

Three Spanish Golden Age Sonnets

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It is generally recognised that the Spanish language reached its literary pinnacle of achievement in what is known as its Golden Age (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). The poetry of authors such as Luis de Góngora or Lope de Vega continues to be seen as the finest of their age.

The feminine rhyme is the norm in this poetry. Exquisite rhythms give a characteristic musical structure to the sonnet, and ever-present puns also require careful consideration and may become enormous obstacles to a successful translation. It is also necessary to weigh the significance of the different aesthetic and semantic levels of the original; the balancing act that literary translation often entails is mainly about consigning these levels into the target-language text as closely as possible to their original distribution without creating an absurdity in the process.

Readers should not consider translations as a definitive work, but rather, as Castro has suggested, “above all an ideational endeavour, a reaching towards hidden absolutes.”¹ Raffel has warned readers not to believe that a translation somehow is the original, either.² The fact remains that the translation can never be the original.

Any attempt at translating poetry ought to start by including as many hints of the original text’s characteristics as possible. Grossman writes that the purpose of translation is to find analogies, by re-creating “as far as possible, within the alien system of a second language, all the characteristics, vagaries, quirks, and stylistic peculiarities of the work.”³ If some semblance

of rhyme can be re-created in the translation, a great deal of the poetry of the original *feels* conveyed.

The classic Spanish Golden Age sonnet – these three poems fall into that category – is comprised of two quatrains of an identical rhyme scheme (ABBA) and two tercets, where the rhyme scheme may be CDC DCD, or any other similar combination.

Although of a different metre and rhyming structure, the Elizabethan sonnet is the historically closest and truest coetaneous English equivalent. The Spanish Golden Age sonneteers employed the hendecasyllabic. In the case of an English translation the expected metre would, however, be the iambic pentameter, not only because it is historically the nearest literary equivalent but also because it is probably the easiest to recognise for English readers.

These are three very different sonnets in language, in tone and subject. The first sonnet is an anonymous one; it was probably first published in a collection entitled *Jardín de Venus* (The Garden of Venus), printed circa 1589. A poem of an openly sexual theme and a decidedly burlesque tone, it hardly masks the chauvinistic discourse that prevailed in the morals and *mores* of the age. Perhaps it is an anonymous piece not only because of its sexual explicitness, but also because it is a stark subversion of the discourse of the Petrarchian romantic tradition that had been very much in vogue in Spanish literature since the early 1500s.

The second sonnet is by Luis de Góngora (1561-1627), the best-known representative of the literary stream known as *Culteranismo*. This literary stream was typified by the obscurantist combination of an extremely ornamental, affected lexicon, and a particularly complex syntactical order. Its theme is the *carpe diem*, where the poet urges his loved one to enjoy her life and her body (that is, to engage in sexual intercourse) before old age and death make it too late and impossible to enjoy.

The third sonnet has traditionally been attributed to Lope de Vega, an extremely prolific writer, better known for his drama than for his poetry. The sonnet demonstrates his mastery of language and rhyme as well as his wit. It is arguably one of the most deliciously playful poems ever written in Spanish. Anthologised innumerable times as the “impromptu sonnet,” the author “ad-libs” a sonnet at the request of a lady. Instead of writing the love poem she expected, Lope allegedly made fun of her request by writing a sonnet where he explained in detail what makes up a sonnet and how it should be composed.

These translations largely follow the same strategies I used for my own translation of a famous satirical sonnet by Quevedo.⁴ From a formal point of view, the iambic pentameter has been sought – not without some

evident shortcomings – in all three translations. Re-creating wherever possible a rhyming scheme was also part of my general translation strategy, but by no means the driving principle.

As Umberto Eco has suggested, the dominant principle in the translation of poetry should be *verba tene, res sequentur*.⁵ In my translation of these three sonnets, expression was paramount.

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NOTES

- ¹ Brian Castro, *Looking for Estrellita* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999), 134.
- ² Burton Raffel, *The Art of Translating Poetry* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1988), 89.
- ³ Edith Grossman, *Why Translation matters* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 10.
- ⁴ Jorge Salavert, "'To a Man with a Big Nose": A New Translation', in *Colloquy: text theory critique*, 15 (2008).
www.arts.monash.edu.au/ecps/colloquy/journal/issue015/salavert.pdf
- ⁵ Umberto Eco, *Decir casi lo mismo* (Barcelona: Lumen, 2009), 71.

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Ninguna mujer hay que yo no quiera,
a todas amo y soy aficionado;
de toda suerte, condición y estado,
todas las amo y quiero en su manera.

Adoro la amorosa y la austera,
por la discreta y simple soy penado,
y por morena y blanca enamorado,
ora sea casada, ora soltera.

Todo lo que Dios cría es buena cosa,
tan mujer es aquesta como aquella,
lo que tiene la una, la otra tiene.

Agora sea fea, agora hermosa,
siempre es tenella por hermosa y bella,
que en la mujer el hombre se conviene.

Anonymous [c.1589]

There's not a woman that I do not love,
All of them I desire and I care for;
Of every station, and even every source,
They're all somehow my little treasure trove.

I adore the warm ones, and those austere,
I love those who are simple yet polite,
I fall in love with women, tanned or white;
Free? Wedded? It matters not, I hold all dear.

All of God's creations are good indeed,
This one's a woman; so is that one, too.
What this one does, others can make me feel,

Dreadful or gorgeous, at all times you should
Tell them they're really the best, the most sweet:
For man with a woman wonders can do.

Mientras por competir con tu cabello,
 Oro bruñido al sol relumbra en vano;
 Mientras con menosprecio en medio el llano
 Mira tu blanca frente el lilio bello;

Mientras a cada labio, por cogello,
 Siguen más ojos que al clavel temprano;
 Y mientras triunfa con desdén lozano
 Del luciente cristal tu gentil cuello;

Goza cuello, cabello, labio y frente,
 Antes que lo que fue tu edad dorada
 Oro, lirio, clavel, cristal luciente,

No solo en plata o viola troncada
 Se vuelva, mas tú y ello juntamente
 En tierra, en humo, en polvo, en sombra, en nada.

Luis de Góngora [c.1582]

Threads of the purest gold cannot outdo
 your beautiful hair glowing in the sun;
 whilst your white face, in absolute scorn,
 stares down at the most beautiful bloom;

your crimson lips are now eagerly chased
 by many eyes like a spring carnation;
 as your exquisite neck, in elation
 overpowers the radiance of your necklace;

relish neck, hair, lips, brow, savour them all
 before the pass of time destroys the lot:
 gold, lily, carnation, necklace, all shall

become bleak silver, blossom that will rot,
 and hereafter you, and your body all,
 turn into soil, smoke, a shadow, naught.

Un soneto me manda hacer Violante,
 que en mi vida me he visto en tal aprieto,
 catorce versos dicen que es soneto
 burla burlando van los tres delante.

Yo pensé que no hallara consonante
 y estoy a la mitad de otro cuarteto,
 mas si me veo en el primer terceto,
 no hay cosa en los cuartetos que me espante.

Por el primer terceto voy entrando,
 y parece que entré con pie derecho,
 pues fin con este verso le voy dando.

Ya estoy en el segundo, y aun sospecho
 que voy los trece versos acabando;
 contad si son catorce, y está hecho.

Lope Félix de Vega [c.1615]

Violante has asked me for a sonnet,
 never before have I been so afraid,
 of fourteen lines a great sonnet is made,
 the first three are no bee in my bonnet!

I feared I would not find the perfect rhyme,
 I am halfway the second quatrain yet,
 if I can make it to the first tercet,
 the two quatrains might even sound sublime.

I shall therefore begin the first tercet,
 and it does seem a fine start I could make,
 so with this line an end I put to it.

This is the final stanza, no mistake,
 thirteen lines so far, you'll have to admit;
 pray, do count them: fourteen. A piece of cake!