Which Is Not One', in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter & Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 23–33 (p. 28).

- <sup>30</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990), pp. 107–108.
- <sup>31</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language' (1974), in *The Kristeva Reader*, *ibid.*, p. 97.
- <sup>32</sup> *This Sex Which Is Not One*, pp. 9–22 (p. 10).
- <sup>33</sup> Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), pp. 22–30 (p. 27).
- <sup>34</sup> Pipilotti Rist, *Ever Is Over All* (1997), MOMA. <<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81191>> [accessed 1 January 2019]. Beyoncé Knowles references Rist's *Ever Is Over All* in her 'visual album' *Lemonade* (Parkwood Entertainment/Columbia Records, 2016), which also meditates on colour. In the video for 'Hold Up', Beyoncé breaks car windows with a baseball bat, wearing a carefree yellow dress. She swaps Rist's 'ruby slippers' for bare feet with toenails painted red, and outdoes Rist's performer by smashing a piñata, a shop window, and, eventually, the camera itself, making colour abruptly fade from the image. – Beyoncé, 'Hold Up.' YouTube, 4 September 2011. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeonBmeFR8o>> [accessed 1 January 2019].
- <sup>35</sup> Pipilotti Rist, 'Color Is Dangerous', interview by Christian Lund at the Hayward Gallery, London, November 2011, Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, <<http://channel.louisiana.dk/video/pipilotti-rist-color-dangerous?page=27>> [accessed 1 January 2019].
- <sup>36</sup> David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2000), pp. 22–23.
- <sup>37</sup> David Batchelor, *Cluster Silhouette* (2016), <<http://www.davidbatchelor.co.uk/works/2D/>> [accessed 1 January 2019].
- <sup>38</sup> Meiling Cheng, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Sight', in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, *ibid.*, p. 29.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- <sup>40</sup> Victoria Finlay, *Colour: Travels Through the Paintbox* (London: Holder and Stoughton, 2002), p. 319.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.
- <sup>43</sup> 'L'Azur', *The Poems In Verse* pp. 46–49 (pp. 48–49), ll. 29–36.
- <sup>44</sup> Barbara Johnson, 'Les Fleurs du mal armé: Some Reflections on Intertextuality', in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, *ibid.*, p. 274.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 277–278.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.
- <sup>48</sup> 'Don du poème', *The Poems In Verse*, pp. 58–59, l. 10.
- <sup>49</sup> David Lloyd, 'Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Poems In Verse* Translation with notes by Peter Manson', *ibid.*
- <sup>50</sup> 'L'Azur', pp. 46–47, ll. 9–12.
- <sup>51</sup> Peter Manson, 'Girl born without a mother: the posthumous Mallarmé', *The Enclave Review* (Spring 2011), 5–6.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- <sup>53</sup> *Hérodias*, 'II: Scène', pp. 84–85, ll. 130–134.
- <sup>54</sup> *The Poems in Verse*, p. 222.
- <sup>55</sup> Peter Manson, 'Birth Windows', *For the Good of Liars* (London: Barque Press, 2006), p. 15, ll. 4–13.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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