

Jonson, Ben (2002): *Volpone*. Edición bilingüe de Purificación Ribes. Madrid: Cátedra.

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1. Ben Jonson, *Volpone* and its translations into Spanish

Every scholar of English studies has been taught at university that Ben Jonson is, next to Shakespeare, the most important dramatist of the Elizabethan era. However, these two authors are completely different. Shakespeare portrays the tragic destiny of human beings and Jonson depicts the darkest and meanest sides of people's behaviour. While Shakespeare's greatest plays (*Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, etc.) are marked by tragedy and depression, Ben Jonson's (*Volpone*, *Epicæne*, *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair*, etc.) expose social abuses, show up the follies of the day and satirize the baseness of human nature; he pokes fun at the absurd fashions of the time by means of exaggerated characters and situations. In short, Shakespeare delves into the human soul and Ben Jonson moves around the boundaries of human passions, absurdity and stupidity; as a satirist, he attempts to arouse hostile emotions such as mockery, disdain, hatred, disgust, etc. at the expense of the character that is being satirized.

The important contribution made by Ben Jonson to world literature, and in particular his brilliant *Volpone*, is not reflected in the number of Spanish translations of his works that have been published. Hardly any have appeared in the last fifty years, apart from those of Borrás and Bermejo (Alfil, Madrid, 1953), Tasi (Moll, Palma de Mallorca, 1956) and the splendid translation done by Adolfo Sarabia twenty-two years ago (Bosch, Barcelona, 1980). In an attempt to make up for this deficit, the publishing house Cátedra has just published (in 2002), as part of its *Letras Universales* collection, an extremely well-edited bilingual edition of *Volpone* (the only erratum I found was on page 241, line 5) translated by Dr. Purificación Ribes of the University of Valencia.

Though the earlier translations are very good, everything in life needs updating in the light of new insights, innovative findings, new perspectives or the original proposals brought up by the constant research carried out by young scholars in each historical period. The research done in each particular period contributes novel ideas enabling new aspects of the everlasting freshness and vividness of these classics of world literature to be discovered. Such books are true founts of wisdom and when we analyse the language used, in this case from the point of view of the philological challenge entailed in translating a literary work of the 17th century, they offer an array of the universal features and properties of people's most obscure passions and weaknesses.

Purificación Ribes gives us a translation which is faithful (within the limits defined by the concept of faithfulness in translation), clear, limpid and, above all, exquisite. Cervantes (*Don Quijote*) tells us that reading a badly translated text can be compared with the experience of someone "quien mira los tapices flamencos por el revés, que aunque se ven

las figuras, son llenas de hilos que las oscurecen, y no se ven con la lisura y tez de la haz". This is certainly not the case with Dr. Ribes' magnificent translation of *Volpone*. In my opinion, her choice of language and turns of phrase are felicitous, stylish and eloquent, both from the point of view of philology and from that of traductology, for the reasons I shall discuss below.

Some literature teachers like to ask their students on the first day of class what the word literature means. The conclusion reached is that literature embraces so many aspects, perspectives and values that it is no easy task to give a comprehensive definition of this phenomenon, so characteristic of the human race. However, there is one point on which everyone, or almost everyone, would agree and that is the aesthetic value of literary texts. This is precisely one of the features of this publication, since the aesthetic values of language, for instance, the rhythm, tone, register and ideal choice of language, may be appreciated in both the original text and Dr. Ribes's translation.

2. *Volpone* and the diachronic view in English philology

The translation of an English literary text of the 17th century is not a task to be undertaken by anyone who lacks a sound philological background. A fundamental feature of modern English studies is the importance that has always been attached to the diachronic dimension of the language. Indeed, philology goes back to the 19th century when language was approached from an entirely historical point of view, and this has left a lasting mark on the university syllabuses of English philology. The historical or diachronic approach to language affords three main informative aspects which can be clearly distinguished in Dr. Ribes's book: the literary, the purely linguistic and the cultural.

In the introductory chapter, consisting of 67 pages divided into various sections, Dr. Ribes presents some aspects of *Volpone* in a true professorial manner, that is, thoroughly, clearly and enjoyably. She starts with a brief summary of Ben Jonson's biography, followed by an analysis of how his works as a whole were received by the critics. She then focuses on *Volpone* and discusses the different performances of this play staged in England and on the Continent, together with the mutilations it suffered as a result of the prejudices of each period. Some Spanish translators, for example, refused to condemn the main character of the play. As Dr. Ribes informs us, the problem of the controversial ending, which few performances had been able to overcome, was resolved once and for all by David Williams in the version he staged in Stratford (Ontario). In this performance, after hearing the judges' verdict, *Volpone* leaves the stage and then reappears in formal dress and delivers the play's epilogue. In the section on sources, Dr. Ribes refers to the classical echoes of Horace's *Satires* (II,5), Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead* and Petronius's *Satyricon*, which she goes on to discuss in greater detail in the numerous footnotes. The last section is devoted to an analysis of the three classical unities in Jonson's play.

In addition to the admirable philological dissertation given in the introduction, the hundreds of notes that illuminate the book are delightful nuggets of information, encapsulated lessons on the culture, tastes, personalities and atmosphere of the period in

England and other European countries (especially Italy), as well as on the institutions, in particular the judicial system, the corruption of which is denounced with a ferocity similar to that employed two centuries later by Charles Dickens in *Bleak House*. The author's linguistic and literary comments are also of great value:

a) Constant references to the classical sources of the play (Horace, Juvenal, etc.):

A lawyer could never have been; nor scarce/Another woman (Ni al letrado se habría oído ni siquiera a otra mujer), page 296 . [These same two comparisons can be found in Juvenal (Satires VI, 439-40)].

b) Explication and justification of the meanings of words with reference to lexicographic authorities:

I could stifle him, rarely, with a pillow (Con una almohada lo ahogaría divinamente), page 180. [This meaning of "divinamente" is listed as the 3rd sense of the word in the OED: *unusually or remarkably well; finely; splendidly; beautifully*, as the author explains in footnote 68 on page 180]

It should also be said that Dr. Ribes acquits herself very well in the translation of overweight noun and adjective phrases, such as the following:

Those turdy-facy-nasty-payt-lousy-fartical rogues (Esos bribones con la cara de boñigo, sucia testa, piojosos, hediondos).

c) A magisterial translation of double-sense words and of the connotations representing emotions, feelings, etc.:

My blood,
My spirits are returned; I am alive;
 And like your *wanton gamester*, at 'primero',
 Whose thought had whispered to him, *not go less*,
 Methinks I *lie*, and draw - *for an encounter*

Mi sangre,
Mi ánimo ha retornado; estoy vivo,
 Como el *jugador desenfrenado de "Primera"*,
 Al que su mente susurra: "*al envite*".
Me voy a apostar, y a sacar ... *para este lance*.

Spirit: II.8.b (sing. and PL: Liveliness, vivacity, dash).
 'Mi ánimo' is an excellent choice.

Wanton: A2: 'lascivious'; A2 'Unrestrained'.

'Desenfrenado' means both 'lúbrico' and 'empedernido' in Spanish.

(*At primero*): "A gambling card-game, fashionable in the 16th and 17th cents, in which each player was dealt four cards'.

De primera (juego de baraja en el que el lance con que se gana la partida se llama "flux") certainly underscores the ambiguity of the passage.

Not go less: 'lay the highest wager possible'.

'(AI) envite': ("puesta que se añade a la ordinaria en algunos juegos de azar", María Moliner) keeps the original sense and carries the connotation of Volpone's impatience to gain Celia's love.

Lie: 1) 'Lay or place the bet'; 2) 'lying in wait for an encounter' [In this case Volpone waiting for Celia].

'Apostarse' encompasses both meanings.

Encounter: 1) 'a match for a winning suit'; 2) 'An amatory interview'.

'Lance' is a very happy term in Spanish because it includes both senses in this case.

3. *Volpone* and traductology

The theoretical study of translation has been given various titles, of which traductology seems to be the term most widely accepted. Two of the main objectives of traductology are: (1) the study of language aimed at solving the problems of equivalence arising when two texts written in different languages but with the same meaning come into contact; and (2) a better understanding of the manipulation techniques used by translators in their quest for equivalence. The term manipulation in this context denotes skill and "linguistic efficiency", while equivalence implies "conservation of the same meaning". In this sense, translators are seen as manipulators of the target language in the search for equivalence so as to maintain the essence of the source language intact; whereas traductologists are rather analysts of linguistic resources who propose theories and models that attempt to provide a better explanation of the theoretical questions arising from languages in contact.

Two fundamental techniques of *indirect translation*, that is, translation that is not literal, are transposition and modulation. Vinay and Dalbernet in their publication *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais* (Paris: Didier, 1958) declare that a translator who cannot transpose or modulate is not a translator. In transposition, one part of speech in the source language is converted into a different part of speech in the target language. For example, *He held that ...* (in this construction the nucleus is a verb) becomes "*en su opinión*" (the nucleus of which is a noun), or in the Spanish translation of *late delivery* ("*demora en la entrega*") where there is a transposition of the adjective *late* to the noun

"demora". Dr. Ribes's text is full of excellent transpositions. The following three may serve as examples:

Shall I hope? (¿Puedo albergar esperanzas?), page 241.

The testimony comes, that will convince (Aquí la prueba testifical, irrefutable), p. 241.

Heaven, that never fails the innocent (El cielo, amparo del inocente), page 419.

In the case of modulation, categories of ideas and semantic categories, rather than parts of speech, are manipulated. An example of modulation can be found in the everyday expression *Young people take everything for granted* (Los jóvenes no les dan importancia a las cosas). Vázquez Ayora (*Introducción a la Traductología*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1977) believes that modulation is the most important technique used in indirect translation. The following are four examples taken from the text:

By your own scale (Vuestra experiencia os avala), page 154.

That same fellow was an unknown fool (De bufón sólo tenía la apariencia), page 200.

I hear him coming (Ya va entrando en razón), page 254.

In addition to mastering transposition and modulation with ease and skill, Dr. Ribes has not given in to the "temptation of the paronym", that is, the attraction exerted by homographic or homophonic words and parallel syntactic constructions in the source language without first subjecting them to critical scrutiny. This tendency to use paronyms can be seen in the translation of many determiners and adjectives; for example, *certain* does not usually mean "cierto" but "determinado", *various* is more often "diversos" than "varios", and *particular* is almost never "particular" but rather "concreto". Dr. Ribes has taken great care over the translation of paronyms.

In conclusión, this is an exquisite volume whose translation will delight not only the educated reader delving into the study of the great figures of world literature, who will find a selection of telling aphorisms, ideas and maxims, but also the sociologist and the psychologist, both of whom are analysts of human passions, and especially English studies and traductology scholars, who will all find its valuable linguistic and cultural contributions of immense use. A traductologist who enjoys analysing translation techniques will find an endless series of brilliant examples of transpositions and modulations, etc, together with many other manipulative techniques, all performed naturally, simply and with great skill by Dr. Ribes.