

Coello's Spanish *Hamlet* (1872)  
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*El príncipe Hamlet*, a play written by the young Spanish playwright Carlos Coello de Portugal y Pacheco (1850-1888), premiered in Madrid on November 22, 1872. As the title shows, it was not Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In fact, the public of Madrid had never seen the original, at least in Spanish: **(DIAPOSITIVA 1)** two prior versions of *Hamlet* (signed by Ramon de la Cruz and Jose Maria Carnerero), had been performed in Madrid in 1772 and 1825 respectively, but they were translations from the French version of Ducis, and since the unexplained failure of a *Macbeth* translated directly from English by Jose Garcia de Villalta in 1839, no one had dared perform a Shakespeare play in the Madrid scene, with one exception: one *Hamlet* extremely faithful to the original, had been staged with great success by the Italian company of Ernesto Rossi in 1868, in Italian, five years before Coello's play.

*El príncipe Hamlet* is a "recast" ("refundición"), a term that can be defined (Ganelin 1994: 5) as "an adaptation of a dramatic text that may manifest many kinds of changes to recast the play in a new form that reflects the aesthetics of the recaster's era, or to redirect the thrust of a play in order to expand upon specific issues developed in the original ". A recast usually tries to "improve" the original by adapting it to the mentality and concerns of the public for whom it is intended, and was used in Spain frequently in the first half of the nineteenth century to modernize the huge repertoire of works from the Spanish Golden Age, especially comedies. At that time, recasts tried primarily to accommodate comedies to neoclassical precepts, but they were also used for other reasons such as avoiding censorship during the highly conservative periods.

But there were more recasts than merely those of classic Spanish theatre.

Troughout most of the nineteenth century, several translations of Shakespeare's plays were also recasted (**DIPOSITIVA 2**): in the case of *Hamlet*, there was one version written by Pablo AVECILLA and published in Madrid in 1856, another by Mateo Martínez de Artabeytia, published in 1872 in Havana, never performed, and *Theudis*, a drama written by Francisco Sánchez de Castro also inspired by *Hamlet*, published and staged in Madrid in 1878. The tendency to "recast" also occurred in Spanish-speaking America, as seen in the recasted work entitled *Hamlet* by Manuel Pérez and Francisco López Carvajal Bibbins and released in Mexico City in 1886. Two years after *El príncipe Hamlet*, Coello used the translation of another classic European drama, *The robbers* by Friedrich Schiller, to write his own recast *Roque Guinart* (1874), wherein the newly recasted plot takes place in Spain, and the characters are all Spanish.

During the first seventy years of the XIXth century, Spanish translations of Shakespeare's works also greatly deviated from the originals. There is no doubt that the translation of *Hamlet* made by Leandro Fernández de Moratín in 1798 was one of the major translations rendered into European languages in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for it was, among other things, being unusually respectful to the original, as it was translated directly from English. Nonetheless, Moratín, translator and playwright, admirer of French culture and an avid reader of Voltaire, added a list of objections in the Notes to his translation. Objections that formed a long list of "unacceptable" or "indecorous" things, according to the neoclassical model, that eventually influenced the recast by Martínez de Artabeytia, which, as a matter of fact, can be read as the translation that Moratín would have liked to pen, but did not dare on account of his high respect for Shakespeare. As we shall see, it also influenced Coello's, although to a lesser degree.

Not until the second half of the century, new translations of Shakespeare done directly from English were finally published, including Jaime Clark and Guillermo Macpherson's translations (1873) which, curiously enough, were never used in performances.

*El príncipe Hamlet* opens at an extremely complex moment in History, **(DIAPOSITIVA 3)** during the reign of Amadeo I of Spain, a king "imposed" after the abdication of Isabel II of Bourbon in 1868 and a few months after the general elections held in August 1872. The Basque country was in a state of insurrection and large areas of Aragon, Catalonia and Valencia were controlled by the Carlist army. The shadow of republicanism also stalked a weak monarchy that finally crumbled giving way to the establishment of the First Spanish Republic in 1873, which was also to fail, bringing about the restoration of the monarchy in the person of King Alfonso XII of Bourbon in 1875. It was a very unstable political situation, not unlike that of the Danish monarchy following the king's death and the ascension of his brother to the throne, as reflected in both the original *Hamlet* and Coello's play.

The play, with the eminent actor Antonio Vico in the role of the eponymous protagonist, enjoyed a great deal of success and was performed over consecutive seasons in different Spanish cities: The *Diario de Madrid* **(DIAPOSITIVA 4)** describes in its review that on the opening night there was a long standing ovation and both Coello and Vico had to come out to the stage more than eight times. The play's recognizable orality and the immediacy or proximity of the values which it transmitted to the public of the time are factors that can explain such success, a success that probably would have been much harder to attain in the case of a *Hamlet* closer to the original. It certainly helped to spread the knowledge of Shakespeare in Spain, but also

to forge a distorted image of *Hamlet* in the collective beliefs of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish public.

### *The "warning" of Coello*

Coello defined his play as a "drama trágico-fantástico", the second adjective referring to the appearance of the ghost. He was also careful to note in a "Warning" that "my work is not a translation, not even an adaptation: *El príncipe Hamlet* is a drama inspired by the play written by the English Calderón, and whoever stops to meditate a little on what the word 'inspired' means, will understand effortlessly that it is a drama different to the original, although it owes its existence to it, in the same way that a son owes his to his father, resembling him in the facial features, but with his own life and his own different personality."

Coello also stated that his purpose was "to write a drama subject to the needs of the Spanish scene and the special conditions of our audience." But, what do these statements mean exactly? While the words "special conditions" seem to indicate that the Madrid public was not prepared to see, or appreciate, the original *Hamlet* (strangely enough they had accepted the play performed by a world-famous actor like Rossi, in a foreign language like Italian), the reference to the "needs of the Spanish scene" is harder to explain. Even the British critic Sir Henry Thomas (1949: 13) said, rather bluntly, about the failure of Villalta's *Macbeth*, that "it was made painfully clear that theater-going Spaniards at least were not ready for Shakespeare."

It could be argued that Coello referred to the fact the Spanish scene had the urgent need to perform Shakespeare's plays, given his late reception when compared to other European countries. If this is the case, we might conclude that the so-called

“special conditions” precluded his reception, thus making it necessary for his plays to be recasted with the special conditions of the Spanish public in mind.

### *Formal text features*

In the play’s plot, based effectively on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Coello translated and inserted paragraphs from the original work, which demonstrates that he knew it perfectly, but always using his own words (this is why Alfonso Par, the most [important](#) historian of translations and performances of Shakespeare in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Spain, accused him of "falsifying" the original [1940:18]). Moreover, he included in the text several stage directions for actors, indicating how they should react in certain scenes of the play. Plus, following the traditional patterns of Spanish theatre, acts are reduced to three, and new scenes start whenever a character enters the stage. Thus, the first act has eight scenes, the second eighteen, and the third thirteen.

Coello also respects basically the neoclassical precepts of unity of time, place and action (Rafter 2011: 288), and chooses to use “analogical” verse translation: he [writes](#) his play in rhymed verse resorting to the most common metrical patterns of Spanish comedy, especially the octosyllable but also the alexandrine and the hendecasyllable. All of them were recognizable elements, perhaps essential, to the general theatre audiences of the time. The octosyllable, in particular, had been deeply rooted in Spanish theatre [since the Golden Century](#), and was criticized both by those Spanish and Spanish-speaking American writers willing to break with the old patterns. Thus, the Argentinian Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, during his visit to Spain in 1846, regretted the constant use of the "hammering octosyllable", considering it as a retrograde feature, and the Spanish novelist Benito Pérez Galdós describes the theatrical

preferences of two very plain female characters in *El amigo Manso*, a novel published in 1882, with the following words: "They hated the simplicity of prose and slept when actors did not declaim cutting the sentence with hiccups and resounding rhymes".

All these concessions to the formal conventions of Spanish theatre undoubtedly sought to please the public and ward off any unwanted surprises, like the negative reactions to Villalta's *Macbeth* in 1839.

### *The plot*

Coello substantially modifies *Hamlet's* original plot. First of all, he changes the names of the characters (**DIPOSITIVA 4**): Claudio is called Fengo in the play, Gertrud, Gunhilda, and the dead king, Horvendilo. The hispanicized names of Fengo (Feng) and Horvendilo (Horwendil) come from the Belleforest's *Histories tragiques* (Par 1935: 30). And secondly, he merges the characters of Laertes and Horatio into one, and raises a conflict between him and Hamlet. The prince gets help from Horacio to kill King Horvendilo, and Horacio (who in the play remains Ophelia's brother) requires the help of Hamlet to kill the murderer of his father Polonius. The murderer, despite being ignored by Horatio, is the Prince himself. When in the final scene Hamlet and Horacio rush on the king, he tells Horacio who killed Polonius in an attempt to escape, but it is too late for Hamlet and his stepfather as both of them have drunk from a poisoned cup. Hamlet dies (**DIPOSITIVA 5**) after uttering the following words: "My good father has been revenged/and now... the body suffers, but not the soul" ("Mi buen padre está vengado /y ahora...el cuerpo padece...mas no el alma). And his very last words are not "The rest is silence", but "I'm going to Ophelia... who is calling me" ("Yo...me voy con Ofelia...que me llama"). Words that confirm the play's ultimate goal: the execution of a vendetta, as well as another important feature of the Spanish Golden Century

theatre: divine justice for the “good” characters (“the body suffers, but not the soul”). The implicit message is that Hamlet is bound for Heaven, from where, in this case, Ophelia is calling him.

The critic Alfonso Par, who qualifies the work (1940: 27) as a “blunder”, believes that the dramatic conflict contained in the play “is merely external,” that is, “it does not determine any interior tragedy in Hamlet’s spirit or the other characters. The prince feels no doubts, no worries, nor has a thoughtful mind; on the contrary, he single-minded from the beginning”.

Much in the same way, Denis Rafter (2011: 266) states that “from the beginning we know that the passion of the work will be characteristic of Spain and not of England,” and he says about the main character (2011: 273) that “we do not find in him the rationalist modern man but the knight-prince of the Spanish Golden Age. He is not Shakespeare's Hamlet.” The paradox, according to Rafter, is that there are enough models “in the Spanish theater of the Golden Age, such as Segismundo of Calderón’s *Life is a dream*, who have the psychological burden and reasoning of a Hamlet, which Coello could have used to construct his character” (2011: 501). Plus, perhaps stumbling into the pitfalls of stereotypes, he claims that “after working with Spanish actors for several years, we know that a Spanish hero faced [with](#) this dilemma of revenge would not have waited longer than the first act to kill Claudius” (2011: 301). The point is that Coello builds a different character from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: a medieval man, more so than a Renaissance man; a revengeful hero, more so than a tormented modern soul.

*Conclusions*

Perhaps due to its character of "recast", this play, since it fully and consciously moves away from literalism, has been practically ignored by the Spanish translation studies on Shakespeare. The German Hispanist Carolina Michaelis (quoted by Morel Fatio, 1876: 251) branded it as "an intolerable desecration of Shakespeare", and, as we said above, Alfonso Par also negatively judged this recast. More recently, Pujante and Gregor qualified the play simply as an "archaic curiosity" (2010: 40).

But, as said above, it is a fact that Coello writes a very effective play, in theatrical terms, by pulling off dynamic and, at times, surprising action, with extremely well resolved scenes. The collaboration between author and actors, mainly Vico, may also be one of the reasons of its popular success.

Another, no doubt, are the nationalist values encoded in the play. Spanish nationalism, uncertain in the face of so many political upheavals that called into question the very existence of the monarchy and even the nation, used the past to reaffirm itself. In the case of theatre, it resorted to the Golden Age to get feedback from traditional literary patterns, impregnated with such "Hispanic" values as male honor, the need for revenge against a manifest outrage and "filial loyalty" (Rafter 301). In fact, almost all the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish translators and scholars try to compare Shakespeare with his Spanish counterparts of the Golden Age, especially with Calderón, in a kind of nationalistic game that was never played against France but rather against England, the Spain's big rival in the days of colonial empires. On the other hand, the Spanish literary field lacked something that it should have had by this time: knowledge of Shakespeare, as I said already, because Spain was late in the reception of his works. These two trends can explain the writing policies adopted by Coello in his recast.



It is also obvious that vestiges of neoclassicism remained alive in Spain during that era. This explains the use of the three units in the play, albeit in a loose way, and in general the option of extracting from the original only that which jibed well with neoclassical conventions, as expressed in the objections contained in Moratín's famous "Notes".

Therefore Coello's *El príncipe Hamlet* is a deliberate intertext, in which Shakespeare certainly, and mainly, resonates, but also certain formal and ideological characteristics of the theatre of the Spanish Golden Age. In the play there are also traces of previous translations as Moratín's, but also Ducis', from whom Coello borrows, for example, the replacement of "the play-within-the play" of the original by a story told in a book. Although, as said above, Coello explicitly denies the character of "translation" of his work, this way of proceeding gives evidence of specific attitudes of the Spanish literary field about the translation of plays meant to be performed.

Finally, *El príncipe Hamlet* is another example that confirms the resistance of the Spanish theatre field to accept the original Shakespeare and of its preference for "adapted" Shakespeares using translation and certain theatrical operations such as those that can be seen in Coello's play. Although the translation of Shakespeare's plays done by Jaime Clark or William Macpherson, already mentioned, will finally and genuinely /'dʒenjʊmli/ acquaint Spanish readers with the English author, theatre goers will not get to see a true Shakespearean *Hamlet* on a Madrid stage until Gregorio Martínez Sierra's translation is performed in 1917.

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