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Incorporating the *Comedia* into the Anglophone Canon
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INCORPORATING THE *COMEDIA* INTO THE ANGLOPHONE CANON

This is a paper about pragmatics--light on theory, light on research, heavy on experience. I will wear two hats: as a translator, as a theatre artist/administrator. The goal is simple: to share with my colleagues some practical advice on achieving a goal we all think would be beneficial to Anglophone readers and audiences—securing *comedias* their rightful place in the Western Canon, not just as literary texts, but as performable—and performed—plays for English-speaking audiences.

I acknowledge that at the present, in addition to the obvious challenges facing us, there are two previously unforeseen obstacles: the question of whether there should even be such a thing as a literary or theatrical Western Canon; and the (one hopes) temporary inability to produce anything in English-speaking theatres at the moment. The latter situation does at least provide us time to strategize and plan; the former is a more formidable challenge, as it includes dealing with not just a protest against the Dead-White-Male bias in the practice of «canonicity», but a serious questioning of the very idea of «the classics» themselves, in favor of greater fluidity and inclusion for more modern and diverse and out-of-the-mainstream work.

I do not intend to address these recent issues in this short paper. But I can try to address numerous other challenges we have all known for the last few decades: scarcity of translations; even greater scarcity of *playable* translations; even greater scarcity of actual *productions*; ignorance of the body of work by theatre decision-makers; inexperience of directors

when it comes to *comedia* style and staging; actors' technical unpreparedness for, or insecurity about, the specific demands of *comedia* playing; resistance of audiences to old, unfamiliar things; the dominance of Shakespeare; the current economics of theatre when it comes to large cast plays; the common dismissal or underprizing or mischaracterization of Spanish literary work (part of the «black legend»)—and of course, among other concerns, the general inertia of the habitual and familiar when faced with the untried and the unusual.

Translating the *Comedia*

As a translator, I can speak only for myself—that is, I can only say with any security why I have chosen the translate Golden Age plays the way I have chosen to. I cannot say with any certainty that my specific choices might work for others, or that they are general principles—though obviously, if I didn't think they were the right choices, I wouldn't have made them. With that caveat, here are the tasks I set myself from the very beginning as a translator.

My goal from the beginning was to create *playable* scripts. My first commission came from the great theatre director Jack O'Brien, who once found himself on a plane sitting next to the equally great, but not very nice, critic John Simon—who asked him why his theatre, the Old Globe in San Diego, did not produce more of the great continental classics. Such as, asked my friend Jack. Such as Moreto's *El desdén con el desdén,* replied the critic—assuring him it was perhaps the funniest courtship comedy ever written, and a staple on European stages.

Jack called me when the plane landed and asked me to find a playable English translation of this apparently famous and fabulous play. As his dramaturge, I assured him I would—only to find, greatly to my surprise, that none existed. The shock of this discovery must have unsettled my wits at the time because then and there I decided—with only a lusty and limited knowledge of Spanish—that I would undertake to make one.

I did know a fair amount about Golden Age theatre from my university study and teaching of theatre history and of plays in translation. And I did know a handful of Spanish classics (in English), those that the culturally proficient might be expected to know—the «serious» ones like *Life is A Dream*, *Fuenteovejuna*, *The Mayor of Zalamea*, *The Trickster of Seville*.

And a couple of comedies; I had read Lope's Romeo and Juliet play *Castelvines y Monteses* and Alarcón's *La verdad sospecha* in what I thought were not very readable, let alone playable, translations. But that was about it, I'm afraid.

Perhaps it was best that I was so uniformed and naïve—because from the very beginning I set myself two further tasks that, as I look back, were probably hare-brained and certainly hubristic: I would translate into rhyming verse; and my version would be exactly the same length as the original copytext, with, ideally, a one-to-one line correspondence between the Spanish and the English.

To the question—why did I choose these tasks?—I might well answer, because I didn't know any better. But I think they sprang as well from a belief, which has only grown stronger over time, that English versions of *comedias* should initially be made available to Anglophone readers (and ideally audiences) in a form as close as possible as the originals. No excessive massaging or tailoring to make them palatable (to mix my metaphors unappetizingly). If they are indeed classics, that is deserving of entry into the «canon», then let them seek and gain admittance through the front door, dressed formally as they are, rather than through the side door in some more casual leisureware.

Prosody

I had not yet decided on a specific verse form—other than rhyme; and it took me some time before I landed on the somewhat hybrid prosody I use now. I *did* know that I would not be trying to imitate the early modern diction of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The verse of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays was not common speech, granted, but it was contemporary speech elevated by verse. So should my translations be, I thought, as much as possible 20th and 21st century speech elevated by verse.

I was also pretty sure I could not write in rhyming iambic pentameter throughout, though originally I did not avoid it entirely. The burden of rhyme was already so great for our uninflected, rhyme-poor English, that the addition of iambic meter would simply break the back of my endeavor. Besides, it could lengthen the plays by as much as 25%, as the Spanish favored the shorter syllabic line over the Shakespearean decasyllables and hendecasyllables.

Gradually, over the course of three or four translations, I evolved a working prosody, with the following guidelines:

1. I would adopt an accentual, rather than an accentual-syllabic meter. That is, only the stressed syllables would be counted; between them might occur from zero to three unstressed syllables. Short lines would typically have *four* stresses, longer lines *five*. This would roughly mirror the eight- and ten/eleven-syllabics of the Spanish.

2. The decision on how many actual syllables there might be in the overall English line would largely depend upon the formality of the verse in its dramatic context. Thus, more formal speeches would call for greater regularity, approaching or utilizing recognizably iambic rhythm.

3. Rhyme schemes would mirror, as much as possible, the rhyme schemes of the original; and the more elaborate and intricate the rhyme scheme—as in *octavas, décimas* and sonnets, for example—the more formal the prosody and diction would likely have to become in the English version.

4. For the assonating schemes of the Spanish, I would have to find a looser rhyming equivalent; I hit on English «ballad rhyme»: *abcb*; or for more formal *romance* speeches, *abab*.

5. When the Spanish waxed particularly poetic—as opposed to being merely verse—so would the English; and here, certain familiar poetic techniques in English—even poetic licenses like disrupted word order and even more elevated diction—might be used to convey the «poeticism» of the original. It also became important to me to distinguish workaday verse (prosodically «correct» lines) from inspired poetry (beautiful lines)—and also to tell when the «poeticism» deliberately spilled over into satire or burlesque or parody.

6. This decision to rhyme *throughout* strongly affected the *quality* and *profile* of my rhyming. The inflectional system of Spanish makes rhyming both easier and more natural sounding. English rhymes—because they are harder to achieve—almost always call more attention to themselves. An English version that landed too hard on its rhymes would be, I thought, in danger of sounding both contrived and monotonous. So I practiced what I have come to call «stealth rhyme»—which effectively chooses which rhymes to highlight (so that they chime) and which to hide (so they are barely heard, if at all); it does the latter though the selective use of weak endings, run-ons, eye-rhymes, mid-word rhymes, and near rhyme.

7. And this leads me to make an obvious but crucial distinction about dramatic verse. Even when dealing with a highly presentational style as Golden Age dramatic verse displays, a good translator should always hold the default position that verse on the stage is character and context-based. That is, most stage speech is meant to represent language created at the moment of experience, not language carefully crafted at some distance from experience. So the natural rhythms and word order of the English language, even in the most formal, presentational verse, must never disappear or be over-ridden by elaborately «poetic» or «musical» rhythms. It must aim not only to be eminently speakable, but ideally immediately hearable by the audience. Clarity is the first virtue of stage speech, and «trippingly on the tongue», as Hamlet might say, ought to be its natural pace and rhythm. (On the other hand, see the next section on the *comedia*'s fondness for showy set-pieces.)

8. So, over the twenty-five years I've been doing this, I have come to the conclusion, for me at least, that verse is the *heart* of the *comedia*; and if Golden Age plays are to be introduced and accepted into the Anglophone canon—as the representatives or ambassadors of Spain, so to speak—they must be presented with their verse credentials in order. Just how rigorous the prosody should be is probably best left to the translators themselves. I would suggest, however, that some metrical rigor is necessary; free verse, for me, is an unacceptable option. Strong meter is present in the original, so some «measure», to my thinking, should be present in the translation, even if it is only as simple as counting syllables. As well as some honoring of the relative line lengths of the original.

Rhetoric and Virtuosity

Similarly, I think *rhetorical* virtuosity is, to continue the conceit, the brains of the *comedia*. Therefore, for me, wholesale efforts to diminish or downplay the rhetorical copiousness of the *comedia,* while they may draw it aesthetically more in line with the contemporary taste for «realism» or «naturalism», are just alternate ways of trying to smuggle these plays into the canon under false pretenses. Stronger than the *mimetic* element, to my thinking, is the *performative* element in the *comedia,* by which I mean the element of self-conscious artistic display and self- presentation—both on the part of the playwright and the performer. Stronger even than in

Shakespeare to my thinking. A bit more «look at me» and a bit less «look at this». This effect is created not only by the author's virtuosity with verse and elaborate plotting, but also by the showy rhetoric, specifically by the frequent «set-pieces»—some rather tenuously connected with the plot—that actors are expected to perform and audiences are expected to appreciate *as set- pieces*, as rhetorical performances.

This led me, in my work, always to compose and offer *complete* translations, avoiding the temptation—commonly yielded to—to condense or curtail or omit those longer speeches from the outset, which, it is often claimed, audiences will simply not sit still for. Or not stand for. Or may even resent. My own experience has, in fact, been the opposite. My default position is to assume that even general theatre-goers, when faced with such set-pieces will recognize virtuosity when they hear it—and appreciate it. (A similar kind of prosodic and rhetorical virtuosity, for example, has not kept David Ives' originals and adaptations from achieving wide-spread success on American stages.)

Cultural Knowledge

I was strongly aided in this decision and practice to honor the long speeches in translation, I should add, by a happy accident; my initial graduate and post graduate work was in Renaissance rhetoric and dramaturgy, as well as in classical philosophy and theology. Many of the major Golden Age playwrights were themselves priests, and I shared with them a remarkably common curriculum in my own academic life. Virtually all had a firm and similar foundation in the study of logic, rhetoric, philosophy, and theology; and most shared a common store of tropes, schemes, styles, *topoi*, and allusions not only with one another, but with the *literati* across Europe and in the Colonial outposts of culture in the New World. I suspect, for example, that Sor Juana's remarkable self-education ended up to be not so different from—only more miraculous and deeper and more wide-ranging than—what her best male counterparts achieved in their seminaries and universities.

So in this regard, the translator must approach the long speeches of the *comedia* not as obstacles but as challenges. Almost all of them are constructed on strict rhetorical principles; and many of them--monologues or soliloquies of self-examination or self-explanation, as well as of deeper existential questions--also draw heavily on the psychology,

philosophy, and theology of the period. Thus, the translator must also be fluent in the terminology and categories of mental and moral behavior that were current in Spanish culture of the period generally, and of the Golden Age worldview in particular.

Virtuosity in the original must be met not only with prosodic and rhetorical virtuosity on the translation, but also with a kind of cultural virtuosity as to the complex intellectual backgrounds of the age. It was, as I say, a happy accident that I had such relevant and serendipitous academic preparation for translating *comedias*, since translating *comedias* was never something I ever dreamed I might be doing.

Entertainment Value

Then again, neither was theatre itself, in my early years, ever considered as a future vocation. But that profession, too, once I found myself more and more involved in it, added another level of preparation—quite different perhaps from that of my colleagues in Hispanic studies. Though I no longer think it is true, I do believe that in earlier years, one of the possible obstacles to getting Golden Age theatre more widely accepted into the canon was the *seriousness* with which most academics and scholars came to the *comedia*. This is possibly the reason why it was preeminently the «serious» plays of Golden Age Spain which were most frequently translated, anthologized, and taught. As if their «seriousness» were the key that would unlock the gate to their wider appreciation.

I came from another direction, from the world of «entertainment» and «performance», both as a Shakespearean and a general practitioner of theatre. Therefore I was drawn to the comedies, and to the comic or entertaining elements in the more serious «melodramas» or tragedies. I recall when we first brought *La verdad sospechosa* to the Chamizal, I was struck, as were many, not just by the success we had, for which we were all grateful, but also by the surprising opinion of some academic critics, who felt that the production, while highly enjoyable, missed some of the more important and serious elements of the play—missed its moral didacticism, to be specific.

What we had seen as a robust comedy with an engaging anti-hero, others would have preferred to view more as a dramatized lesson in the evils of lying with a chastened and duly punished protagonist.

So my advice here to current and future translators is to accord

the *entertainment value* of the *comedia* a somewhat higher value, both in your choice of texts to translate and in the way in which you translate sections that may have a somewhat ambiguous tonality. In short, make allowances as least as much for the pleasure as for the preaching. If not more.

And this brings me to the final question of translating humor. If you are translating for the stage, you must give yourself much more latitude with the comic verbal elements in the *comedia*—whether in the one-line jests or the extended riffs. Again I come to this from the entertainment side. The purpose of verbal comedy is to elicit laughter. Much of verbal humor may be topical and/or expressed in the common (or, literally, vulgar) language and cadence of the people attending the performance. A literal translation which does not elicit the laugh, either because the rhythm, the diction, the topicality, or the immediacy is not present, violates the spirit of the jest while «honoring» the letter. In the case of comedy, I believe, fidelity is more due to the theatrical intentions of the playwright towards the audience's response, than to the actual words he used to convey those intentions.

Producing the *Comedia*

Now I put on another hat, and talk about producing the *comedia*, or better, getting the *comedia* produced. Reflecting back on the obstacles or challenges I listed at the beginning of this essay, let us assume we have leapt the hurdle of translation, and now have readable, speakable, performable, entertaining translations at hand. How do we get them out of our hands and into the hands of producers and directors?

Asking this question should lead us to realize that some of what we identified as obstacles may in fact be advantages. Take the dominance of Shakespeare, for example. There is such a thing as a Shakespeare industry in English-speaking theatre, and it manifests itself in three forms: one is the required presence of Shakespeare in the repertoire of resident theatres; the second is the abundance of Shakespeare Festivals; and the third is the centrality of Shakespeare study and performance in the most respected acting conservatories. The fact that a *comedia* performance makes almost exactly the same physical demands on a theatre as a Shakespearean performance—in terms of sets, costumes, music, fencing, dance, and personnel—should be a pathway to production rather than a closed door. In other words, something very like *comedia* has been produced regularly

on English and American stages for centuries; it's not like we're asking for Kabuki or Noh theatre to become fixtures in the Anglophone repertoire.

And there are two important elements of the *comedia* that are, at this moment, working particularly in its favor: opportunity for diversity in programming and casting, and multiple strong roles for women. The first element is particularly helpful for theatres (and this means pretty much all of them) which are now under siege precisely for their lack of diversity. And the second is important not just for our theatres, but also for our finest acting conservatories, which have struggled for decades with the scarcity of great female roles, the shortage of female roles in general, and the overall imbalance of gender casting in the classical canon.

I am not suggesting that we promote the *comedia* exclusively as a «niche» event in anyone's theatrical or academic calendar: here's our «Latinx» play, here's our women's play; but the fact that theatre administrators are on the lookout for plays that respond to the demand for greater ethnic and gender balance in programming and casting can give the *comedia* a purchase which it did not have before. And we could leverage that with productions that simultaneously meet that demand and make the further case for *comedia*'s rightful place in the canon.

And there is also the opportunity for young directors to make their names doing something few others have attempted till now—becoming the go-to guy or gal who «does Golden Age plays». Sometimes all it takes is one or two successful productions to put an overlooked classic, and its director, on the map. Not that many years ago, few people had ever heard of Marivaux, and then came Stephen Wadsworth; and Marivaux became, for a time, one of the «hottest» playwrights in America. And Laurence Boswell has done much the same for the *comedia,* and for himself, in England. The *comedia* could be the gold ring on the theatrical merry-go-round, if someone could be tempted to snatch it. I'm not suggesting that we promote the *comedia* exclusively as a «career-maker» either, but it wouldn't hurt to dangle that possibility in front of a talented young director or two.

As for the fear that our actors lack the training and experience to do *comedia*, I frankly think that is a straw man. Actors are actors; every script presents them with new challenges, if they are lucky. And most actors seek and enjoy new challenges. Nothing is quite so stale as a stale actor. So long as the translation is speakable and not deliberately archaic, even amateur actors can make it work with the help of talented directors

and coaches.

What I have done so far is identify what we might call the «targets», the likeliest places where *comedia* scripts might find a path to the stage: regional theatres, Shakespeare festivals, acting conservatories, ambitious directors, actors looking for challenges. To this I would add one more: academic departments of both theatre and languages. I would consider these, to some extent, as «secondary targets»; they do not have the cachet of nearly or fully professional productions one might find in the primary targets, but they can be useful in a number of ways.

First, the translators get an invaluable chance to put their versions through the ultimate test run—stage-worthiness. Every time I produce one of my translations, I gain valuable insights into the play and inevitably make both major and minor corrections to my working script. I learn where it is ineffective or just wrong, and where it must be improved, where the rhythms are bad or the dramatic momentum stalled. I also learn where it may be cut or otherwise altered for production.

Second, every production, no matter how localized and rudimentary, can increase the profile of the play. And while it is unlikely by itself to attract the kind of attention that *comedia* would need in order to earn a larger place in the Western Canon, every little bit helps. And one never knows when a modest college production may work its way through the American College Theatre Festival to national prominence on the Kennedy Center Stage.

And finally, even flawed or failed productions offer an opportunity for learning—for the translators, directors, designers, actors, and producers involved; so that the next go-round will be more successful.

So, to continue the metaphor, we have the targets and we have the arrows (the new translations); what we now need is the specific delivery system (the bow?) that will get the arrows to their targets. It is in this sense that I consider academic productions to be secondary targets, part of the delivery system more than the goal itself, because, while in non-dramatic literature, academia may set the parameters of the canon, in dramatic literature, the professional stage will always play a significant part.

What are the other elements of a successful delivery system? Certainly the **publication** of stage-worthy translations is of extreme importance; and here, of course, the flagship efforts of the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) *Comedia* in Translation and Performance working group have been key, not just in preparing new translations, but

in securing their publication, and, in some cases, professional readings of them, whether in person or online. Part of its success, admittedly, comes from its stated commitment to «diversifying the classics»—that is, clearing a larger space for under- represented Hispanic classics in the Western Canon. (Spoiler alert, I'm a grateful beneficiary of this program.)

I believe the next step forward is to move further along the continuum that extends from academia to the professional theatre, by actually **commissioning** established playwrights and poets, either alone or in collaboration with scholars and/or directors, to attempt new translations. I know this has been done occasionally in the past, and not always successfully; but the difficulty of it should not preclude further attempts. (I was briefly involved in one such effort some years ago only as an actor, and I can testify that it was an extremely difficult and checkered process, and in the end may even have set the cause back by its incompetence. So this path is not an easy one.)

A next step would be in the **commissioning of recordings**, either of full readings or full productions or even scenes, and **establishing a platform** for accessing such recordings. We begin, at this point, to necessarily get involved in two related challenges: financing and performers' unions. I know The Association for Hispanic Classical Theater (AHCT) is trying to establish a library and platform for full recordings of the Chamizal performances; but once any professional companies, as opposed to purely academic departments, are involved, this, and other attempts, become very complex matters of legality and fair compensation. Far easier, at this moment, is commissioning low-cost Zoom recorded readings, using either amateur casts, or SAG-AFTRA's[1] experimental or micro production contracts, or—for professional theatres who already have a professional relationship with Actors' Equity—one of that union's current minimal contracts or temporary agreements.

But wide distribution of such recordings may still be severely limited and subject to additional compensation; so it would be wise for any person or organization contemplating this next move to familiarize themselves with the details of all available contracts and agreements before moving too quickly.

Another part of a successful delivery system is the **creation and sustaining of professional relationships with the country's theatres**

[1] Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists

and conservatories, not just with the executive producers and artistic directors and chairpersons, but also with their literary managers and resident dramaturges, the people who help make the decisions about programming and commissioning. And with their diversity and outreach specialists as well. If cries for more diverse programming open the door a crack, we would be foolish not to stick our *comedia* toes in it.

Another part is the **creation and sustaining of professional relationships with funding sources**—that is, grant makers and donors who might be persuaded that underwriting *comedia* translations and performances might be a valuable addition to their portfolio of supported causes and institutions. This, too, is a real challenge, with so many claims being made at this particular time of crisis both in the nation's health and economy; but jobs in the arts are no less fragile than jobs in other sectors of the economy—indeed provably more so; and the need for the arts to survive this difficult time is no less critical than for this small business or that family restaurant to survive. Indeed, the performing arts—specifically radio and television and film and internet productions—are what have kept spirits up and mental and emotional health intact for many in virtual isolation during these dark days. Ours will be one of many voices crying for help, some more urgent, but we cannot therefore let our voices be totally stilled or overwhelmed by others.

Conclusions

Translation remains the single most important element, I believe, in any attempt to incorporate the *comedia* into the Anglophone canon, literary or theatrical. But experience tells us this task will not be easy. It will require not just a high level of individual artistry, such as, for example, Richard Wilbur provided for Molière's works, but also an efficient means of distribution. Wilbur's first Molière translation was commissioned by the Poet's Theatre as part of a strong verse drama movement after the Second World War. And he was already an accomplished and published poet, so his translations were published quickly and broadly, by major publishing houses, even before they found productions. This is unlikely to happen for us. So even when we are fortunate enough to have theatrically and artistically viable translations, we must keep all avenues of access open and cultivate as many possible supporters, so that there are multiple channels to provide broader distribution of scripts and broader possibilities of

production. And we must earn, and achieve, some undeniable theatrical successes in the professional theatre--and ideally in the national press.

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