

Spanish Poetry of the Golden Age
in contemporary English translations

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Spanish Poetry of the Golden Age

in contemporary English translations

Selected & edited by
Tony Frazer

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Introduction

This is an unusual book: anthologies of classic poetry in translation are somewhat rare, and anthologies of *period* translations are even rarer. This compilation has its origins in my dissatisfaction with most modern translations of the poets represented here—not that these are particularly deficient: some indeed are excellent, such as those by regular Shearsman translator, Michael Smith. My problem lies in the fact that it is well-nigh impossible to translate the work of poets such as Góngora and Quevedo today in formal verse without sounding as if one is stuck uncomfortably between eras.

Finding Sir Richard Fanshawe's almost-contemporary translations of Góngora and the Argensola brothers was thus something of a revelation. This led to further exploration, and the subsequent addition of the other translations that now accompany Fanshawe's in this volume. Thomas Stanley and Philip Ayres, while not the equal of Fanshawe, still offer us splendid versions of the original poems, even when they abandon their literal sense.

Translation tends to be a poor relation in modern academia, and the more so historic translation. Departments of Hispanic Studies are rarely interested in old English translations of classic Spanish texts, or in their reception. By the same token, English Literature departments are rarely interested in translations from other languages, regarding them as secondary creations, rarely worthy of closer study—no doubt partly because specialists in English Literature rarely have a thorough knowledge of other languages or, indeed, their classic literatures.

At the time these translations were made—over roughly a one-hundred-year span—England and Spain were constantly in conflict: Spain was the most powerful nation, and the richest nation in the western world, possessor of the largest empire, and militantly Catholic. England was an upstart mercantile power, initially with a very limited treasury, and—from Madrid's point of view—apostate. This militated against the reception of

Spanish literature in England—with the startling exceptions of Montemayor's *Diana* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Spanish was the language of the enemy, and was learned mainly for reasons of diplomacy, and to understand the enemy better, rather than to read its literature. The contrast with French and Italian is marked: numerous translations from those literatures appeared in English, some of them indeed from these same translators: Fanshawe and Stanley from Italian, Ayres from both French and Italian. It is noticeable that the impact of *Diana*, in Yong's translation (ca. 1583, but only printed in 1598), was substantial, but that this did not lead to further examination of Spanish models—perhaps because the Italianate style of poets such as Boscán and Garcilaso was already familiar in its original guise, and the *culteranismo* of Góngora may have echoed the short-lived *euphuism* of Lyly—already being ridiculed in English stage works of the early years of the 17th century. It could of course also be that Góngora defeated would-be translators, as he tended to defeat the ambitious Thomas Stanley.

So it was that Spanish came a distant third in the translation stakes during this vibrant period of English literature, but the results were such that they ought not to be forgotten—which is where this collection finds its rationale. My source texts in both languages came in a variety of guises and degrees of modernisation: I have applied a 'light-touch' modernisation to the English texts, leaving the punctuation unchanged, but modernising spellings whenever scansion permitted. The Spanish texts follow most modern rules, especially as regards accents, but critical editions tend to be erratic with punctuation, and the first editions often have almost none, and thus there is a degree of subjectivity here, with some period spellings surviving (ç for modern z, x for j, for instance). Facsimiles—or faithful reprintings—of the original first publications of many of these poems can easily be tracked down by those readers who prefer their texts 'uncooked'.

Tony Frazer
January, 2008

Garcilaso de la Vega

Soneto XI

Hermosas nimphas, que en el rio metidas,
contentas habitáis en las moradas
de reluzientes piedras fabricadas
y en columnas de vidrio sostenidas,

agora estéis labrando embevescidas
o texendo las telas delicadas,
agora unas con otras apartadas,
contándoos los amores y las vidas:

dexad un rato la labor, alçando
vuestras rubias cabeças a mirarme
y no os detendréis mucho según ando,

que, o no podréis de lástima escucharme,
o convertido en agua aquí llorando,
podréis allá despacio consolar-me.

translated by William Drummond

Sonnet XXII

Nymphs, sister nymphs which haunt this crystal brook,
And happy in these floating bow'rs abide,
Where trembling roofs of trees from sun you hide,
Which make ideal woods in every crook,
Whether ye garlands for your locks provide,
Or pearly letters seek in sandy book,
Or count your loves when Thetis was a bride?
Lift up your golden heads and on me look.
Read in mine eyes mine agonizing cares,
And what ye read recount to her again:
Fair nymphs, say all these streams are but my tears,
And if she ask you how they sweet remain,
 Tell that the bitt'rest tears which eyes can powr,
 When shed for her do cease more to be sour.

Line 13, powr : pour

Garcilaso de la Vega

Soneto XXV

¡O hado secutivo en mis dolores,
 cómo sentí tus leyes tan rigurosas!
Cortaste'l árbol con manos dañosas
 y eparziste por tierra fruta y flores.

En poco espacio yazen los amores,
 y toda la esperança de mis cosas,
tornados en cenizas desdeñosas,
 y sordas a mis queexas y clamores.

Las lágrimas que en esta sepultura
 se vierten oy en día se vertieron:
recibe, aunque sin fruto allá te sean,

hasta que aquella eterna noche oscura
 me cierre aquestos ojos que te vieron,
dexándome con otros que te vean.

translated by William Drummond

Sonnet

O Fate! conspired to pour your worst on me,
O rigorous rigour, which doth all confound!
With cruel hands ye have cut down the tree,
And fruit and flow'r dispersèd on the ground.
A little space of earth my love doth bound,
That beauty which did raise it to the sky,
Turned in neglected dust, now low doth lie,
Deaf to my plaints, and senseless of my wound.
Ah! did I live for this, ah! did I love?
For this and was it she did so excel?
That ere she well life's sweet-sour joys did prove,
She should (too dear a guest) with horror dwell?
 Weak influence of Heaven! what fair ye frame,
 Falls in the prime, and passeth like a dream.

translated by Philip Ayres

A Sonnet. On the Death of Sylvia

Oh Death! without regard to wrong or right,
 All things at will thy boundless rage devours;
This tender plant thou hast cut down in spite,
 And scattered on the ground its fruit, and flowers.
Our love's extinct that with such ardour burned,
 And all my hope of future pleasure dies;
Nature's chief masterpiece to earth's returned,
 Deaf to my passion, and my grievous cries.
Sylvia, the tears which on thy sepulchre,
Hereafter shall be shed, or those now are,
 Though fruitless, yet I offer them to thee,
Until the coming of th' eternal night
Shall close these eyes, once happy with thy sight,
 And give me eyes with which I thee may see.

Garcilaso de la Vega

Soneto XL

Pasando el mar Leandro el animoso,
en amoroso fuego todo ardiendo,
esforçó el viento, y fuese 'mbraveciendo
el agua con un ímpetu furioso.

Vencido del trabajo presuroso,
contrastar a las ondas no pudiendo,
y más del bien que allí perdía muriendo,
que de su propia vida congoxoso,

como pudo, 'sforçó su voz cansada
y a las ondas habló d'esta manera
mas nunca fue su voz dellas oída:

«Ondas, pues no se'scusa que yo muera,
dexadme allá llegar, y a la tornada
vuestro furor esecutá en mi vida.»

translated by Philip Ayres

Leander Drowned

Though winds and seas oppose their utmost spite,
Joined with the horror of a dismal night,
To keep his word the brave Leander strove,
Honour his convoy, and his pilot love;
He long resists the envious billows' rage,
Whose malice would his generous flame assuage.

At last, his weary limbs o'ercome with pain,
No longer could the mighty force sustain;
Then thoughts of losing Hero made him grieve,
Only for Hero could he wish to live.
With feeble voice, a while to respite fate,
He with his foes would fain capitulate:

Whilst they against him still their fury bend,
Nor these his dying accents would attend:
"Since to your greater powers I must submit,
Ye winds and seas, at least, this prayer admit;
That with my faith I may to her comply,
And at return let me your victim die."

Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola

Soneto

Ya el oro natural crespes o estindas,
o a componerlo con industria aspines,
luzir sus lazos o sus ondas mires,
cuando libre a tus damas lo encomiendas;
 o ya, por nueva ley de Amor, lo prendas
entre ricos diamantes y zafires,
o baxo hermosas plumas lo retires,
y el traje varonil fingir pretendas,
 búscate Adonis por su Venus, antes
por su Adonis te tiene ya la diosa,
y a entrambos los engañan tus cabellos;
 mas yo, en la misma duda milagrosa,
mientras se hayan en ti los dos amantes,
muero por ambos y de celos dellos.

translated by Sir Richard Fanshawe

Sonnet

Whether thou curl, or trence thy native gold,
And workst it pliant into every form,
Or leav'st it by thy maids to be unrolled
Falling about thy neck like Danae's storm:

Or whether richly 'tis enamelled
With cheerful emeralds, and blue sapphire veins,
Or crowned with tossing plumes, which hide thy head,
Hunting the hart ore the enamelled plains.

Venus mistakes thee for her rural lover,
Whom late Adonis for his Venus took;
Whilst change of dresses doth by turns discover
A lovely swain, and goddess in thy look.

But I, to whom they both united seem,
In love with her, grow jealous straight of him.

Line 1 : As Peter Davidson observes in his edition of Fanshawe's works, 'trence' may be an anglicisation of Spanish trençar (or trenzar) — to braid, or plait hair.

Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola

[A su hermano Lupericio]

Fabio, las esperanzas no son malas;
mas tú con tanto aplauso las acetas,
que a oráculos forzosos de profetas,
y aun a vivos efetos, las igualas.

Sabe que contra el Tiempo se arma Palas,
contras sus inconstancias y sus tretas;
que él es tal, que tropieza en sus muletas,
cuando le piden que use de sus alas.

Y así nunca en el término futuro,
ni en el presente (si eres sabio) digas
que hay tiempo que del tiempo esté seguro;
que cuando a fuerza de sufrir le obligas
a que acuda fiel, te pone un muro
de presto entre la hoz y las espigas.

translated by Sir Richard Fanshawe

Hope

To hope is good, but with such wild applause
Each promise Fabius thou dost entertain;
As if decreed thee by fate's certain laws,
Or in possession now it did remain.

Wisdom is armed 'gainst all that can succeed,
Time's changes and his stratagems: for such
His nature is, that when his wings we need
He will come creeping on his halting crutch.

Do not, if wise, then to thy self assure
The future, nor on present goods rely,
Or think there's any time from time secure:
For then when patience sees her harvest nigh,

That mocking tyrant in an instant rears
A wall between the sickle and the ears.

Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola

[A una dama que estaba mirando un retrato de Mario]

Mario es aquel del Minturno lago
al Africa, por él domada, huyendo,
le vemos sus rüinas confiriendo
con las altas rüinas de Cartago.

Filis, de tu altivez el justo pago
en la pintura muda estás leyendo;
pues también haze el tiempo sin estruendo
en el reino de Amor el mismo estrago.

El cristal, en que afiles cada día
tus flechas, te dirá mejor la historia
de Mario y de Cartago en tu figura;
y, comprehendida en la fatal vitoria,
tarde concederás que tu hermosura
no fué más que una breve tyranía.

translated by Sir Richard Fanshawe

A Picture

Behold how Marius from Minturnian Lake
Flying through Africk late by him orethrown,
A pitiful comparison doth make
Between high Carthage ruins and his own!

Thy pride's just fall which thou must one day mourn,
In this dumb picture Celia thou hast read
For so doth age, Love's empire too oreturn,
And pull down thrones in hearts established.

Thy glass, where oft thou whetst each wounding grace,
Will show thee better far the history
Of Marius, and razed Carthage, in thy face:
And thou, one trophy of time's victory,

Shalt then confess, to equal scorns exposed,
Thy beauty was a tyrant soon deposed.

Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola

Soneto

Con tyránicas leyes nos aprieta,
Julia, tu alago, que a esperar nos mueve,
no permitiendo que un descanso breve
el más favorecido se prometa.

Así a la flor que en real jardín secreta
ni el huésped raro ni el cultor se atreve,
el sol, la lluvia y aun el viento leve
que juega con sus ojas la respeta.

Sutil y nuevo género de daños
que den veneno, alagos y favores,
lo mismo que desdenes y mudanzas.

No más, benignidades exteriores,
si cuando me animáis con esperanzas,
a mejor luz os hallo desengaños.

Alternative text, as published in Rimas

Con dura ley tu halago nos aprieta,
Cintia, que en fe de que a esperar nos mueve,
descubre en ti que ni una gloria breve
quiere que el más valido se prometa.

Así a la flor que en real jardín secreta
ni el huésped raro ni el cultor se atreve,
la lluvia, el sol, y el mismo soplo leve,
que juega con sus hojas, la respeta.

¿Cuál prevención podrá evitar los daños
que obran en las clemencias y favores,
lo mismo que en desdenes y mudanzas?

No más, benignidades exteriores,
pues cuando me animáis con esperanzas,
a mejor luz os hallo desengaños.

translated by Sir Richard Fanshawe

Sonnet

Strange tyranny! with smiles to kill your lovers?
With show of parley, is't not treachery?
T'inveigle hope, which frustrated discovers
How he that's favoured most, shall surest die.

Like the first cherries (ripening in a net)
Thy lips are watched; or as some minyon-flower
In covered pots on the King's terrace set
On which the rainy heavens forbid to lower.

Few are let in, the gard'ner dares not touch it,
Not the sun view it with too amorous rays
It shuns the grosser airs, least they should smutch it,
With whose coy leaves the wind, even trembling, plays.

But Cynthia, 'tis a vice with fair ones borne;
Ye bait with smiles, to catch whom ye may scorn.

Line 6 minyon-flower : (also minion-flower) blossom of the minion peach.

Line 11 smutch : soil or stain

Lupercio Leonardo de Argensola

Soneto

Amor, tú que las almas ves desnudas,
cuéntanos el desdén y la osadía
con que la hermosa Filis resistía
a tus doradas flechas más agudas.

Y dinos las razones y las dudas
con que, después de herida, se encubría;
si soberbia o vergüenza detenía
lo que mostraban apariencias mudas.

Lo que nosotros vimos acá fuera
fué colorearse el rostro como rosa,
y huir de nuestros ojos sus dos soles;
cual suele Phebo al fin de su carrera,
robando su color a cada cosa,
las nubes adornar con arreboles.

translated by Sir Richard Fanshawe

Sonnet

Thou, Love, by whom the naked soul is viewed,
Recount to us, with what disdains and heart
Of proof could Phillis (with such form endued)
Resist so long thy sharpest golden dart.

And those close doubts, and struggling reasons show,
With which being vanquished she her wound concealed.
If it were pride, or shame, which made her so,
Deny with language, what dumb shows revealed.

What we without could see, was that her face,
Like blushing rose put on a crimson dye;
And her eyes hid themselves with bashful grace,
Like languishing Apollo, drawing nigh,

His races end; when his bright beams he shrouds,
And, with vermilion flakes, adorns the clouds.