

SELF-TRANSLATION, REWRITING OR SELF-CENSORSHIP? THE AMENDMENT OF A MISOGYNISTIC LYRIC IN TAYLOR SWIFT'S SONG 'BETTER THAN REVENGE'

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ABSTRACT: In 2023, American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift released a re-recorded version of her 2010 song 'Better than Revenge,' altering a lyric that originally disparaged a woman because of her sexuality. Through an analysis of the popularisation of feminist discourse in recent years and its direct impact in Swift's feminist stance, the study aims to understand the motivations and effects of the amendment, questioning whether it is an act of (self-) censorship influenced by ideological and perhaps even commercial factors. To this end, the research engages with concepts such as Canli's (2018) intralingual self-translation, Lefevere's (2017[1992]) rewriting, and Pesen's (2019) re-lyricizing. The results open a discussion on the implications of rewriting history, while they also highlight the relevance of translation in music as a mechanism for negotiating identities (Susam-Saraeva, 2018) and for artistic appropriation.

KEYWORDS: Taylor Swift; Feminism; Intralingual Self-translation; Rewriting; Censorship

1. Introduction

Taylor Swift is one of the most influential artists of the 21st century music industry. Beyond her role of singer and performer, she has distinguished herself as a songwriter through her storytelling skills. From her debut in 2006, Swift has released twelve studio albums, writing or cowriting all of her songs. While she has transitioned across multiple musical genres, the self-referential, narrative and literary-influenced qualities of her work have remained consistent, reflecting a capacity for adaptation that "responds to commercial pressures to evolve while retaining a coherent musical identity" (Sloan, 2021, p.1).

When her first six albums were sold without her consent in 2019, she decided to re-record all of them to gain full control and ownership over her work (see Polite, 2025). Although she recently acquired the original masters, she had already re-recorded and released four of these albums, which bear the distinctive subtitle "Taylor's Version". Even if they closely replicate the original productions, one significant lyrical change stands out in 'Better than Revenge,' a track from her third studio album, *Speak Now* (2010). Its re-recorded version was released in July 2023 and remains largely faithful to the original, except for one line that "had received criticism for 'slut shaming'" (King, 2025, p. 123), that is, diminishing a woman's value because of her sexual life.

Although this lyrical change has been briefly addressed in some academic works (see King, 2025; Martínez Martín, 2025; Cray, 2025), it has never been considered from the perspective of Translation Studies. Given the 13-year gap separating both versions, a period that framed the "popularisation of feminism in the media" (Jackson, 2018, p. 33) and Swift's increasing engagement with political discourse, the lyrical change might constitute a distinctive example of ideological rewriting (Lefevere, 2017). To address this issue from Translation Studies would therefore mean to acknowledge the role of translation in the

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way that (pop) music negotiates and reflects sociopolitical changes. The present study therefore aims to investigate the translational process of the amended lyric, why it was produced, and what effects it brings.

Methodologically, the study draws from ‘The outward turn in translation studies’ (Bassnett and Johnston, 2019) which has consolidated new perspectives of what our discipline can study and what translation really can do (Blumczynski, 2023). Following Galvão’s (2025) line of thought that songwriting is a translational practice, and the metaphor of Borges’ (1999[1939]) Pierre Menard (Steiner, 1975; Arrojo, 2004, 2007; Chaudhuri, 2007), I will argue that Taylor’s Versions are translations of the original records determined by a quest for appropriation. Additionally, I will delve into the concepts of ‘intralingual translation’ (Canlı, 2018) and ‘relyricizing’ (Pesen, 2019), this latter being a type of rewriting (Lefevere, 2017), while understanding variability as an inherent aspect of songs (Kirby, 2011; Yagoda, 2011). I will also conduct a content analysis between ‘Better than Revenge’ (BtR) and ‘Better than Revenge (Taylor’s Version)’ (BtRTV), solely focused on the verbal changes, which will be framed within the study of the popularisation of feminist discourse and celebrity feminism (Jackson, 2018, 2021; Chidgey, 2021).

2. Literature review

2.1 Translation as appropriation

Understanding translation beyond the interlingual instance that Jakobson (1959) named ‘proper’ is to acknowledge in its etymology a process of moving, carrying and transferring (Arrojo, 2007; Blumczynski, 2023; Vidal Claramonte, 2025). As Chaudhuri (2007, p. 90) reminds us, “to translate (or to read a translation) is to affirm one’s conviction that something can be ‘carried across’ languages: that a verbal message does not inhere only in the words”. In contrast to the traditional idea of a word-centred operation involving different languages, Bassnett and Johnston’s ‘outward turn’ highlights the need “to expand our ideas about translation beyond the linguistic and to seek a redefinition of what translation actually is” (2019, p. 187). As a matter of fact, translation is “a process necessary to most forms of expression” (Minors, 2013, p. 1) that “can operate across modalities, not just as a static, instrumental interlingual transfer” (Galvão, 2025, p. 164).

Galvão’s (2025) proposal of ‘songwriting as translation’ continues a discussion that challenges conventional notions of translation in its relation to music (Minors, 2013; Apter and Herman, 2016; Susam-Saraeva, 2018; Bennett, 2024; etc.). Songwriting, as the process of “crafting both words and music”, is an “embodied creative practice that resists monolingual paradigms and attests to the plurality of lived experience” (Galvão, 2025, p. 145). In Swift’s career, songwriting has been essential “to create a sense of self in an industry dependent on fracturing her identity into myriad, saleable parts” (Sloan, 2021, p. 13). Consequently, if songwriting is a way of translating experience, and, furthermore, if translation implies reflecting on how meaning travels (Vidal Claramonte, 2022), Swift’s re-recorded songs and their new meanings constitute a relevant issue for scholarly investigation within the field of Translation Studies.

In the volume *Taylor Swift and the philosophy of re-recording: The art of Taylor's versions* edited by Brandon Polite (2025), several chapters discuss the ontology of the re-recorded albums. For Irvin, they may be considered conceptual art because they raise “questions about the nature of art, the artist’s role, and—increasingly—the institutions and power structures in which artists and their works are caught up” (Irvin, 2025, p. 52). It is important to remember that, although currently Swift owns the original records, she embarked on the re-recording project in an attempt to assert ownership of her life’s work. By challenging the inequitable practices within the music industry, Swift aspired to obtain the rights she never had and at the same time set a precedent for artists who want to own their work. The major difference is, therefore, that “conceptual art has often involved appropriation”, while Taylor’s Versions involve “self-appropriation” (Irvin, 2025, pp. 53-54).

Polite (2025b) explores the metaphysical condition of the re-recorded albums questioning if Swift’s process has been an actual reclamation of her work or only a metaphorical one. After applying the view of formalist aesthetic theory and intentionalism, he concluded that re-recording could not “produce genuine instances” of the albums, offering thus a merely metaphorical reclamation (Polite, 2025b, p. 110). This view mirrors the questions “how can one translate a work without making of it a different work? And if different, does it constitute a translation of that work?” (Chaudhuri, 2007, p. 90).

Taking a different approach, King (2025, p. 118) compares the Taylor’s Versions to facsimiles or to Andy Warhol’s *Brillo boxes* (1964): “both could, to the cursory or untrained audience, easily be mistaken for the original”. The difference lies not only in their production, but in the context that surrounds them. Taylor’s Versions perform a legal act as well as a “series of very significant financial acts” (King, 2025, p. 130). Accordingly, “the meaning that we take from these albums as full works will clearly be different” (p. 121).

Regardless of which perspective one adopts, it is clear, nonetheless, that even if there are few outstanding differences, these re-recordings “aren’t perfect duplicates of the original albums” (Polite, 2025a, p. 7). Extending this discussion to the field of Translation Studies raises a central question: can they be identified as translations?

To answer this, my point of departure will be Jorge Luis Borges’ (1999) short story ‘Pierre Menard, author of the *Quixote*,’ where a fictional French author takes on the task of composing a contemporary *Quixote*, but

he did not want to compose *another* *Quixote*, which surely is easy enough—he wanted to compose *the* *Quixote*. [...] his goal was never a mechanical transcription of the original; he had no intention of *copying* it. His admirable ambition was to produce a number of pages which coincided —word for word and line for line— with those of Miguel de Cervantes (Borges, 1999, p. 91; in all Borges’ quotes, the emphasis is from the original).

Menard’s mission has been described as “the most acute, most concentrated commentary anyone has offered on the business of translation” (Steiner, 1975, p. 70). Since Menard’s *Quixote* “gets to exist in a different context, acquiring a life of its own” (Arrojo, 2007, p. 23; my translation), Borges’ story calls into question the notion of ‘original’ by proposing that

“translation, in the same way as reading, is no longer an activity that protects the ‘original’ meanings of an author, but functions instead as a *producer* of meanings” (Arrojo, 2007, p. 24; my translation, her emphasis). Consequently, Menard and his (un)original work offer a theory of translation that shows how “with no outward change of state”, the (translated) text may enter “an indefinitely prolonged and varied extension of its being” (Chaudhuri, 2007, p. 89).

As with Swift’s re-recordings, Menard’s *Quixote* entails a recontextualised iteration and “a profoundly original work, identical with Cervantes’s and yet radically different in purport” (Chaudhuri, 2007, p. 87-88). In light of these considerations, it is worth recalling King’s (2025) comparison of Taylor’s Versions and Warhol’s *Brillo boxes*: they could be mistaken for the originals, but *they are not* the originals. Is that not what a translation is: a new original crafted for its own new target?

Though Menard’s initial method was to “learn Spanish, return to Catholicism, fight against the Moor or Turk, forget the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918—*be* Miguel de Cervantes”, he soon realised that “being, somehow, Cervantes, and arriving thereby at the *Quixote*—that looks to Menard less challenging (and therefore less interesting) than continuing to be Pierre Menard and coming to the *Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard*” (Borges, 1999, p. 91). In Swift’s case, she appropriated her past work through her present means and experiences.

Inevitably, Taylor’s Versions are affected by “context and other seemingly slight differences” (King, 2025, p. 120). Contextually speaking, almost everything has changed: her voice, her label, her number of followers, her motivations, the quality of musical production, the range of her influence, her political views... In this line, it is important to consider Swift’s shifts through albums and the meticulous crafting of her persona in each ‘era’ (Lyon, 2019; Sloan, 2021; Polite, 2025a; Cray, 2025; Cantalamessa, 2025), as her “celebrity-text is continuously altered and carefully reconstructed when a new album is released” (Driessen, 2022, p. 93).

Another important factor is *The Eras Tour*, a series of nearly 150 concerts across more than 20 countries from March 2023 to December 2024. In its performances, Swift revisited each of the ten (later eleven) albums she had released up to that point, evoking the distinctive elements of their respective eras, “consciously and explicitly leaning into the same notion of a post-persona persona, deliberately highlighting the ‘eras’ as a series of characters she has played on the way to where she finds herself now” (Cray, 2025, p. 164). The concurrency of the tour and the release of some Taylor’s Versions implies that she “puts her mastery of personas as aesthetic tools on full display while simultaneously—and somewhat defiantly—crafting a ‘no persona’ persona” (p. 165). Consequently, just as Menard’s *Quixote* could only exist through Menard’s, and not Cervantes’, experience, the Taylor’s Versions were created through this post-persona persona, as a translated work across eras.

Swift’s re-recordings constitute an example of how translation can also involve an “institutional, personal, and political significance of self-appropriation” (Cantalamessa,

2025, p. 170). If “translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history” (Apter, 2006, p. 6), Taylor’s Versions, understood as translations, fulfil Swift’s intention of owning her work as they help reposition the legal agency of artists over their creations. In light of these considerations, the re-recorded songs become translations that reassert “the value and importance of her teenage concerns and artistic production from her new position as an influential cultural figure” (Irvin, 2025, p. 55). Within this re-recording project, translation has functioned as “a significant medium of subject re-formation and political change” (Apter, 2006, p. 6) with no transformations at the verbal level. Except for one particular song that does involve linguistic shifts: ‘Better than Revenge (Taylor’s Version)’.

2.2 Intralingual self-translation

The type of transferring addressed in BtRTV leads back to Jakobson’s tripartite division, and, more particularly, to his well-known categorisation of intralingual translation or ‘rewording’: “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language” (1959, p. 233). I have argued that Swift’s re-recordings are acts of translation, within which BtRTV represents a unique example of ‘intra-lingual self-translation’ (Canlı, 2018).

Grutman and Bolderen (2014, p. 323) define self-translation as “the process of transferring one’s own writings into another language, and the product thereof, i.e., the self-translated text”. In self-translation, the same authorial entity unfolds in at least two different systems (Placidi, 2023, p. 123). These are not necessarily linguistic systems, as I will argue drawing on Canlı (2018), who has challenged the assumption that self-translation can only be bilingual, providing a useful framework for examining intralingual self-translations. Through a thorough study of William Faulkner as “intr-auto-translauthor”, that is, “an author who translates his own work into the same language” (2018, p. 59), Canlı expands the notion of intralingual translation “with a focus on the author’s translational actions as the translator of his/her own text” (2018, p. 45).

In some interpretations, self-translation functions like any other form of translation, and the resulting text may not hold a status comparable to the original (Popovič, 1976). However, other scholars suggest that self-translation produces a ‘second original’ (Matelo and Spoturno, 2014) or at least a translated text with “a similar status” to the original (Arrojo, 2004, p. 31). As it has been previously noted, Swift’s re-recorded versions are nearly identical to the earlier ones, with the key difference being her ownership of these ‘new originals’. Standing out among these, BtRTV illustrates the variability and updating necessity that makes part of some songs at an intralingual level (see Kirby, 2011; Yagoda, 2011). It can therefore be understood as a “new original” (Placidi, 2023, p.123) that blurs the borders between Swift’s teenage and adult voices —something usual in self-translation processes.

Matelo and Spoturno (2014) identify three common motives for self-translation: reluctance from authors to be translated by others, a desire to reach a broader audience,

and economic purposes. In Swift's case, the two latter motivations are involved, deeply immersed in a politically charged background. The identitarian and political systems in which the translated version unfolds bring into discussion the consideration of an ideological rewriting presumably influenced by censorship or even self-censorship, concepts that will be now explored.

2.3 Rewriting, relyricizing and (self-)censorship

Since André Lefevere's seminal work *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, the relationship between translation and rewriting has remained a central concern in Translation Studies. As he has stated, "translation is the most recognisable type of rewriting, [...] it is able to project the image of an author and/or a (series of) work(s) in another culture, lifting that author and/or those works beyond the boundaries of their culture of origin" (Lefevere, 2017, p. 7).

One of Lefevere's examples of rewriting is the literary classic *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which was initially conceived as a personal diary, but later underwent some changes in order to be published as a novel. In this process of transformation, the author herself and others included different arrangements aiming at the "'construction' of the image of a writer" (2017, p. 45). This shows another example of intralingual self-translation, where there exist two versions of Anne Frank, person and author, blurred inside the same work:

once Anne Frank took the decision to rewrite for publication what Anne Frank had written, the person Anne Frank split up into a person and an author, and the author began to rewrite in a more literary manner what the person had written (Lefevere, 2017, p. 54)

This double role, one could argue, mirrors the two versions of Swift blurred inside the re-recorded song: the teenager who wrote the original lyrics, and the 33-year-old woman who rewrote its most controversial line.

Derived from Lefevere's framework, Pesen proposes another key concept for this study: 'relyricizing,' which refers to "the rewritten lyrics" as "a subcategory of 'rewriting'" (2019, p. 83). The different kinds of rewriters involved in musical production, namely "song resingers, reperformers, relyricists, [...] are always dependent upon 'patrons'" (Pesen, 2019, p. 84). Patronage is a determinant factor participating in rewriting processes and comprising "the powers (persons, institutions) that can further or hinder the reading, writing, and rewriting of literature" (Lefevere, 2017, p. 12)—or music, as in this case. Swift's initial patron was the music label Big Machine Records, which produced the first version of BtR and later sold Swift's work. Over time, Swift evolved into a global cultural phenomenon with a "loyal and very committed fanbase" (Driessen, 2022, p. 93). Consequently, the re-recorded version had a different and more complex patron, which incorporated the fans as a significant financial supporter, bearing as much—if not more—influence as her new label.

In this regard, it is crucial "to focus on the role of song translation in the (re)writing and shaping of history" (Pesen, 2019, p. 82). Ideology emerges here as a central factor, as it:

dictates the basic strategy the translator is going to use and therefore also dictates solutions to problems concerned with both the 'universe of discourse' expressed in the original (objects, concepts, customs belonging to the world that was familiar to the writer of the original) and the language the original itself is expressed in. (Lefevere, 2017, p. 31)

Although a 13-year span may appear relatively brief, the language BtR is originally expressed in has become challenging for the universe of discourse in which its translation was produced. In recent times, the growing awareness of social inequalities has led to a tendency of rejection towards ideologies deemed discriminatory, a paradigm shift that "has re-shaped narratives and adjusted thresholds of tolerance, themselves the result of a cultural politics ineluctably absorbed with identitarian issues, that have become key determinants of the sensitivities of cultural reception" (Xu and Johnston, 2025, p. 2). This pursuit of a 'political correctness' has conditioned different cultural products, as for example the works of British author Roald Dahl, recently revised in order to eliminate racist or misogynistic ideas, which some have considered an act of censorship (see Pope and Fodor, 2025).

Apter and Herman illustrate a particular case of censored rewriting in music: a popular English operetta from 1885, *The Mikado*, which originally included the derogatory term 'nigger'. Subsequent productions and scores in English replaced this term with less pejorative alternatives (see Apter and Herman, 2016), which serves as another example of intralingual translation responding to ideological changes. As the authors explain, "it is often not acceptable for translators to ignore the taboos of their own time and place. Such taboos sometimes required translators to radically change or even destroy an original work" (Apter and Herman, 2016, p. 102).

One last example is the self-censorship undertaken by the pop punk band Paramore. One of their most successful hits, *Misery Business* from the album *Riot!* (2007), was widely criticised because of its slut-shaming line "once a whore you're nothing more". Lead singer Hayley Williams publicly stated her current disagreement with these words, and the band stopped performing it on stage for several years despite its popularity (see Andrew, 2022).

These cases of censorship highlight the role of political and ideological tensions in musical expression. These tensions are "involved in the production, recording, and distribution stages of music, but also in the multitude of political functions music can fulfil at the consumption stage, even when the songs in question originally did not have any political messages" (Susam-Saraeva 2018, p. 360). Paramore's example is particularly relevant since *Misery Business* may have served as inspiration for Swift, who has recognised the influence of this band in the creation of her album *Speak Now* (Swift, 2023a). It therefore serves as a "successful prior censorship" (Merkle, 2018, p. 247).

This discussion has established the concepts and critical lens through which the forthcoming analysis will be conducted. The understanding of Taylor's Versions as acts of translation, the introduction of the notions of intralingual self-translation and relyricizing, and the consideration of (self-)censorship as one ideological engine participating in the

rewriting of history, will be the point of departure to analyse the two versions of BtR in the following sections.

3. Analysis of Swift's versions

After releasing her second studio album *Fearless* (2008), the most awarded country album in history, Swift faced scepticism regarding her actual songwriting skills. This shaped the creation of her next album, *Speak Now* (2010): "I decided I would write it entirely on my own. I figured, they couldn't give all the credit to my cowriters if there weren't any" (Swift, 2023b). Both the original album and its re-recorded version list Swift as the only songwriter. Swift's decision parallels McClary's (2002, p. 150) observation about the impact of Madonna's success and image on critical discourse: "in a world in which many people assert that she (along with most other women artists) can't have meant what one sees and hears because she isn't smart enough, claims of intentionality, agency, and authorship become extremely important strategically".

In the prologue to the original album, as part of a CD-leaflet containing the lyrics, Swift equated the songs on this record to 'open letters' intended to convey her most profound emotions, describing BtR as one such letter, addressed "to a girl who stole something of mine" (Swift, 2010). She would later recognise this period (her last teenage years, from 18-20) as "the most emotionally turbulent" of her life (Swift, 2023b). The song's central theme is vengeance, as the title itself suggests, and it narrates the story of a teenage love triangle in which the narrator is left for another girl. Consequently, the narrator seeks to undervalue her romantic rival holding her accountable for everything, and disregards the agency of the male character.

Although the entire song is visceral, there is one particular line in the chorus that encapsulates and reinforces its misogynistic undertones, condemning the sexuality of the rival. Thirteen years later, however, the re-recorded version of *Speak Now* transformed that sole line and made *BtR* the only song to undergo a lyrical modification among the four re-recordings released to date.

Table 1. Lyrics of the original and the re-recorded songs.

BtR (2010)	BtRTV (2023)
she's not a saint, she's not what you think, she's an actress she's better known for the things that she does on the mattress.	she's not a saint, she's not what you think, she's an actress he was a moth to the flame, she was holding the matches.

Before the release of the re-recorded version, social media platforms hosted the complaints of fans who believed that the original lyrics "felt witty, wise, and sophisticated when sung by a teenager", but "may now appear naïve and even prejudiced and unfeminist" (Martínez Marín, 2025, p. 145). Consequently, the re-lyricized line aligns with the song's overall theme while eliminating the slut-shaming element. In the prologue to *Speak*

Now (*Taylor’s Version*), Swift (2023b) acknowledges the “unfiltered and potent” essence of the original record, yet makes no explicit mention of BtR or its lyrical change. She has not addressed the matter in any public medium either.

King’s analysis of the change notes distinct features in “the characters portrayed” (2025, p. 123) in each version, especially in the rival, who receives “a more flattering because more agentially assertive position” (2025, p. 123), resulting on Swift’s correction of “a common critique of (quasi-)adultery narratives cast under this gender rubric: that they pit women against each other, ignoring the man’s responsibility” (King, 2025, p. 123). Nevertheless, it is hard to infer any of this from a line that reinforces the man’s passivity, depicting him as a mere ‘moth’ unconsciously driven to matches that might even burn him, while the woman is still portrayed as conscious and responsible. For this reason, I agree with Paul’s remark that “beyond the inconsistent switch from present tense to past tense [...], the lyric doesn’t actually alter the message of the song in any meaningful way” (2023, n.p). In fact, the new line preserves the implicit male-centred narrative of female rivalry, which remains unchanged in other lines of the song like “no amount of vintage dresses gives you dignity” or “stealing other people’s toys on the playground won’t make you many friends”.

It is also worth noting that this is not the first instance in which Swift has altered a controversial lyric. The last time corresponds to her debut album, self-titled *Taylor Swift* (2006). The song ‘Picture to Burn’ originally included a line that was quickly deemed homophobic, which “Swift soon after re-recorded and edited into the otherwise unaltered track” (Cray, 2025, p. 167). Ever since this new version was released, it was included in every copy of the album and every performance, becoming therefore the ‘official version’.

Table 2. Lyrics of the original and the official songs.

First published version of ‘Picture to Burn’ (2006)	Re-released version of ‘Picture to Burn’ (ca. 2007/2008)
so go and tell your friends that I’m obsessive and crazy, that’s fine, I’ll tell mine you’re gay.	so go and tell your friends that I’m obsessive and crazy, that’s fine, you won’t mind if say...

This serves as a precedent illustrating what could be either Swift’s own awareness of the potential controversy surrounding her writing, or “a part that she only discovered thanks to some fans or critics (or perhaps her PR team)” (Polite, 2025b, p. 104). Nevertheless, this example differs from the rewriting of BtR “as this was an edit and re-release of a track, rather than a full re-recording, and was likely also done primarily for strategic, commercial reasons (i.e., not alienating gay fans) rather than as an intentional and robust, persona-driven commentary” (Cray, 2025, p. 167). Another key difference is that the issue in ‘Picture to Burn’ is limited to a single line, whereas the entire BtR carries misogynistic undertones. Consequently, one has to wonder what actually changes in the re-recorded song as a whole and what it implies.

4. 'Better than Revenge': Rewriting oneself's past perspective?

4.1 Feminism as a political and commercial force

Extratextually, the changes between the original and the translated versions involve the political climate surrounding Swift's persona. By translating her initial works into versions that she can now own, she was inevitably reconnecting with experiences, thoughts and emotions from her youth, and thus "revising her past self through the re-recordings" (Martínez Marín, 2025, p. 147).

While there may be many songs touching on topics she does not identify with anymore as an adult, BtR was the one that most obviously and directly confronted her with a past mindset. One significant change between her 'past self' and her 're-recordings self' was :

the revelation of her political convictions: once such beliefs became integrated into her performance persona, her lyrics and sentiments expressed through them can no longer be convincingly heard as [...] aligning with contemporary (i.e., Trump Era) conservative values (Cray, 2025, p. 157).

Her political stance was made public when she proclaimed herself against Republican candidate Marsha Blackburn in 2018. This is depicted in Swift's documentary *Miss Americana*, where she declared her desire to be "on the right side of history" (Swift, 2020). This documentary highlights "her increasing awareness of the role misogyny and political conservatism play in silencing her voice, diminishing her achievements, and perpetuating homophobia" (Ford and Macrossan, 2024, p. 934).

The feminist beliefs portrayed in the documentary are not an isolated case, as Swift and the general public have been exposed to "the recent embrace of feminism in the mainstream and popular media" (Rottenberg, 2019, p. 40). As social media enable the collective spreading of messages, with pop culture serving as a significant site of online feminist participation (Marwick, 2019), "feminism has become mainstreamed and popularised in ways that no one would have predicted just a decade ago" (Rottenberg, 2019, p. 41).

In this context, celebrity feminist discourse has become a complex issue, as it may sometimes lean more on a commercial strategy than on authentic activism (Jackson, 2021; Tong, 2024). Chidgey (2021, p. 1055) notes an emergent celebrity activism "mediated by practices of individualised consumer capitalism and oriented by explicit social justice frameworks". Accordingly, a related concept is that of 'neoliberal feminism', a variant that "not only disavows the socio-economic and cultural structures shaping our lives but also helps to produce a new feminist subject who is incited to accept full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care" (Rottenberg, 2019, p. 42). "What is clear is that today identifying as a feminist has become a source of social and cultural capital and pride" (Rottenberg, 2019, p. 41) and therefore commercial intentions may be a force shaping public feminist discourse.

With *Miss Americana* and Swift's more politically committed songwriting (see Smialek, 2021; Avdeeff, 2021; Oberst, 2024), some argue that "Swift translates her affects into feminist expressions" (Tong, 2024, p. 1). When highlighting her struggles as a woman inside the music industry, and determining her advocacy for human rights even against the current leading ideology in the United States, "Swift further constructs her persona: inviting audiences to conceive of her as someone who defiantly chooses to prioritise integrity over financial risk" (Cray, 2025, p. 158).

Nevertheless, her feminist stance and alliance to social movements have been said to reflect a neoliberal feminist view, playing an "exploitive and performative" role (Smialek, 2021, p. 99) as part of her public persona (see Avdeeff, 2021; Sloan, 2021; Ford and Macrossan, 2024; Oberst, 2024; Tong, 2024). However, even if Swift's activism follows a neoliberal tendency "in which the notion of activism is sold as part of a celebrity's social brand", it "remains poignant in its performativity" (Sloan, 2021, p. 13).

In this sense, whether commercially-centred or not, Swift's feminist discourse can have a significant impact as part of a globally influential musical genre:

Music and other discourses do not simply reflect a social reality that exists immutably on the outside; rather, social reality itself is constituted within such discursive practices. It is in accordance with the terms provided by [...] music that individuals are socialized (McClary, 2002, p. 21).

Accordingly, this study considers the marketable appeal of feminism capitalised by Swift, as well as her own awareness of her influence, as a significant frame for the re-lyricizing of BtR.

4.2 The rewriting of history

In such a delicate project of re-recording albums that had been known and played for over a decade, it was imperative to take into account the preferences of final consumers. Although the listeners of pop music and the general society have been part of its reception, Swift's main patron has overall been the fans, who were mobilised "to abandon the much-loved originals and shift to Taylor's Versions", something "essential to the project's success" (Irvin, 2025, p. 59).

In an 'era of feminism' (Flotow, 1997) that has gained prominence over the last decade, Swift uses the "transformation of her persona to 'move' her fans – affectively as well as effectively – to consider what she seems to see as 'the greater good', whether that is Politically (in terms of American politics) or politically (in terms of the politics of the music industry)" (Driessen, 2022, p. 95). The re-recording project, as a political act of artistic reclamation, thus entails the possibility to validate or to reshape certain elements of her past so that they are coherent with her present persona.

Paramore's case, presented in the first chapter, as well as the 'Picture to Burn' re-lyricizing, are cases of "successful prior censorship" (Merkle, 2018, p. 247). These kinds of practices may have set a precedent for Swift and her team during the re-recording

process, resulting in a censorship that might have been partially self-induced and partially encouraged by the expectations of her patron.

Studies have shown how, in the translations into English of Mozart and Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni*, "all versions resort to strategies aimed at drawing on the new receiver's culture. Whatever their own specificities, all versions tend to reduce the strangeness and otherness of the original text" (Degot, 2020, p. 135). Swift's re-lyricizing undergoes a similar process, because some of Swift's newer fans are unfamiliar with her past much as the audience receiving an interlingual translation is unfamiliar with the original. Swift's decision to change the specific lyric her public was most critical about (Paul, 2023; King, 2025), involves considering that "the encounter between new moral or religious ideas and those of the target context may be [...] perceived as threats to the integrity of the receiving culture" (Merkle, 2018, p. 238).

At first sight, eliminating a misogynistic line from a song might seem like an act of feminist rewriting. A feminist translator could assume "the right to change what she cannot approve of" (Flotow, 1997, p. 29). Another feminist translational practice is writing again the stories told by the patriarchy, shifting the women's roles from objects to subjects (Vidal Claramonte, 2022, p. 30). In BtRTV, this only occurs partially. As Bueno and Alonso¹ (2023) note, because Swift's amendment does not shift the meaning of the song, it does not change its original misogynistic theme. Even if omitting the song in the re-recorded album could seem like a solution that meets her present feminist values, the narrative of *Speak Now* "is incomplete without it" (Paul, 2023, n.p) and so is her entire project of re-recording as appropriation.

Rather than a feminist rewriting, it is what Bueno and Alonso (2023) describe as a rewriting of history: a solution that highlights her discomfort toward her previous belief system, embedded in a mechanism of censorship. Resulting from discomfort, this part of her past is neither examined, challenged, nor acknowledged as problematic: it is merely suppressed. This new original can therefore appear as dishonest, "changing the past" and avoiding to recapture "the emotional minefield the originals were created within" (Paul, 2023, n.p). Bueno and Alonso (2023) describe this re-recorded song as a time capsule that metonymically represents the culture of 2010, and Swift's choice is no other thing than erasing and rewriting history in order to avoid a potential confrontation with her past beliefs.

Even if feminism was not such a popular concern back in 2010, "there is a certain unpredictability of when and how songs can have political significance, regardless of whether they were initially intended for political purposes or not" (Susam-Saraeva, 2018, p. 361). The thirteen-year gap prior to BtRTV, infused with the popularisation of feminism in public discourse, endowed the song with political significance and highlighted an opposition with Swift's feminist stance. Because "any text carries the mark of its producer, which is also the mark of the ideological and cultural context in which it is produced"

¹ Bueno and Alonso's (2023) analyses were shared in a public podcast examining *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)*. Although it is not scholarly criticism, their contributions are meticulous and accurate.

(Flotow, 1997, p. 43), a new version anchored in a past context would not be coherent with the features the present producer wanted to articulate for her fans. As a result, an ideologically motivated rewriting of the song manipulated the original version in order to adapt it to the prevailing ideological current in which it would be reproduced (Lefevere, 2017, pp. 5-6). Since the new lyric still backs the misogynistic narrative situated at the heart of the song, solely rewriting the criticised 'slut-shaming' part may function more as an attempt to efface a problematic past statement rather than critically engaging with it.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I have explored the relyricizing of Taylor Swift's re-recorded version of 'Better than Revenge'. As part of her Taylor's Versions, understood as translations that granted her an appropriation of her initial work, the revision of BtR presents an intralingual self-translation, where Swift rewrites a past statement in order to reduce the distance with her current values. Since music "acts as a vehicle where people can negotiate their multiple identities" (Susam-Saraeva, 2018, p. 359), Swift's lyrical change should be seen as an outstanding part of the negotiation of her present identity through a translation-as-appropriation process.

In the reception context of the translated versions, the patronage embodied by the fans also played a significant role, because of their critique of the slut-shaming element via social media (Paul, 2023; King, 2025). Even though Swift is the only author of the change, it cannot be entirely considered self-censorship, having been partially induced by the expectations of her patron.

Regarding past relyricizings in Swift's trajectory, while the amendment of 'Picture to Burn' eliminated all the homophobic elements of the song, removing the problematic line in BtR merely sidesteps criticism of her slut-shaming writing and leaves the song's underlying misogyny unchanged. In her re-recording project, Swift was careful to depict the voyage to her past in a way that matched her present values, probing herself as "a master of self-appropriation, as she cultivates a persona that motivates intense and lucrative loyalty from her fans" (Irvin, 2025, p. 68).

Even if Swift does not make the song feminist, the change does make it less unfeminist, which may suffice to make it commercially acceptable and more congruent with the feminist stance she defends. Because of this, one would still have to question if Swift's choice is an attempt to erase an obsolete past which troubles present discourse. If so, is it a useful approach in her aim of being "on the right side of history" (Swift, 2020)? To stop reproducing slut-shaming narratives is certainly necessary, but it is also counterproductive to pretend they never existed, because no real learning nor progress can come without a clear vision of history. Certainly, Swift's case, among the many others existing in cultural production, does not have a single solution.

What can nevertheless be concluded is that in any of these practices, translation is an essential tool to communicate more social justice-oriented perspectives, but it might be insufficient if it is restricted to rewriting history with no involvement of reflexive

conversations. As human rights face an increasing threat in many places around the globe, the need for critical engagement is more urgent. Since pop music provides a worldwide and accessible platform for introducing subjects for discussion, it is also important to examine its motivations and effects from an academic perspective. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates the relevance of Translation Studies, for artists as well as audiences, to deeper understand the shifts both shaping and shaped by pop music and culture.

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