

# **Spanish translations of culture-bound elements in *The First Part of Henry IV*: a historical perspective**

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse the techniques used by three different Spanish translators when translating a specific group of culture-bound elements in Shakespeare's *The First Part of Henry IV*. In order to determine whether the techniques vary according to the uses and customs of different historical periods, the translations chosen were those by Macpherson (1897), Astrana (1932) and Valverde (1967). For the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing only on a group of culture-bound elements related to money and measurements. These elements are especially relevant throughout the tavern scenes in *The First Part of Henry IV* and play an important part in the dynamics of those scenes.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In his lecture given at the British Academy in 1949, Sir Henry Thomas reviewed the reception of Shakespeare in Spain paying special attention to the critical essays and translations that had been written to that day. Among the various translations published during the first decades of the twentieth century, Thomas (1949:19) referred in particular to Astrana's, the first translator to render the entire Shakespearean production into Spanish. According to this author, the success of Astrana's translations "was evident from the nine or ten editions of the *Obras Completas* and the thousand individual plays and poems" that had so far been circulated among the Spanish audience. Astrana's accomplishment was soon after replicated by Valverde, whose *Teatro Completo* also enjoyed the same success and popularity as his predecessor's. The many editions and publications that followed throughout the twentieth century made both Astrana and Valverde's translations the basic source of Shakespearean knowledge available in Spain until the end of the century. However, previous contributions to the field had been offered as early as 1873 by Jaime Clark

and 1885 by Guillermo Macpherson. These English speaking, non-professional translators rendered a sum total of thirty-five plays into Spanish, and despite the harsh criticism their translations later earned from scholars such as Par (1935), theirs was the first attempt to translate directly from the English since Villalta's ill-fated *Macbeth* (1838). In Thomas' words (1949:17), "it is gratifying to think that these two foreigners did what no Spaniard ha[d] yet done [...] for Spain and for Shakespeare in Spain." In this light, an essay aiming to give a historical perspective on the Spanish translations of culture-bound elements in *The First Part of Henry IV (IHIV)* should take into account one or both of these translators' work. Unfortunately, Jaime Clark only translated three tragedies and seven comedies, as early death intervened. Macpherson also died before accomplishing the translation of all Shakespeare's plays, but published twenty-three translations, *IHIV* included. Therefore, together with Astrana's and Valverde's translations, this paper will also focus on Macpherson's work.

In this paper, I seek to give a general overview on the translation techniques the three selected translators used when rendering a potentially problematic area in *IHIV*: culture-bound elements. These elements pose a particularly difficult task for translators as they refer to certain objects, practices and beliefs that can only be understood in their own socio-cultural context. As a consequence, translators need not only to have an extensive knowledge of Elizabethan culture, but also be intimately acquainted with Spanish culture. The adaptation, explanation and even non-translation of these elements may provide us with valuable information about the way these translators understood their own practice. In addition, the analysis of the resulting translations may allow us to tentatively establish the translators' aims and the kind of audience to whom they addressed their translations.

Any analysis dealing with the concept of culture-bound elements should first provide a definition of the term. However limiting a definition of culture may be, I consider conceptual clarification has to be provided. In this way, and for the purpose of this paper, I have adopted a working definition proposed by Williams (1976:90): "[Culture is] the independent and abstract noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group." Similarly, culture will be considered in this study as the way of life that is peculiar to the members of a given social group; hence, their beliefs, their customs and the objects they use in their everyday routine. Bearing this definition of culture in mind, I propose a definition of culture-bound elements as those objects, allusions or expressions that refer to the way of life a particular people or society lead. In my definition, I avoid labelling these elements as 'words' or 'terms', as in doing so I would be limiting them to a linguistic category. In my opinion,

culture-bound elements do not belong to any linguistic category in particular, and they can be formed either by words, adjectives or any other kind of extra-linguistic manifestation.

## 2. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

### 2.1. Money

Among the various material objects typical of a society, coins seem particularly affected by the passing of time. Whereas folk and religious beliefs are deeply rooted within a community, the coins their members use are subject to changes in their external appearance, weight and value. Political and economic factors determine the coinage of new coins and the disappearance of old ones, and this process may take place in a relatively short period of time. As an example, let us mention coins such as *angel* or *denier*. These were both legal tender in Shakespeare's days, although hardly heard of a century after his death. The allusion to these and other coins in *IHIV* poses a difficult task for both critics and editors, as most contemporary native speakers are unaware of their equivalence and value. Translators, on their part, are faced with two difficulties when rendering these coins into Spanish: that they no longer exist in their country of origin and that, even if they did, they would probably be unknown to most Spanish readers. The analysis of the selected translations will show the ways these coins have been translated in different historical periods in Spain.

#### 2.1.1. Penny

In the third scene of the first act, King Henry shows his determination not to ransom the traitorous Mortimer, having him rather die in the hands of Glendower:

For I shall never hold that man my friend  
Whose tongue shall ask me for one penny cost  
To ransom home revolted Mortimer  
(*IHIV*, I.iii.1.90-3).

The penny is still used in Britain, although its value has changed considerably since Shakespeare's times. However, to determine the exact value the coin had in Elizabethan society is not necessary to understand this allusion, as we consider King Henry is not referring to the penny itself, but to the fact that he is not willing to pay anything to ransom Mortimer. The

*Oxford English Dictionary (OED, penny 5)* points out that phrases like “*not a penny, never a penny or not worth a penny*” are used in the sense of “not the least amount, no money at all.” In our opinion, this is the idea that lies beneath the use of the coin in the King’s speech. Macpherson (1885-97:153) renders this allusion by means of a cultural equivalent:

REY. Y por amigo no tendré yo nunca  
A ninguna persona cuya lengua  
Sólo un maravedí para el rescate  
De ese rebelde Mórtimer me pida.

By translating *penny* for *maravedí*, Macpherson seems to be trying to accommodate the English coin to Spanish culture, erasing the original reference and replacing it with an equivalent easily recognisable to the Spanish audience. This technique makes the translated text very easy to understand, as most readers of the time would be acquainted with the value of the *maravedí* and would have no problem in grasping the King’s meaning. However, we consider the appearance of a Spanish coin such as *maravedí* in *IHV* may also give rise to the suspicion that the translation has been excessively manipulated. Readers could think this is so as it is very unlikely Shakespeare used this coin when writing the play. In this way, the translator could be accused of tampering with the original text.

In contrast to Macpherson, both Astrana (1974:411) and Valverde (1973:1172) avoid a cultural equivalent and translate *penny* as literally as the Spanish orthography and phonetics would allow:

*Astrana* REY. ... porque no tendré por amigo al hombre cuya lengua me pida gastar un penique para rescatar a su casa al rebelde Mortimer.  
*Valverde* REY. ...pues nunca consideraré amigo mío al hombre cuya lengua me pida gastar un penique para que vuelva a casa rescatado el rebelde Mortimer.

In our opinion, this translation seems far more coherent with the socio-cultural context of the original play. Although it is possible that some readers may not know the exact equivalence of a *penique*, its use in the translation does not seem inappropriate, as it is only logical that an English King would use an English coin when referring to the ransom of an English nobleman. Besides, we do not consider knowing the value of the penny necessary to an understanding of the King’s words, since it is clear from the context he does not want his coffers to “be emptied to redeem a traitor home” (I.iii.11.86). As opposed to the technique used by Macpherson, which entails a conscious replacement of *penny* for *maravedí*, these translators appear to be concerned

with respecting the original reference and rendering it as faithfully as the Spanish language would allow.

## 2.2. Linear measures

England has traditionally used its own system of linear, capacity and weight measures. This system is still in use nowadays, and has been adopted by other English-speaking countries such as Australia and the United States. However, this system differs from the Metric System that has been used for centuries in Spain, and so units such as the *yard* or the *mile* may require explanation or equivalents to be fully appreciated by Spanish readers.

### 2.2.1. Yards, miles

At the beginning of the second scene of the second act, Poins informs Hal he has robbed Falstaff's horse, and that the knight is furious with him. Indeed, Falstaff appears on stage insulting Poins ("Poins, and be hanged!" II.ii.1.4) and later comments on the hardships travelling on foot mean for him:

Eight yards of uneven ground is threescore-and-ten miles afoot with me, and the stony-hearted villains know it well enough (*IHIV*, II.ii.11.23-5).

A clarification on the exact meaning of both *yard* and *mile* is needed to judge the accuracy of the translators' proposed renderings. According to the *OED*, *yard* (*n* 2; 9a) is: "A measure of length (traditionally the standard unit of English long measure) equal to three feet or thirty-six inches." As one yard is equal to 0,9144 meters, 8 yards would then be little more than 7 meters.

With regard to *threescore-and-ten miles*, two elements need to be explained. Firstly, and following the *OED*, *score* (*n*; III) was "a group of twenty"; in this way, *threescore and ten* would be 70. As for the mile, this English measure was originally equivalent to 1.618 yards (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, Appendix 12, p.1075); as a consequence, 70 miles would be equal to 105,000 meters.

In this light, we consider Falstaff to be making an exaggerated comparison, as he is suggesting a mere distance of 7 meters is as much for him as to march a hundred kilometres. From our point of view, this hilarious comment reinforces Falstaff's characterization as an obese and lazy knight throughout the play. Macpherson (1887-95:167) translates both *yards* and *miles* by means of two cultural equivalents:

FAL. Ocho varas de terreno quebrado son para mí setenta leguas, y á esos infames de corazón empedernido, bien les consta.

By employing these equivalents, Macpherson not only shows his knowledge of the English and Spanish measurement systems –8 *varas* and 70 *leguas* equal 8 yards and 70 miles precisely– but also facilitates comprehension for Spanish readers, who are able to fully appreciate Falstaff's hyperbole. However, and as we mentioned above, the use of this equivalence technique may be criticised as it reveals Macpherson's conscious effort to accommodate the English text to Spanish customs. As a result, the translator's presence becomes noticeable, and so readers may become aware the text they are reading is a translation and not an original play.

Astrana (1974:416-17) renders these measures as literally as possible, making some changes in their orthography and pronunciation to adapt them to the Spanish language:

FALSTAFF. Ocho yardas de terreno desigual equivalen para mí a hacer setenta millas a pie; y los villanos, de corazón empedernido, lo saben perfectamente.

Although by rendering yards as *yardas* and miles as *millas* Astrana keeps certain coherence with the original cultural context of the play, the fact that these measures have never been used in Spain may hinder understanding for Spanish readers. These may infer from the context that Falstaff is exaggerating, but the force of the hyperbole is lost in vague measures whose equivalence is widely unknown. In this case, Astrana seems to disregard readers' full appreciation of the comment for the sake of faithfulness to the original text. In his translation, Valverde (1973:1182) uses both a cultural equivalent and a literal translation:

FALSTAFF. Ocho varas de terreno desigual son para mí como setenta millas a pie; y esos malvados de corazón de piedra lo saben muy bien.

Similarly to Macpherson, Valverde also chooses the *vara* as an equivalent for *yard*, thus facilitating readers' understanding of the measure mentioned. However, and most surprisingly, the translator renders *miles* as *millas*, a literal translation that, while keeping faith with the original text, does not seem coherent with the previous use of a cultural equivalent. We can only speculate on Valverde's reason for using two different criteria when rendering so similar culture-bound elements. Be that as it may, this lack of

systematic approach may result in readers missing Falstaff's hyperbolic comparison at the beginning of the second act.

One of the first conclusions we may obtain from this analysis is that the translators selected do not follow a specific technique when translating culture-bound elements, but resort to different strategies such as literal translation and cultural equivalents.

There is a clear tendency in Macpherson to accommodate the original cultural references to Spanish culture. Although this technique undoubtedly renders his translation comprehensible to the Spanish audience, some critics may think his acculturation process gives a distorted or unfaithful picture of Elizabethan society. In addition, the inclusion of coins and measures typical of Spanish culture may shatter readers' dramatic illusion, making them realise they are reading a translated text. A possible explanation for Macpherson's choices when rendering these elements may lie in the fact that he considered the translator's mission was to render the original text "revestido siquiera del modesto atavío de un lenguaje inteligible" (Ruppert 1920:48). In this light, it is possible that Macpherson carried out a conscious replacement of a number of culture-bound elements for the sake of intelligibility. Be that as it may, and although further analysis would be necessary, we consider it most probable that Macpherson devised his translation to be staged. Bearing potential theatre-goers in mind would certainly account for the use of cultural equivalents, as these undoubtedly facilitate understanding of quick and witty dialogues in a theatre.

Astrana's tendency, however, seems to be that of rendering the original culture-bound elements as literally as possible. Astrana very seldom replaces an Elizabethan culture-bound element by a Spanish equivalent, but rather keeps the original ones with minimum changes to their orthography. This may be due to the fact that Astrana was very much concerned with producing a faithful translation of Shakespeare. As he himself pointed out (Astrana 1974:1979) in his translation of *The Winter's Tale*, "nosotros hemos emprendido la abrumadora tarea de verter y comentar a Shakespeare, no para mutilarlo ni falsearlo, como nuestros predecesores, sino para expresar exactamente lo que dijo." With this aim of faithfulness in mind, it is only logical that he widely employed the technique of literal translation when rendering the original culture-bound allusions into Spanish. However, although some may judge literal translations as faithful to the original text, these may not always be fully appreciated by Spanish readers, and may give rise, in certain cases, to misunderstandings and incomprehension. Even though more research on Astrana's techniques would be needed, it seems this translator had a reading audience in mind, and that he would expect them to be acquainted with many aspects of English culture.

Whereas Macpherson's tendency is clearly to use cultural equivalents, and Astrana's literal translations, Valverde does not seem to follow a definite criterion when translating culture-bound elements. In his translations, Valverde uses both of these techniques, thus showing no special inclination to either accommodate or to literally translate the original allusions. Valverde admittedly translated for readers, thus judging his translation as "a failed one" (Valverde 1973:xiii). However, his combination of techniques seems to blend the two previous tendencies, thus producing a more balanced –and complex– translation. Further research into Valverde's techniques when rendering other kind of culture-bound elements would nevertheless be needed to judge his translation procedure and to discover his preferences in translation.

These general observations are by no means intended as an exhaustive account of the techniques Macpherson, Astrana and Valverde use throughout their translations of *IHIV*. The analysis proposed in this paper has been of a tentative nature, aiming to give an initial outline on how translation techniques used to render culture-bound elements have changed from one translator to another. However limited in its scope, we hope this analysis may give rise to future research into the translation process the three translators followed when rendering the remainder of Shakespeare's plays.

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