

# PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATING GUZMÁN DE ALFARACHE INTO ENGLISH

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The earliest English translation of Mateo Alemán's picaresque novel *Guzmán de Alfarache*, which was entitled *The Rogue: or the life of Guzman de Alfarache*, was first published in 1622, twenty-three years after the publication of the first Spanish edition. *The Rogue* was translated by James Mabbe, a Magdalen scholar who had lived in Spain for several years. It went into five editions in the seventeenth century (London, 1622; London, 1623; Oxford, 1630; London, 1634; London, 1656) and it has been reprinted again in our century (London and New York, 1924 and 1967).

*The Rogue* is not the only English translation of *Guzmán de Alfarache*. Other translations were published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but all of them deviate substantially from the original. They derive from French adaptations, and have omitted most moralisations, which are considered "superfluous". Whereas these adaptations are interesting only in so far as they reflect the aesthetic canons and the concept of translation of the age in which they were published, the reprint of Mabbe's translation indicates that it is perfectly satisfactory to twentieth century readers. Obviously, it is not so popular now as it was in the seventeenth century because the readers' interests are different, but had it been a deficient translation, it would not have been reprinted. This paper will analyse some of the problems that *Guzmán* presents to the translator and how Mabbe solved them.

Translating *Guzmán de Alfarache* into English is indeed a difficult task. Mateo Alemán was a great master of the Spanish language. His pithy prose and extremely rich vocabulary, his use of proverbs and idioms, puns, metaphors, alliterations, and other sound-effects pose many problems to the translator. Mabbe wrote in his dedication to John Strangways: "En algunos lugares hallo mi *Guzmanico* oscuro como la noche. Pero, yo he hecho algunos *Escolios* para quitar los *Escollos*. Espero buen puerto".

*Guzmán de Alfarache* became immediately popular when it was published in 1599. The number of editions *The Rogue* went into and the fact that it is found in the catalogues of many private libraries show that Mabbe's translation

was also a success among English readers. Moreover, it was highly praised by Mabbe's contemporaries. John Florio, Ben Jonson and Leo Diggs wrote commendatory verses for it. John Florio wrote his laudatory verse "To the exact Translator of the famous History of infamous Guzman". Leo Diggs emphasized the fact that whereas Alemán's language was dark and difficult to understand, Mabbe "now makes him [Guzmán] speake English plaine" ("To Don Diego Puede-Ser, and his Translation of Guzman"). Ben Jonson also refers to Mabbe's recreation of *Guzmán* and considers it even better than the original: "hee's [the English Rogue] too well suted, in a cloth, / Finer than was his Spanish" ("On the Author, Worke, and Translator"). Mabbe was, then, an "exact", a faithful translator, but, as we will see, he was also creative; his translation reflects his personality and his own style.

Mabbe was a contemporary of Alemán's and fully understood the spirit of the original. He respected Alemán's intention and the content, structure and stylistic devices of the novel. Alemán combined Guzman's adventures with long moralisations to instruct his readers. Mabbe was the only English translator who realized the importance of the moral passages and did not omit them, as later translators did, mutilating the content and changing the structure of the novel.

The form of a literary work is as important as its content. Alemán made frequent use of metaphors, puns, sound effects, proverbs and popular expressions. Mabbe wrote his dedication in Spanish, probably to show that he had an excellent command of the source language, and in it he used a style very similar to that of Alemán, as if he wanted to show us from the beginning that he would respect the author's stylistic devices. Indeed, he respected and retained them, but he also imprinted his own personal style in the translation, showing his fondness for amplification and figurative language. Mabbe expanded Alemán's pithy passages and clarified them.

As it is mistakes in translation rather than successful solutions that critics normally pay attention to, I would like to focus on Mabbe's effective renderings. In his dedication Mabbe wrote: "El que buelue las palabras y conceptos de vna lengua en otra à menester tener fidelidad, prudencia, y sagacidad, y ygual noticia de ambas Lenguas, y lo que en ellas se dize por alusiones, y términos metafóricos, y mirar lo, que en esta otra lengua se puede corresponder". A translator must then be faithful to the original and sensitive to language. He has to use the resources of the target language to produce on his readers the effect that the author intended. Mabbe's concept of a faithful translation was not a literal translation, but one which attempted to carry over into English the sense and the stylistic devices of the original.

The search for the adequate equivalences from one language to another often requires a great deal of imagination and ingenuity, in addition to a mastery of the two languages. I will consider now how Mabbe used the resources of English to solve some of the main problems he was faced with in translating *Guzmán de Alfarache*.

Alemán often used metaphors to define and exemplify concepts. Whereas most modern translators feel uneasy in the presence of metaphors—the term "metarophobia" has been coined to refer to this feeling—Mabbe was fond of figurative language and reproduced Alemán's metaphors accurately:

Es amor una prision de locura, nacida del ocio, criada con voluntad y dineros<sup>1</sup>.

Love is the prison of Folly, borne of Idleness, bred vp by Selfe-will and Money<sup>2</sup>.

Not only does Mabbe keep Alemán's figures of speech but he also makes up metaphors and similes which do not exist in the original. The following example illustrates the translator's exuberant style; Mabbe expands the original text considerably, by adding a series of metaphors:

Todo se me hacía tarde.

(GA, 1, II, 8, p. 324)

I thought euery houre a thousand yeere, till I might come to see her againe; Time (me thought) was too slow of wing, his Glasse did not runne fast enough, his Scythe did not sweepe away the loytring houres half so speedely, as I could have wished.

(TR, 1, II, 8, p. 160)

Mabbe does not feel uneasy either in the presence of sound-effects. Alliteration is a frequent device in Elizabethan literature, and Mabbe has no difficulties in keeping Alemán's alliterative passages:

Es fiera, fea, fantástica, furiosa, fastidiosa, floja, fácil, flaca, falsa, que sólo le falta ser Francisca.

(GA, 1, III, 2, p. 362)

It is fierce, foule, fantasticke, furious, fastidious, faint, facile, feeble, false: only she failes of being a Franciscan.

(TR 1, III, 2, p. 190)

1 Mateo Alemán, *Guzmán de Alfarache*, F. Rico, ed. *La novela picaresca española* (Barcelona, 1967) 103-922, GA 2, III, 5, p. 823.

2 Mateo Alemán, *The Rogue: or the life of Guzman de Alfarache*. Trans. James Mabbe (London, 1622), TR, 2, III, 5, p. 287.

More difficult to keep are the rhymes which normally produce a comic effect and are so characteristic of Alemán's style:

El hombre tenía poder, el juez buenas ganas de hacerle placer.  
(GA 2, II, 2, p. 606)

He was a powerful man in that Citie, and the Iudge (it seemed) was very willing to pleasure him.

(TR, 2, II, 2, p. 106)

Mabbe, however, tries to compensate for this loss, by using the same sound effect in other passages:

La bolsa apurada y con ella la paciencia.  
(GA, 1, II, 1, p. 247)

My purse pennillesse, and my patience remedillesse.  
(TR, 1, II, 1, p. 103)

Another problem that Mabbe had to face was the rendering of Alemán's frequent puns. The translation of puns, of word-play, generally requires a great deal of ingenuity. Mabbe, an Elizabethan translator, was also very fond of puns and tried to reproduce them. Alemán often used words which had the same sound but different senses. Mabbe looked for an analogous wordplay in English, and in many cases he succeeded, since English has many monosyllabic words, and puns are easily made with them:

En la posada no hay cosa posada.  
(GA, 2, II, 8, p. 669)

Into an Inne bring nothing in.  
(TR, 2, II, 9, p. 184)

Mabbe also succeeded in retaining Alemán's paronomasia –his plays on words which have a similar sound:

Yo mandé que te hartases; mas que no hurtases.  
(GA, 1, III, 9, p. 248)

I will'd thee, that thou shouldst fill thy selfe, and not filch.  
(TR, 1, III, 9, p. 244)

Alemán's misogynous explanation of the etymology of the word "mujer", "Su nombre trae consigo: *mujer de mole*, por ser blanda" (GA, 2, III, 1, p. 739) is replaced by a similarly misogynous but ingenious comment: "And therefore their name sutes well with her nature, being for this cause, called *Woman*, because she is a *woe* to *man*" (TR, 1, III, 9, p. 244).

However, in some cases Alemán's puns have to be sacrificed, since it is impossible to reproduce them in English, especially when the two meanings are not semantically related, as in the polysemic pun, but when the identity of sound is purely arbitrary. When the translator can only capture one of the two meanings, he usually explains the Spanish wordplay in a footnote.

Mabbe's fondness for wordplay is evident throughout his translation and he sometimes adds his own puns. Mabbe even plays on his name, which is translated as "Don Diego Puede Ser".

*Guzmán de Alfarache* is full of proverbial expressions, which are not only a stylistic device but a way of expressing concise statements regarding human nature. Mabbe, who lived in an age when there was a literary interest in proverbs, realized the importance they have in a didactic work and tried to preserve and, if necessary, explain them. Whenever possible, Mabbe uses an English equivalent:

Por saltar de la sartén caí en la brasa.  
(GA, 1, I, 5, p. 169)

When I leapt out of the Frying-pan into the fire.  
(TR, 1, I, 5, p. 45)

The comments that Mabbe writes in his footnotes show his tendency to use English idioms and proverbs. "Los pies de la perdiz" (GA, 2, I, 1, p. 487), for example, is translated as "the legge of a Larke" (TR, 2, I, 1, p. 6) and a footnote explains: "The Spanish word is *pie de perdiz*, but the other fits better with our phrase or speech". When there is no English equivalent, Mabbe translates the proverb absorbing it in the text and explaining its meaning,

Y así viene quien menos culpa tiene a lavar lana.  
(GA, 2, III, 2, p. 761)

Whence, it oftentimes comes to pass, that he that is least in fault, smarts most.  
(TR, 2, III, 2, p. 232)

Mabbe also translates a number of proverbs and idioms literally, always noting *Proverb* in the margin, so that the reader knows that there is a proverb in the original. The Spanish proverb "echar la sogá tras el caldero" (GA, 2, III, 2, p. 700), for example, is translated literally as "to cast the cord after the cauldron" (TR, 2, II, 3, p. 123) on one occasion, whereas he gives the English equivalent on another "to throw the halve after the hatchet" (TR, 2, II, 3, p. 123).

Proverbs also show Mabbe's tendency to enlarge and clarify the text. He sometimes adds the Spanish proverb:

De muchos pocos hiciera mucho.

(GA, 1, I, 5, p. 176)

*De muchos pocos hiziera mucho*; Many a little makes a mickle.

(TR, 1, I, 5, p. 50)

resorts to Latin:

Mi amigo es Platón, pero mucho más la verdad.

(GA, 1, I, 1, p. 115)

*Amicus Plato, sed magis amicus Veritas*: Plato is my friend, but the Truth more.

(TR, 1, I, 1, p. 7)

or uses two or more similar proverbs:

Una pequeña piedra suele trastornar un carro grande.

(GA, 2, II, 8, p. 689)

A little hayre in a Pen, makes a great blot; and a little stone in the way, overturnes a great Waine.

(TR, 2, II, 9, p. 176)

Mabbe translated not only the proverbs that he found in the original, but he added some of his own, thus reflecting the literary value that proverbs had during the Elizabethan age. In short, he succeeded in conveying one of the most characteristic features of the *Guzmán*.

The consummate craft with which Alemán handled Spanish, and his masterful use of vocabulary obviously posed some problems even to a translator who had an excellent command of this language. Mabbe had difficulty in understanding some expressions, but his mistakes and deviations are not very important. Alemán alludes in one passage to the custom that some inn-keepers had of giving horse meat to poor guests. Guzmán says: "ninguno entrara en la venta a pie que dejara de salir a caballo" (GA, 1, II, 1, p. 256) the expression "a caballo" meaning that they had eaten horse meat. Mabbe misunderstood it and translated the sentence as "That no man that had come into the Inne afoot, would haue stayed to goe out a horse-back" (TR, 1, II, 1, p. 110).

How to translate dialectal features is a problem which has been the subject of endless discussions. Unfortunately, there is no ideal solution. When faced with this problem, Mabbe decided to render the dialectal expressions into Standard English, sometimes indicating the speaker's peculiar speech:

Dijo: "Hernán Sanz, dádmelo a mí, que, par diez, nunca hu ñamurado"

(GA, 2, I, 2, p. 5)

In his Clownish kinde of language, said unto him; Brother Sanz, giue mee the Pig: for by these ten bones I vow vnto you, that I was neuer yet in loue.

(TR, 2, I, 2, p. 604)

In the same way, the thieves' slang becomes standard English:

No hay neguilla.

(GA, 2, II, 2, p. 604)

He cannot possibly deny it.

(TR, 2, II, 2, p. 105)

Nobody has yet written an ideal or perfect translation; all translations can be improved. A modern translator would no doubt omit all the amplifications which are characteristic of Mabbe's style, but I wonder whether s/he would render Alemán's metaphors, sound-effects, puns and proverbs better than Mabbe and would find more effective expressions than those used by him.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

GA: *Guzmán de Alfarache*, ed. F. Rico (*La novela picaresca española*, pp. 103-922), Barcelona, 1967.

TR: *The Rogue: or the life of Guzman de Alfarache* Trans. by James Mabbe, London, 1622.