

Rendering “Misster E” in French: Questions of Nonbinary Language in a Grammatical–Gender Language

Editorial

The cover of [volume 8 of *Revue YOUR Review* \(2021\)](#) features a painting of Misster E, the nonbinary, “gender-bending, glamorous drag king” alter ego of the artist and one of the authors of this essay, Natalia Bonczek (Bonczek, 2021a). As expressed in the artist’s statement published in the volume:

Misster E is encouraging us to write our own stories about gender and who we are. Through this alter ego, I present a more confident self, unharmed by the harsh binaries of expectations of “normal woman” or “normal man.” This painting may be uncomfortable because it challenges these norms, but I also hope to create space for alternative interpretations of gender and the performance of it. (Bonczek, 2021a)

The statement accompanying the artwork featured in volume 8 was composed in English and the journal was tasked with translating it into French. The straightforward English sentence, “through this alter ego, I present a more confident self, unharmed by the harsh binaries of expectations of ‘normal woman’ or ‘normal man,’” carefully articulated a concept of “self” that Bonczek left ungendered, but required further investment in nonbinary expression in French. Who is presenting the “more

Figure 1. Natalia Bonczek. (2019). *Misster E* [acrylic on canvas, 32”x36”]



Editorial

confident self”? Is it the artist as undersigned, or is it the alter ego? If the alter ego, can we assume that since they are a drag *king* that they subscribe to a masculine identity? The statement refers to them as “gender-bending”; their name is written as a composite of “Miss,” “Mister,” and “Mystery”; and the expressed objective of the painting, and of the existence of Misster E themselves, is to “challenge [the] norms” of “harsh binaries,” and “to create space for alternative interpretations of gender and the performance of it.” Nouns in French traditionally carry gender, which when not biological is usually arbitrarily assigned; but when referring especially to humans, it is usually expected to match up with the gender identity of that person. And the options available in conventional French required defining Misster E through the “harsh binarities” of either masculine or feminine grammar. So, what gender is Bonczek’s “self” performing? What grammatical gender will be placed on a nonbinary persona? Is it “un moi” (masculine, singular) or “une moi” (feminine singular)? Is the self “confiant” and “épargné” (masculine, singular) or “confiante” and “épargnée” (feminine, singular)? Obviously the binary options made available by conventional French usage fails the artist, fails the gender-bending drag king, fails the translator, and fails the reader. An editorial choice was required. An ideological stance was taken.

The editors felt it important to include the artist in the French translation of elements of the English original where confronting gendered language could not be (so coyly) evaded. Our discussion highlighted some of the concerns of the editors and preferences of the artist.

The editors presented a preliminary translation but expressed doubts as to whether it expressed what the artist wanted. There was nothing to suggest, out of context, that the French translation communicated anything different from the English original. But, as discussed here, the English version was able to leave critical elements of information undefined due to the nature of the English language; the French translation introduces gender-related information foreign to the English version. It was imperative that the editors get this right. The editors had proposed, for the sentence “Through this alter ego, I present a more confident self, unharmed by the harsh binaries of expectations of ‘normal woman’ or ‘normal man,’” the following translation: “À travers cet alter ego, je présente une image d’une moi plus confiante, épargnée des binarités dures des attentes d’être ‘une femme normale’ ou ‘un homme normal,’” but highlighted some concerns to the artist:

So you are presenting a more confident “self,” through your alter ego. We have translated “self” as “moi” (which would literally be like saying “a more confident me”), but the “moi” in this translation is feminine (“une moi”). This

Editorial

is the tricky part of French—it has grammatical gender that is essentially binary. There are some generally unconventional mechanisms that some people use to get around binary grammatical gender, but they are not all widely accepted. Are you comfortable with the “moi” being a “feminine” one, “une (which is feminine, as opposed to the masculine ‘un’) moi”? The confidence is expressed through the alter ego, according to your statement, so the expression “une moi” is something that we wanted to check with you about. Essentially, is the “self” that you are talking about a self that you wish to use the feminine article “une” with? This would also affect the form of “confiante” ‘confident’ and “épargnée” ‘unharmed,’ which are currently in their feminine forms. (K. Reynolds, personal communication, July 21, 2021)

The response of the artist was that it was important to try to employ language that did not corner themselves or their alter ego into any sort of binarity—this is precisely what the painting and the statement to be crafted sought to express! The editors and the artist did some research to uncover what mechanism would best meet the needs of the French statement. The artist sought counsel from a drag friend in Montreal, who noted that often the approach of the type “ami.e” or “étudiant.e” is employed there; but nobody felt that this was a satisfactory solution, given its dependency on masculine-feminine grammatical gender binarity, and given the fact that other approaches have been developed that better meet the needs of the nonbinary community. The editors proposed “um moi” instead of “une moi”; “confianx” in place of “confiante”; and “épargnæ” to substitute “épargnée.” Aware that a portion of the reading public might be encountering nonbinary language for the first time, the editors suggested “confianx” and “épargnæ” from among some other commonly used options because they felt that they were the most explicit. These forms were the least likely to be interpreted by the uninitiated as “errors” by using orthographic formulae not traditionally employed in French, and they most boldly asserted expressions of non-binarity: “x,” which has gained significant traction in other languages, most notably in Spanish and the “Latinx” community; and “æ,” which presents as its own carrier of data, for even if it is interpreted as the fusion of two independent graphemes <a> and <e>, these graphemes are *not* typically used in binary opposition in French (the way <o> and <a> are in Spanish, for example). In comparison with the now-slightly more traditional “ami.e” option, still rooted in binarity, the artist confirmed their approval of the proposed language, judging it to be “the more accessible option,” for “it seems to read better and we are making a clear statement” (N. Bonczek, personal communication, July 25, 2021).

Another issue of interest concerned the French word “drag-king,” obviously a calque of the English word. “King” is one of those words in English that *is* gendered,

Editorial

like “girl,” “brother,” “son,” and “aunt,” which differ from words like “waiter” and “waitress” whose gender is only distinguished by their suffixes, “-er” and “-ress.” But the artist’s drag persona is, as stated, “gender-bending” and nonbinary. The editors consulted the Government of Canada’s *Gender and Sexual Diversity Glossary*, in which “drag-king” is clearly marked as grammatically masculine in French, and “drag-queen” marked as grammatically feminine. The editors communicated to the artist, “The rationale that they use is that people who do drag may or may not have a nonbinary identity, but the ‘drag king’ themselves is a masculine persona and the ‘drag queen’ a feminine one, regardless of the gender identity of the performer,” questioning, however, whether this source had any force in this particular context: “Is this something you agree with, or do you want to have a more radical take on this?” (K. Reynolds, personal communication, July 24, 2021). The artist describes their nonbinary drag persona as “a gender-bending, glamorous drag king,” ultimately translated as “un drag-king enchanteur qui brouille des genres” (Bonczek, 2021b). Initially unsettled by this choice, the editors ask: “How could ‘Misster E’ who is ‘gender-bending’ be ‘un drag-king enchanteur’ (*un, enchanteur* = masculine)?” They countered with proposing “the nonbinary ‘um drag-king enchantaire,” noting that “a more common way to do ‘enchantaire’ would be ‘enchateureuse,’ which is a combination of ‘enchanteur’ and ‘enchanteuse,’ but this is objectionable for the same reason that ‘ami.e’ is objectionable insofar as it is just a combination of masculine and feminine” (K. Reynolds, personal communication, July 24, 2021). In the same exchange, the editors also exhibited an opposing view:

But some would argue that *drag-king* is like *personne*—it has a grammatical gender that is what it is, regardless of the identifying gender of the person. Others would say that by virtue of your using the word “drag-king” and not something else, you are necessarily accepting the masculine grammatical gender assignment. (K. Reynolds, personal communication, July 24, 2021)

The artist’s response, while bringing the project no closer to completion, was profound and personal:

Yes, a nonbinary “King” may be gendered but I have been to some drag performances by nonbinary individuals who present as nonbinary kings and queens. I’m sure there will be a time when there will be a name for a fully nonbinary performance, but Misster E is a King who is nonbinary, glamorous, gender-bending as a commentary of how we may understand masculinity and how one may take this on. Misster E is taking on the masculine role of

Editorial

King but in a Queer, and disruptive form. The King persona is very important for the statement as this project was to point to how femme Queens have been more “accepted” or perhaps shown as a spectacle in mainstream culture, but alternative understandings of masculinity have not been widely celebrated or even considered. There is and has been a similar issue with butch women and trans men—this is not saying that trans women, queens, and femmes have had it easy—quite the opposite because this has, at times, made it very dangerous to be femme. My character is presenting alternative understandings of queer masculinity and in this way, Misster E is a King—exploring masculinity without binary of hetero-normative expectations of “manhood.”

My performance of drag would be in some way gendered because as an assigned female, growing up as a woman, this project was to explore a confident trans* nonbinary persona. I deeply considered how I would present this persona, whether as a queen or a king or in another form, but the “King” performance is important because it is my exploration beyond normative womanhood. (N. Bonczek, personal communication, July 25, 2021).

In the interest of practically resolving the question, the editors asked explicitly:

Shall we assign masculine grammatical gender to “king”? You stand by your personal choice of “king,” though as a trans, nonbinary persona. But by choosing “king” are you also choosing the *grammatical* gender that almost all French speakers would assign to that word (even, I think, in the form of “drag-king”? Again, just because one is a trans, nonbinary *personne* (French for ‘person’), they don’t get to eliminate the *grammatical* gender that the language has assigned to the word for “person,” which is feminine for no reason pertaining to so-called natural gender. (K. Reynolds, personal communication, July 26, 2021).

The parties ultimately agreed that challenging the grammatical gender assigned to the word “king” was not necessary. The artist retained the grammatical understanding of “drag-king” as a performance of queer masculinity: “Yes, I agree that we should keep the word ‘drag-king’ as it would be traditionally gendered in French. [...] I think it will remain clear and respectful that Misster E is nonbinary, but performing as a King” (N. Bonczek, personal communication, July 27, 2021).

Editorial

Once everyone had arrived at a point where they were comfortable with the French rendering of the artist's statement for the painting "Misster E," a final hurdle had to be faced: what was the artist's role, the translator's role, and the editors' role in employing language that had not been affirmed by the governing French-language institutions, and that had not even gained universal acceptance in the trans and nonbinary Francophone world? Would the three words "um," "confianx," and "épargnæ" (Bonczek, 2021b) appear as errors to readers who had not been exposed to these new, still narrowly accepted "conventions"? Did the choices warrant explanation in a footnote? What is this journal's role in promoting new language, and how would it most effectively perform that role? What is the journal's responsibility to readers? What is its responsibility to the community of which Bonczek is a representative? Would highlighting for readers the fact that the journal is using unconfirmed language by creating an explanatory note tacitly express a reluctance to accept it? Or would it help to hasten the comprehension and acceptance of the innovative approach on the part of the reader? Ultimately, it was decided that such innovative shifts do not necessarily need explanation, that their mere use, without apology, without recognition of their "deviation" from the norm, is the most effective way to create space for "alternative interpretations of gender and the performance of it." The context of the statement, it was judged, fostered an understanding that significant measures must be taken in the domain of language to reflect desired changes in the social reality. The English original was unknowingly destined to guide our decision: "I present a more confident self, unharmed by the harsh binaries" (Bonczek, 2021a). What more would be needed to justify writing, "je présente une image d'um moi plus confianx, épargnæ des binarités dures" (Bonczek, 2021b)?

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Editorial

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