

Tres tragedias de venganza: teatro renacentista inglés
2006. Ed., intr. & transl. José Ramón Díaz Fernández.
Madrid: Gredos
(Biblioteca Universal Gredos, 46)

Juan Antonio Prieto Pablos
University of Sevilla

This edition, though officially published in 2006, was not available for sale until sometime later. It thus stands as an illustration of two contradictory situations: on the one hand, it must be regarded as a very worthy contribution to the spread of English Renaissance drama in the Spanish-speaking world; on the other, it evinces a certain lack of enthusiasm by the publisher –something to be particularly lamented when the publishing house is none other than Gredos. Their series “Biblioteca Clásica” and “Biblioteca Románica Hispánica” have enjoyed a long and highly respectable reputation and have been a regular reference in philological studies, and its offshoot “Biblioteca Universal” has maintained similar levels of quality since its inception in 2002. Sadly, RBA’s absorption of Gredos seems to have brought in new preferences and interests that bode not well for the continuation of Gredos’s traditional policy.

José Ramón Díaz Fernández has indeed provided a welcome addition to the still very limited catalogue of Spanish translations of English drama. In this book, he offers his own translations of Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (as *La tragedia española*), John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (*La duquesa de Amalfi*, introducing the Spanish toponym in its title) and John Ford’s *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (*Lástima que sea una ramera*, a rather more mellow option than the cruder *Lástima que sea una puta*, chosen by other editors). All three plays had already been translated into Spanish, but with one single exception (Antonio Ballesteros’ version of Ford’s play, published in 2001), none are readily available. And in all three cases, Díaz Fernández’s versions compare most favourably with the previous

ones. Although most of the dialogues in the original plays are in the typical iambic metre of English Renaissance drama, he has chosen prose instead of verse for his translation; nonetheless, he has managed to offer a remarkably fluent prose that sounds natural and well-suited to Spanish ears, and that could be spoken on the stage with few, if any, adjustments. He has also opted for a felicitous combination of present-day Spanish with a number of standard archaic expressions and grammatical formulas: the occasional occurrence of standard archaic terms (e.g., exclamations like “pardiez”; conjunction “mas” instead of “pero”; nouns like “galeno” alternating with “médico”) and of simple alterations of word order (e.g., “Míseros tiempos son estos [...]: 184) contributes to anchoring the text in its Renaissance context in an unobtrusive way. Moreover, these limited liberties he has taken do not go together with any other, more tempting, options that could have led to the production of a subjective or personal version. In fact, he offers a translation that is remarkably accurate and faithful to the original, and that reveals both a sound knowledge of sixteenth and seventeenth century English and a thorough research of the specific nuances of the texts and their authors’ stylistic preferences. This can be perceived in particular in those passages requiring polysemic interpretations: in general, Díaz Fernández has managed to maintain these nuances; and on those occasions in which he could not, he refers to the other possible alternatives in footnotes.

The purpose of this edition is not limited to offering Spanish-speaking readers a suitable translation of these three plays: a 44-page Introduction and a good-sized corpus of notes gives them also the opportunity to learn about their composition and the motives that justify their incorporation to the catalogue of English drama classics. The Introduction starts with a brief reference to the place of revenge drama in the general context of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and then offers separate sections for each playwright and his work, in which the editor outlines what little is known about the author’s life, describes the main aspects in each plot and refers to each play’s editorial and stage history. From a strictly academic point of view, it is probably not much, and possibly not enough; but this is not meant to be an academic edition. If the kind of readers targeted is considered, the expectations should be set at clarity and accuracy, and these goals are met –as much as the authors and texts permit. Moreover, the introduction ought also to be commended for the

inclusion of references to Spanish drama and present-day popular culture (e.g., the allusion to *Shakespeare in Love* as a point of entry to the description of Webster's life and work) that can help readers better to contextualise these plays. It is only to be noted, by way of the exceptionality of this example, that the editor's eagerness to approximate texts and readers leads him to over-stretch the relationship between Spain and *The Spanish Tragedy* and assert that the play was "con toda seguridad escrita con posterioridad al intento de desembarco de la Armada Invencible, en un momento en el que todo lo relacionado con España se vivía con auténtica expectación en Inglaterra" (49).¹ Although some critics (e.g., Philip Edwards, editor of the Revels version) suggest 1590 as a date of performance, a general consensus establishes a more general segment (1582-1592) that precludes any certainty with regards to any correspondence between the play and the Armada fiasco of 1588.

Not being an academic edition, Díaz Fernández's should not be expected to cover certain other aspects that would have been otherwise requisite. This is particularly the case as regards textual features: for this matter, the editor wisely refers those who might be interested to critical editions (unfortunately for Spanish readers, these critical editions are in English), and simply points out the occurrence of significant textual cruxes, whenever they come out in the text, by means of footnotes (as, for example, when his translation goes into passages that were added in the 1602 edition of *The Spanish Tragedy*; or when he explains that the verses added after the dumb show in 3.4 of *The Duchess of Malfi* were disclaimed by Webster: 263). Nonetheless, an aspect that would have been much welcomed is a more detailed reference to earlier translations (Glantz's *La tragedia española*, Díez Canedo's *La duquesa de Malfi*, the various translations of Ford's play) particularly respecting their comparison with what this edition offers.

The Introduction is complemented with an extensive catalogue of footnotes. This is, in my opinion, an essential ingredient in editions of non-contemporary foreign texts. Díaz Fernández annotates textual variants, and comments on ambiguities, puns and other verbal games. He also adds notes that refer to the immediate

¹ That is, *The Spanish Tragedy* was "most likely written after the defeat of the Armada, at a time when all things concerning Spain aroused the interest of the people in Britain" (my translation).

context of the play's story or production, from a historical perspective (e.g., James I's selling of nobility titles: 255) or from a literary perspective (e.g., in dramatic references to women's silence: 290); points out elements of the plot that have special dramatic relevance (e.g., Andrea's scarf, which will link its first mention by Bel-Imperia to two other episodes: 66); and explains the numerous classical allusions that pepper the plays (sadly, defining the hydra (376) or Ariadne (123) has become more and more requisite in our times). These topics are to be expected, to a very great extent, in critical editions. Much less usual, and therefore the more welcome, is the addition of notes referring to Renaissance stage practice (as, for example, the first note in *La tragedia española*, where the editor notes that the Ghost of Andrea and Revenge probably enter from the stage trap; or his comment on the meaning that a character with a book in his hand would have for English audiences: 327) or to contemporary performance (319 n.81, where he observes that an ambiguous textual crux was resolved in a 2003 performance of *The Duchess of Malfi* by making her ghost appear at the end of 5.2). These notes do not only help clarify specific passages; they also contribute to enhancing the understanding of these texts as not just words on the page, but as words that combine with action on the stage.

As a whole, the notes in Díaz Fernández's edition must be regarded as constituting a thorough corpus, with very little to object to with respect to what is included. What one could find fault with is what is not found; this is a very easy kind of criticism, as there is virtually no limit to what a book like this could have –and annotation is indeed a case in point–, yet it is also too tempting to avoid, and I will indulge and mention a few instances in which I would have appreciated an explanatory note: for example, for the dance called *gallarda* (English *galliard*) (191);² for the close connection between the Geneva Bible and the Calvinists (284), which would have contributed to marking out the speaker as a Puritan sympathiser in *La duquesa de Amalfi*; or for the stage direction "Lo cuelgan del emparrado" (87: "They hang him in the arbour" in the original text of *The Spanish Tragedy*), which has aroused much critical discussion on the type of stage property used in early Elizabethan

² It might be argued that this definition can be found in the DRAE; but Díaz Fernández does add a note for another dance, the *pavana* (346), which has not the same potential for ambiguity as the *gallarda* (191).

productions. These missed notes must be regarded also as representing others of similar nature (lexical, cultural, dramatic) that could have improved the work, had they been included. But I suspect that specific editorial restrictions (namely, by the publisher, or by the editor himself) must have contributed to putting a limit to the number of notes that could be added. Still, some other omissions are not so understandable; and one fails to find a reason for the exclusion of prefatory material in *The Duchess of Malfi* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, found both in the original editions and in the modern critical editions used by Díaz Fernández.

To conclude, *Tres tragedias de venganza* offers Spanish-speaking readers a very good opportunity to familiarise themselves with three classic plays and with the context which produced them. And its editor, José Ramón Díaz Fernández, facilitates this by providing a suitable amount of information alongside with the translations, a combination that proves both the extent of his abilities as a translator and the thoroughness of his research.

References

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Author's contact: ppablos@us.es