

Translation in *Don Quixote*

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**Abstract**

*Don Quixote as the founding novel is recounted by Cide Hamete Benengeli, Moorish and Spanish (Manchegan) historian, through the mediated work of the morisco-aljamiado (translator). Few scholarly works have in fact been devoted to this latter aspect of the novel amongst the tens of thousands devoted to the novel per se. That the founding novel is recounted by a Moor/Arab in Arabic thanks to a translator, in Toledo, is a huge claim which has passed almost unnoticed for some reason or other. This paper will try to shed light on the presence of translation and the translator in Cervantes's novel.*

In *Don Quixote*, I,9, Cervantes tells us how he found the Arabic historia in Toledo which he bought «for a few bushels of wheat» and got translated by a *Morisco-aljamiado*. This is not, however, the first occasion where translation is mentioned. Already in I,6, the question of translation is brought to the fore, when the priest and the barber enter into conversation in *Don Quixote's* library. If the barber has, he says, Boiardo in Italian without being in fact able to read him, the priest will show no respect if he does not «speak any language but his own». In other words, Boiardo must be read in Italian or not at all, since adds the priest,

**Résumé**

*Don Quichotte, roman fondateur de tous les romans à venir, est raconté par Cide Hamete Benengeli, historien arabe et espagnol (Manchego), relayé par un traducteur morisco-aljamiado. Très peu de travaux ont été consacrés à ce dernier comparativement aux milliers d'études sur **Don Quichotte**. Que le roman fondateur soit raconté par un arabe en langue arabe et traduit en espagnol grâce à un traducteur morisque, à Tolède, voilà un fait qui est pratiquement passé inaperçu, alors qu'il aurait dû soulever moult questions. Ici, nous tenterons d'examiner la présence du traducteur et de la traduction dans le roman de Cervantes.*

the italian poet is better where he should be, i.e. in Italy and in Italian:

- y aquí le perdonáramos al señor Capitán que no le hubiera traído a España y hecho castellano; que le quitó mucho de su natural valor, y lo mesmo harán todos aquellos que los libros de verso quisieren volver en otra lengua: que, por mucho cuidado que pongan y habilidad que mustren, jamás llegarán al punto que ellos tienen en su primer nacimiento(I,6).

The third time where translation is mentioned in the first part is I,40. The captive, that is Cervantes<sup>1</sup>, could not read an important paper written in Arabic (this is exactly what happens to him in **Don Quixote** when he finds the Arabic parchment in Toledo and hires a Morisco-translator). However, he managed to find in the person of the Murcian renegade - a bilingual - the much needed translator. This he does, only to insist on one thing: where the pater says «lola Marien» (Arabic for 'Lady Mary'), the captive should read «Our Lady the Virgin Mary». This apparently anodine passage is nonetheless revealing. What is implied here is that in both the Castilian and Arabic cultures, there are similar 'beliefs' although they might, prima facie, look different or antagonistic. After all, this very point is being recounted by Cide Hamete who has written the *historia* in Arabic.

In Part 2, translation comes back again, this time as early as chapter 3, where Cervantes, via Sampson, praises Cide Hamete as well as the Morisco-translator. But it is here that the translator is recognized as such, acknowledged for the job done, and hence 'blessed thrice'. We are then far from the priest's belief that translations cannot be 'good' (I,6). He is thus given as much credit as the usually-credited Benengeli, for enabling Sampson and the like to read it in Castilian. In fact, he receives here much more credit than the Moorish 'author', since he and only he has enabled the group to read it in their own tongue. However, and though no parallel is drawn between Arabic and Castilian, the implication of Sampson's utterance on seeing Don Quixote reveals Cervantes's thought and obsession: to put on equal footing Castilian and other languages, namely Greek, Latin, and German(II,16).

In addition, and in this very chapter, the 'vulgar' Castilian-written *Don Quixote* translated from the Arabic shall one day, it is said, entertain mankind. But to achieve this, it should be translated in

several languages of the world. Cervantes, via Sampson again, remains optimistic, for «there shall not be any nation into whose tongue it will not be translated». Paradoxically, it is the Castilian, 'vulgar' tongue that will be rendered into several languages, including the ones mentioned above. But in order to provide a text, a story worth translating into these languages, it should be an 'original', great work in the first place. And again, replying to Don Quixote, the same Sampson believes that a blending of such nature and calibre, being a 'cooperation' between Moor and Christian, can only be a great work:

*porque el moro en su lengua y el cristiano en la suya, tuvieron cuidado de pintarnos muy al vivo la gallardía de vuesa merced, el nimo grande en acometer los peligros, la paciencia en las adversidades...(my italics, II,3).*

But what is worth noting here, is that these discussions on translation, writing, and on the combined 'wits' of Moor and Christian are followed, within the same chapter that is, by Sampson's speech on history and poetry («it is one thing to write as a poet, and another as a historian»), obviously referring to Cide Hamete as writer-historian. Besides his 'co-authorship', the translator, as a character, in *Don Quixote* is deeply incorporated into the narrative. His function is to enable Cervantes to control the narrative from the powerful, omniscient writer-historian, as in II,5, where he intervenes to 'correct' or bring information concerning Sancho's 'second speech', considered apocryphal by the translator, written down as such in the body of the narrative. The same sort of incursion occurs in II,24 where the translator intervenes to explain the apocryphal chapter (Montesinos' cave) as related by Cide Hamete. Once the explanation is over, but still carried out by Benengeli, the translator's voice fades away, only to hover around. We know it will soon come back, and it does in II,27. Here, Cide Hamete has just opened the chapter by swearing 'as a Catholic Christian', on which the translator notes that the historian's swearing as a Catholic should be accepted, although he was a Moor.

Although the translator's function is to restore 'truth' from time to time, his interference, at this stage, takes enormous proportions. It is he who writes/says whether the 'original' story penned by Cide Hamete is 'logical' or not, coherent or not. Since he has translated it for Cervantes, he is in a better position to 'clarify', 'correct' or add. In

other words, he is the one who has possession of, and priority over the Arabic 'text'. Yet, his function is also to create an atmosphere of credibility and objectivity, by intervening in particular passages, as in II,44. Here, an allusion is made to the translator who has rendered it in Castilian, giving both Cervantes and Benengeli the opportunity to criticize themselves, if only in the eyes of the readers, by putting him in utter responsibility as to the extrapolated stories and other 'inconsistencies'. Again, he appears and disappears swiftly. But it is perhaps in II,62 that he is more acutely present, though absent, as Don Quixote discusses the problems of translation with a gentleman from Barcelona.

In Barcelona, Don Quixote comes across the first printing house of the town (II,62), and falls into a discussion with the translator of an Italian work, *Le Bagatelle*<sup>2</sup>, related to us once again by the Moorish historian-cum-narrator-cum-author, Cide Hamete. Moreover, the knight compares translation between the vernaculars to viewing Flemish tapestries from the wrong side, that is rather obscure pictures<sup>3</sup>. Thus, he establishes, concerning translating, a clear distinction between 'queenly' languages (Greek and Latin) and those which are 'easy' (vernacular that is), forgetting to mention Arabic, though the Arabic 'original' once into Castilian 'will entertain mankind'(II,3). This deference to 'classical' languages like Greek or Latin is rather surprising since Don Quixote's deeds and conversation are, after all, being recorded in the 'vulgar' Castilian, but nonetheless 'originally' in Arabic. However, the relationship between what Don Quixote calls 'queenly' languages and vernaculars raises a question of the same nature, notably that between *Don Quixote* as written in Castilian and Arabic, since it is purportedly announced as 'written' in Arabic by Cide Hamete, 'Arabigo y Manchego'(I,22). The Arabic 'text', supposedly the 'metatext', as 'father' or 'stepfather' (Prologue,I) stands as a perpetual reminder that in fact the classicizing of the Renaissance, in terms of aesthetics and languages for instance, had served and would serve other purposes than those intended.

After all, in mentioning Arabic words such as *albogues*, *almohaza*, *almorzar*, *alhombra*, *alguacil*, *alhucema*, etc., Don Quixote will give a list of Arabic words beginning with 'al' and ending with 'i'. This happens five chapters further (II, 67). To bring 'queenly' things back to Greece or Rome is valid enough, but certainly not without the

now-accepted or consecrated formula: Moorish *détour*, of which *Don Quixote* itself is a part<sup>4</sup>. These reconsiderations, within the framework of translation studies in general and pseudotranslation in particular, must be stressed again for various reasons, notably literary history beyond frontiers, that is literary history with translation and pseudotranslation deeply incorporated<sup>5</sup>.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>On the captive in Don Quixote as being Cervantes in person, see W. ENTWISTLE, **Cervantes**, 1940, W. BYRON, **Cervantes : A Biography**, 1979. This is what he will later do when he 'finds' the Arabic 'document' in Toledo.

<sup>2</sup>. On this, R. DOZY wrote: « Le véritable récit arabe (of the **Crónica del Cid** that is) fourmille de phrases chrétiennes interpolées, et ou la légende catholique de Cardègne (ainsi que dans la **General**) est attribuée à un Arabe valencien. Cette supposition devient fort probable quand on voit Cide Hamete commencer un chapitre par ces paroles: "Je jure comme chrétien catholique" », in **Recherches sur l'histoire et la littérature de l'Espagne pendant le Moyen-Age**, 1881, vol.2, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup>. Cervantes's reference to this 'fictional' title has not drawn any attention. Yet, it could be connected to Socrate Chrestien's idea that: 'Art, Science, Prose et Vers sont différentes espèces d'un même genre, et ce Genre se nomme Bagatelles en la langue de la Cour', quoted by J.E. SPINGARN, **Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century, 1605-1650**, vol.1, 1957 (1908), p.XXV. That Cervantes refers to this can be strengthened by the idea that he was, in **Don Quixote**, trying to 'eliminate' all previous genres: epic, romance, Moorish novel, picaresque, and this one (II,62), coming at the end of the narrative. , the word 'bagatelle' means 'trifle', from the Italian *bagatella* (1547).

<sup>4</sup>. See for instance, M. EDWARDS, **Towards a Christian Poetics**, 1984, pp.162ff.

<sup>5</sup>. See P.K. HITTI, **History of the Arabs**, 1951(1937), pp.559ff, Sir T. ARNOLD & A. GUILLAUME(eds), **The Legacy of Islam**, 1931, pp.180-209, F. UDINA MARTORELL, 'Les documents arabes aux archives de la Couronne d'Aragon ... Barcelone et l'influence culturelle arabe sur l'Espagne catalane', in **Actes du 1er Congrès d'études des cultures méditerranéennes d'influence arabo-berbère**, M. GALLEY(ed), 1973, pp.50-57. He wrote: 'La contribution arabe à la culture hispanique est un fait indéniable...une véritable osmose se produisit entre la culture arabe et la culture autochtone' (my emphasis).

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