

The Trials of Translating and Directing *The House of Trials*

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As the translator of Sor Juana's comedy, *Los empeños de una casa*, I had to make a number of choices which would determine the overall style of the translation. The most important choice, of course, was the level of diction. Translations of Spanish Golden Age *comedia* often sound stilted and overly ornate in English. Language that sounded graceful and polite to seventeenth-century Spaniards would strike a modern English-speaking ear as pretentious and florid.

Sor Juana wrote in rhymed verse, which was the norm for her time, but is not common in English theatre. I chose to avoid rhyme except for the song, the short scene immediately following the song (for reasons discussed later), and lines at the ends of scenes (to bring scenes to a graceful conclusion as Shakespeare often did). Richard Wilbur's verse translations of Molière work beautifully in English, but most rhyming translations sound like bad Dr. Seuss. So, I chose to render the play in prose so it would flow easily off the performers' tongues, but to make the language as theatrical and pleasing to the ear as possible.

I made the decision to emphasize Sor Juana's metaphorical diction. At the beginning of Act II, for example, Ana asks Leonor how she slept last night and Leonor responds,

Like someone
shipwrecked amid the tempests
of a stormy sea
with the keel aground
and the stern in the air.

I could have simplified this to "I felt shipwrecked and run aground in a storm," which would

have rendered the general image of the line, but would have lost the sense of an extended metaphor. Sor Juana's poetry is often elaborate and baroque, so I sought English phrases that maintained the complex imagery without being stilted.

I also chose to use alliteration whenever possible to make the dialogue appeal to the ear. Thus Castaño says "How wonderful to be wooed" instead of "It's nice to be made love to" and refers to "a legion of lackeys" rather than "many servants." Sometimes I was even able to use double alliteration, as in Juan's soliloquy in Act III, "How can I risk **p**roving my **d**ishonor without **p**reparing my **d**efense?" This also creates a rhythm, making the dialogue fun to listen to in the theatre.

I also attempted to create different levels of diction for different characters. Whenever Rodrigo enters, the verse form changes from assonant rhyme to true rhyme, which suggested a more strict and rigid language, reflecting his strict and rigid character and sense of honor. In translation, I made his language more formal and academic. He never uses contractions, splits infinitives, or ends a sentence with a proposition as other characters do. On the other hand, the servants use slang in the original, so I had to give them more colloquial diction in translation.

The servants proved to be the most difficult characters to translate. First of all, their use of seventeenth-century slang made it a challenge to understand what they were saying. In addition, they often spoke in puns that would not translate literally into English. I found that translating jokes from one language to another was a maddening struggle when searching for a humorous equivalent, but a rewarding pleasure when I discovered a related pun in English. Celia, in Act II, has a speech which uses several different forms and meanings of the verb *mandar*. The word means "to give an order" and also "to leave in a will." My solution was a series of variations on the words "give" and "order":

. . . it always turns out
that if they order something

in order to give,
they give themselves the excuse
that they forgot to give the order
in order not to give.

While perhaps not as clever as Sor Juana, the speech at least gives a sense of Celia's playful diction.

Some puns, however, were just impossible to translate or find any equivalent in English. In the last act, Castaño says that his gloves are *de perro*, which literally means made of dog skin, but is slang for cheap or dirty. Several lines later he says that he is *el perro muerto* (the dead dog) from which the gloves were made. The phrase, *el perro muerto*, also refers to a man who tricks a women into having sex with him by pretending to be someone else. In English, we have no word for a man who performs "a bed trick" nor do we describe cheap gloves as being made of dog fur. I failed to find any equivalent for these puns, so Castaño describes the gloves as "cheap" and himself as "a cheap trick." Some *double entendres*, alas, have no equivalent in translation.

Some phrases can be literally translated quite easily, but sound odd or absurd in another language. In Golden Age Spain, it was customary to utter to the polite phrase "I kiss your feet." I was afraid, however, that a modern American audience would laugh, so I changed the sentence to "I kneel at your feet" which is the action implied by the original phrase.

One formally polite Spanish phrase that sounded both stilted and sexist in English was the recurring phrase: "I am the master of her heart" or "He is the master of my heart." While the phrase is intended to be romantic, it has sinister overtones of sexism, since it is always the man who is the master of a woman's heart and never the other way around. Here I varied my translation depending on the character who spoke the line. I viewed

Leonor and Carlos as an ideal couple in the play, so instead of letting Carlos say "I am the master of Leonor's heart," I gave him the phrase "I am the man Leonor loves" (which also allowed for alliteration). On the other hand, I interpreted Ana as a schemer who is trapped by her own plots into marrying Juan, so she lies and claims that he "reigned absolutely over all the thoughts in my heart." Because Ana is lying, I purposely had her overstate her feelings. My vision of the play resulted in different English translations of the same Spanish phrase.

In many small ways, my translation favors my interpretation of the play, in which Leonor and Carlos are the heroine and hero, because they represent an androgynous ideal. In Golden Age Spain, intelligence and reason were considered masculine traits while beauty and discretion were feminine traits. Leonor's intelligence is emphasized in her long exposition speech, and when she describes Carlos, she emphasizes his beauty and his manners. Thus Leonor sees both Carlos and herself as combining traditionally masculine and feminine traits. I believe that Sor Juana intended to depict each of them as ideally "bi-gendered." Therefore, when given a choice, I always gave Carlos and Leonor the most feminist translation possible.

My interpretation of the play caused me to alter the title of the play, which proved problematic in English, in any case. The literal translation is "the trials of a house," which makes no sense in English. Sor Juana intended it as a pun on the title of a play by Calderón, *The Trials of Chance*. Since this play is unknown in English, there was no reason to keep the play on words. I interpreted the play as a series of trials for Leonor and Carlos, whose love is tested by Pedro and Ana's schemes while they are trapped in their house. Thus, I decided to call the play *The House of Trials*.

Another important decision that incorporated my interpretation of the play was the repeated use of theatrical metaphors throughout the text. Sor Juana filled *The House of Trials* with puns that refer to the theatre, and I chose to emphasize this in my translation.

Whenever a word had several meanings and one of them referred to performance, I chose the theatrical metaphor. Thus, Celia refers to a long speech as "a monologue" and refers to her deceptions as "plot devices." The meta-theatrical joke that audiences always laughed at was Castaño's line to Carlos at the end of Act II:

Let's go and skip the cries of "alas!" and "alack!"
that prevent our leaving and prolong the act.

These lines are part of a pattern of theatrical language that permeates the text. (And, by the way, it is usually the servants, Castaño and Celia, who use the theatrical metaphors.)

The meta-theatrical language is most obvious in Castaño's soliloquy as he dresses in Leonor's clothing. He talks to the audience and addresses individual people who must have been present at the play's premiere. The series of self-reflective references begin with Castaño's plea,

. . . help me to escape these trials
by inspiring a scheme for me
worthy of the great playwright, Calderón!

Sor Juana borrowed heavily from Pedro Calderón de la Barca's dramaturgy throughout the play, but in this scene she outdoes the master. She dares us to compare her play with Calderón's and then proceeds to use Castaño's disguise for a type of gender-bending comedy that Calderón never produced.

The meta-theatrical language becomes meta-theatrical action in the musical performance in the middle of Act II. Ana prepares a musical performance for Leonor to listen to while she is trapped in Pedro and Ana's house. Meanwhile, Ana hides Carlos and her servant in a room with a latticed window, so Carlos can watch Pedro make love to Leonor and be driven by jealousy to lose interest in Leonor. Ana creates a performance for Leonor as well as performance for Carlos, thus Ana arranges a play-within-a-play-within-a-

play. After the singers complete their song, each of the six characters on stage has a speech with the same complex rhyme scheme and two identical lines spoken in between each speech. In addition, the last line of all six speeches rhymed with each other. This was truly a translator's nightmare! **(Video Clip 1 [High Bandwith](#) | [Low Bandwith](#))**

As you can hear in this video from the performance at Oklahoma City University, I translated each of the six speeches into two rhyming couplets, with a repeated refrain. You also may have noticed that the formality of the language in this scene is reflected in the formality of the blocking. The choreography for the musical performance was formal and the singers were obviously in performance mode. Then the movement pattern for the following six speeches was identical for each character. The actor rose on the first word, crossed to another location while speaking, and sat on the last word. The characters, like the singers, seemed choreographed. Their movement patterns were intentionally artificial and theatrical in order to visually mimic Sor Juana's deliberately artificial and theatrical versification. When this production was performed at the International *Siglo de Oro* Theatre Festival in 1996, both of the adjudicators commented on the dramatic effectiveness of this scene in terms of both the translation and the direction.

I had originally translated the scene on video in prose, but while listening to my actors perform the scene when I first directed the play in 1995, I realized that these speeches had to be rendered in rhyming verse. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to hear my text spoken by actors and make changes in rehearsal. When the lines sounded awkward or stilted, I was able to alter them to flow more smoothly. I adjusted the wording of puns and jokes to achieve the best comic effect. With the help of several professors correcting my translation, I was able to produce a version that was reasonably accurate as well as stage worthy.

Catherine Larson's article, "Writing the Performance: Stage Directions and the Staging of Sor Juana's *Los empeños de una casa*" had alerted me to the unusually large

number of asides, but until I had to direct the action on the stage, I was not fully aware of the problems raised by the vast volume of asides. The issue came to a head as I was directing the third scene in Act One. During a scene in the dark, four characters (Leonor, Juan, Ana, and Carlos) grope around the stage in a humorous and thematically significant series of mistaken identities. Then Celia, the maid, enters with a light and the following revelations are all asides:

CELIA (*aside*): I came to see if my mistress is here,
so that Don Juan, who I left hiding
in her room, could sneak out.

But what do I see?

LEONOR (*aside*): What is this? Heaven defend me!
Isn't this Carlos I see?

CARLOS (*aside*): Unless I'm deceived
this is Leonor.

ANA (*aside*): Don Juan here?
I'm speechless!

JUAN (*aside*): Why is Don Carlos here?
He must be Doña Ana's lover.
Because of him that
treacherous and unfaithful woman
treats me with scorn.

LEONOR (*aside*): My God! Is Carlos in this house,
while I lovingly wept
for him being in prison?
In a darkened room

does he make love to me
thinking it's someone else?
He must be this lady's lover.
But how can that be?
Is all this an illusion?
They brought me to him as a prisoner
and left me here! I'm
drowning in a sea of sorrows.

These six asides in row proved to be impossible for the actors to motivate using the staging conventions normally used in directing Shakespeare and other seventeenth-century plays.

The solution I discovered involved having all the other characters freeze while each character spoke directly to the audience. This stop-action technique proved both effective and funny. In fact, the audience was laughing by the fourth aside, having found the obviously theatrical pattern very amusing.

I decided to have the actors freeze during the asides throughout the entire play, which was difficult to train actors to do, but solved a number of textual problems. The cast and I began to experiment with the stop-action technique after the actors playing Castaño and Carlos froze in a particularly funny tableau during one of Ana's asides. Characters would be caught in the middle of an action that could be completed only when the aside had passed.

When we revived the production the following spring in order to tour the production to the *Siglo de Oro* Theatre Festival, I began to play more games with the asides. Sometimes characters moved during their asides while the other characters were frozen. The others would unfreeze to discover that the character speaking the aside had suddenly been transported to another spot on the stage.

This joke was especially effective in the scene where Castaño is disguised in

Leonor's clothing and Pedro makes love to him thinking he is Leonor. (**Video Clip 2 [High Bandwith](#) | [Low Bandwith](#)**). As you can see in this scene, Pedro backs Castaño over a chair in an attempt to kiss him, but Castaño slips out from under Pedro during his aside. When Pedro unfreezes, he falls into the empty chair where Castaño had been. The chair is used again for another visual joke after Carlos and Juan enter sword fighting. Juan lunges into the chair, freezes during Ana's aside, then feels the pain when he unfreezes.

Also, note that the scene ends with six asides in a row. The use of the freezes clarifies the action and helps the audience to focus on the speaker of each aside, since audiences usually focus on whichever character is moving. (This is a basic principle of directing for the stage.)

These bits of comic business using the freezes during the asides were effective because they created visual jokes that matched Sor Juana's verbal puns. I believe that the use of freezes and the jokes we played with the technique also added to the theatricality of the play. Thus, we found a visual equivalent for Sor Juana's verbal self-reflexive comments.

Before starting rehearsals, I had been aware of another the major problem in the text--the long exposition speeches. The play begins with a three page monologue by Ana soon followed by a six page monologue by Leonor. My solution for this seemingly endless narration was to stage some of Leonor's monologue. As she described how many men courted her, those men appeared and offered her gifts which she refused politely as she explained how she courteously defended her honor. Then, as she described her elopement and the sword fight that ensued, Carlos and Diego appeared and dueled. As Leonor described the action, Carlos wounded Diego, who was carried off, and the police arrived to arrest Carlos. This not only gave the audience something to watch during the long exposition speech, but it also allowed us to introduce some exciting sword play into the

first scene. If the audience had started to fall asleep during the exposition, the duel slapped them awake.

By staging what had happened earlier on the street in Ana's house, we once again emphasized the theatricality of the play. In real life, past events do not spring to life as we describe them later. The audience was shown a kind of play-within-a-play. Leonor created the suitors and the duel for us as she narrated them, writing a performance within the performance, just as Ana staged a play-within-the-play for the musical entertainment in Act Two.

The solutions to the translation and directing problems posed by the long exposition speeches, the numerous asides, and the musical entertainment all involved emphasizing the theatricality of the play. The trials of staging *The House of Trials* appear only if the director insists on staging the play as realistically as possible. The more theatrically and artfully the director conceives of the production, the more effective the performance becomes and the problems disappear. Having staged the play twice now on the same set, I would love to stage the play on a less representational and more presentational scene design. More theatrical design elements would create less trials.