

## THE BORROWED MUSE

Problems in the translation of poetry, with some poems in English from the Spanish.

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What is the use of poetry? We might extend Dryden's famous definition in the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* to say that the function of poetry in general is 'the Delight and Instruction of Mankind'. To this definition, we can add others: to 'give the forms of things unknown... a local habitation and a name' (Shakespeare); to 'make things that are not, as though they were' (Donne); to 'put the best words in the best order' (Coleridge); to give a permanent expression to 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (Wordsworth); to 'make a contribution to reality' (Dylan Thomas). Plainly much poetry is written simply because the poet has an urge to write it, and then the potential audience and their reaction is not very much taken into consideration; one reason why poetry seldom makes any money for the poet. It is certain, however, that for whatever reason it gets written, poetry is generally able to convey thoughts and feelings that cannot be adequately conveyed by what we call prose, just as music can produce in us effects that cannot be produced by words.

As a language teacher with a love of music, I have always been interested in the problems inherent in the translation of poetry. In a

sense they are analogous to the problems that beset a musician when he tries to re-score a piece for instruments different from those intended by the composer. One who undertakes such a task is aware at the outset of being presumptuous; he also has to decide whether to encourage, or to suppress, effects in the new version which do not exist in the original. When re-scoring, say, orchestral music for the piano, he must decide which notes to omit when there are too many for the fingers to play, and which to supply in place of percussion. Above all, he is conscious of his own role and responsibility as a creator, but one who must make sure that his own creativity serves that of the original composer. But in spite of these pitfalls, in the process the re-scorer comes to understand many things about the music in hand and about music in general.

For the translator of poetry there are several possible reasons for the undertaking. It is a challenge, an exercise in ingenuity, trying to fit as much as possible of the original—meaning, metre, style—into the mould of another language and another set of poetic conventions. (Note that here I say nothing about prose translations, which often lose so many facets of the original that what they gain in exact rendering of the superficial ‘meaning’ they lose everywhere else. Normally they cannot be called ‘poetry’.) A successful translation may enable readers unfamiliar with the original language to appreciate the genius of the poet and in some measure have the same experience that the poet intended in writing that particular poem. An unsuccessful translation may leave the reader cold or at best cause a mistaken impression. Beyond the challenge aspect, there is the promise the work of translation holds of helping the translator to understand the poem better than he might otherwise, and certainly to direct his attention to all kinds

of nuances and highlights that he might not easily notice. Of course, there is the creative aspect, but as with the re-scoring of music one must not let this eclipse the original.

The difficulties of the poetry translator resemble those of the re-scorer. When looking at the poem as a whole, he must try and seize on its atmosphere so as to infuse that into the translation. This raises special problems with older poetry; is the translation to try and approach the style of an earlier age, risking pastiche, or is it to be frankly modern in manner, risking stylistic anachronism? Then there is the question of technique in metre, length of line and so on. A language like Latin orders its ideas differently and often in fewer words than English, so in *Crotchet Castle* Thomas Love Peacock translates

*Tace daemon, qui est Deus*  
*Sabaot, est ille meus*

as

Peace, fiend; the power I own  
Is Sabaoth's Lord alone

with adherence to the brevity of the Latin original but in a quite different metre. How is one to render the alliteration of Old English poetry in a French translation, or the assonance of the Spanish *romance* genre in English, which does not use line-end assonance as a poetic device? At times the requirements of metre and the exigencies of a rhyme-scheme may

make it inevitable to change the precise meaning of individual phrases—how far can one go without straying too far from the original? Then of course there is the whole question of cultural difference. How can we reproduce in English the feeling of what it was like to be an ancient Greek warrior, supposing we are translating Homer? How is the fervour of the mystical Christian to be made convincing in a translation into Japanese of St John of the Cross? How can this be done while remaining, or rather re-creating, poetry?

Over the years I have amused myself by 'doing into English', as they used to say, some poems from the Spanish Golden Age, the *siglo de oro*, which corresponds roughly to our Elizabethan, Jacobean and Charles I periods. The following examples and commentaries will show how I have tried to deal with the problems outlined above. I have made a slight attempt to reproduce the vocabulary and other linguistic features of the English of the time, as for instance the Elizabethan sense of 'dame' for 'lady' in the Góngora *Letrilla burlesca* and such archaisms as 'doth' and 'ween' but without, I hope, being too self-consciously quaint. In some cases I have chosen a very different rhyme-scheme from the original in order to reproduce as far as possible the poet's meaning, and in others I have departed from the strict and literal sense of the Spanish in order to keep the general atmosphere and follow the requirements of metre and rhyme. In other words, I have sought to 'keep' the poets' intentions in a dynamic sense rather than 'preserve' them, which smacks of the mummy or the refrigerator. How far these translations succeed either as translations or as poems I leave to the reader to decide, as also the relevance and usefulness of the notes and commentaries. Of the supreme quality of the original poems there is no doubt and to this fact the accumulated

tributes of critics Spanish and foreign bear witness.

### **Fray Luis de León**

(Born 1527 or 28 in Belmonte (Cuenca) into a rich and influential family. Some Jewish ancestors, a fact which caused much trouble in his career although he was never anything but a devout Catholic. Became an Augustinian novice in 1542, while studying at the University of Salamanca. Meteoric career: Professor of Theology at 34, widely respected for his eloquence in Spanish and Latin and for his compendious knowledge of theological texts. Jealous colleagues encouraged the Inquisition to arrest him, probably for having translated the *Song of Solomon* into Spanish and for having questioned the accuracy of the Vulgate, but no charges were ever clarified. In solitary confinement for nearly five years, then released without apology or explanation and restored to his honours. Is said to have begun his first lecture after release with the words *Dicebamus hesternam die*, 'as we were saying the other day', making no comment on his long imprisonment. Honours piled on honours; further chairs at Salamanca, published devotional works, the *Nombres de Cristo*, etc.; elected Provincial of his order in 1591, just before his death at Madrigal de las Altas Torres. Poems only published forty years after his death. Ever regarded as one of the finest and purest Castilian poets.)

#### *LA VIDA RETIRADA*

*¡Qué descansada vida,  
la del que huye el mundanal rüido,  
y sigue la escondida  
senda, por donde han ido*

#### THE SOLITARY LIFE

What restful, happy days  
Come to the man who flies this  
worldly scene,  
And follows hidden ways  
In which have trod, I ween,

5 *los pocos sabios que en el mundo* The few wise men that in this  
*han sido!* world have been!

*Que no le enturbia el pecho* His breast is not dismay'd  
*de los soberbios grandes el estado,* By troubles that afflict the proud  
 and great,  
*ni del dorado techo* His judgment is not sway'd  
*se admira, fabricado* By the lofty, golden state  
 10 *del sabio moro, en jaspes* Of Moorish roofs, with jasper so  
*sustentado.* ornate.

*No cura si la fama* It profits nought if Fame  
*canta con voz su nombre pre-* Sing with triumphal voice his deeds  
*gonera,* abroad,  
*ni cura si encarama* Nor if the tongue of Shame  
*la lengua lisonjera* Heap flattery on the fraud  
 15 *lo que condena la verdad sincera.* That by all true, sincere men is  
 abhorr'd.

*¿Qué presta a mi contento* What adds to my content,  
*si soy del vano dedo señalado,* If the vain finger point me out  
 for praise,  
*si, en busca deste viento,* If, on this void intent,  
*ando desalentado,* I tread unhappy ways,  
 20 *con ansias vivas, con mortal* Gasping, in anxious straits, with  
*cuidado?* care a-daze?

*¡Oh monte, oh fuente, oh río!* Oh mountain, fountain, stream!

*¡Oh secreto seguro deleitoso!* Oh secret certainty of my delight!  
*Roto casi el navío* In you I have my dream,  
*a vuestro almo reposo* Fleeing the waves, whose might  
 25 *huyo de aqueste mar tempestuoso.* Threatens my bark with ruin's  
 dreadful plight.

*Un no rompido sueño,* For undisturb'd repose,  
*un día puro, alegre, libre quiero ;* For pure, free happiness my soul  
 doth yearn,  
*no quiero ver el ceño* Far from the frown of those  
*vanamente severo* Whose thoughts on money turn  
 30 *de a quien la sangre ensalza, o el* Or with the fires of restless pas-  
*dinero.* sion burn.

*Despiértenme las aves,* Let birds that fill the air  
*con su cantar sabroso no aprendido;* With their sweet unlearn'd song  
 awake me still,  
*no los cuidados graves,* Far from the heavy care  
*de que es siempre seguido* That evermore doth fill  
 35 *el que al ajeno arbitrio está* His life, that waits upon another's  
*atenido.* will.

*Vivir quiero conmigo,* I seek a life alone,  
*gozar quiero del bien que debo al* To taste those joys that but to  
*cielo,* heav'n I owe,  
*a solas, sin testigo,* A life to no-one shown,  
*libre de amor, de celo,* Free from Love's jealous woe,  
 40 *de odio, de esperanzas, de recelo.* From Fear, from Hate, from  
 Hope's deceptive show.





*con su manso rüido,* With gentle diligence,  
 60 *que del oro y del cetro pone* Banishing thoughts of gold and  
*olvido.* power from thence.

*Ténganse su tesoro* Their treasure let them keep  
*los que de un falso leño se confían;* Whose hopes in falsest planks of  
 wood reside ;  
*no es mío ver el lloro* I would not see them weep  
*de los que desconfían* Whose faith is sorely tried  
 65 *cuando el cierzo y el ábrego* When Boreas and Auster fierce  
*porfían.* collide.

*La combatida antena* The wind-blown lateen spar  
*cruje, y en ciega noche el claro día* Creaks, and clear day is turn'd to  
 blackest night ;  
*se torna ; al cielo suena* To heav'n rise up from far  
*confusa vocería* The shouts of those whose plight  
 70 *y la mar enriquecen a porfía.* Makes them throw cargo to the  
 ocean's might.

*A mí una pobrecilla* To me there will suffice  
*mesa, de amable paz bien abastada,* A humble board, with lovely peace  
 supplied ;  
*me baste, y la vajilla* Let dishes of great price  
*de fino oro labrada* And finest gold, abide  
 75 *sea de quien la mar no teme* With him who never fears the  
*airada.* angry tide.

<p><i>Y mientras miserable- mente se están los otros abrasando con sed insaciable del peligroso mando 80 tendido yo a la sombra esté cantando ;</i></p>	<p>And while the others burn With thirst unquench'd, beyond all hope of grace, Seeking at every turn The perils of high place, Let me rest singing in some shady space ;</p>
<p><i>a la sombra tendido de hiedro y lauro eterno coronado puesto el atento oido al son dulce, acordado 85 del plectro sabiamente meneado.</i></p>	<p>There in the shade reclin'd With ivy and eternal laurel crown'd, Attentive ears inclin'd To the sweet, harmonious sound Of the well-play'd lyre—there let me be found.</p>

### Notes

lines 9-10: The reference here is to the Moorish palaces built at Granada and elsewhere in Spain during the centuries of Islamic domination; the poet's meaning is that a wise man is unmoved by such splendours, or the power they symbolise.

11-15: These lines may refer to the fact that at Salamanca Fray Luis received praise from admirers and at the same time knew that his detractors were spreading false tales about him.

18: *viento* literally 'wind', here used in the sense of 'vain praise'; I have translated this by 'void'.

- 20: *mortal cuidado* 'mortal care', translated 'with care a-daze'.
- 21-60: These stanzas appear to refer to Fray Luis' country retreat at La Flecha, near Salamanca.
- 23: *roto casi el navío* 'the ship almost broken'; a metaphor for the poet's life. In translation I have transferred this to line 25.
- 40: *recelo* 'suspicion'. I have had to alter slightly the sense and order of these two lines.
- 50: I have added 'treasur'd place' for the sake of the rhyme.
- 53-4: Literally 'decking the ground with green on its way'. I have supplied a prolepsis with 'verdant ground'.
- 59: *manso rüido* 'gentle sound'.
- 60: *cetno* 'sceptre', metonymic for 'power'.
- 62: *falso leño* 'false plank' i. e. a wooden ship.
- 66: The 'lately spar' (*antena*) held the three-sided sail on the mizen or aftermast of the ships of Fray Luis' time; the other sails were often square. As the mizen-sail was important in helping to steer the ship, this reference underlines the severity of the storm described, which leads to the jettisoning of valuable cargo. The entire episode is intended to emphasise the futility of a life dedicated to the acquisition of worldly riches.
- 73-5: The suggestion, in both Spanish and English versions, is that only those whose wealth does not depend on trade can truly enjoy golden dishes on the table—the implication, in the Spain of that time, being that virtually nobody can. Better to be poor.
- 76-7: The division of *miserablemente* is odd even in the experi-

mental practices of sixteenth century Spanish poetry. I have not attempted to reproduce it.

85: *plectro* metonymic for 'lyre', the typical instrument of classical times, which was played with a plectrum. My translation of the last stanza is a little free, but I think it keeps the feeling of the original.

### Commentary

The poetic form used by Fray Luis is the *lira*, the stanza of five lines with a syllable-count of 7, 11, 7, 7, 11 and rhyming *a b a b b*, used with such effect by Garcilaso de la Vega. I have rendered this in English by lines of similar length, three or five feet, and the same rhymes, the metre being mainly iambic. Both metre and rhyme make an interesting contrast between this poem and the nearest equivalent in English poetry, Pope's *Ode on Solitude*, which really resembles it only in being, like Fray Luis' original, distantly related to Horace's second Epode, the *Beatus ille*. Although neither Pope nor Fray Luis retain the satirical element which emerges at the end of the Epode, the Spanish poet uses the theme of rustic calm and communion with Nature to make a biting contrast with the follies of the worldly.

I think this English version of the Spanish *lira* works very well, though it cannot be doubted that the longer lines of Pope's Ode are better for conveying the peace of life in the country. Fray Luis, however, manages to combine peacefulness with dynamism, and I have tried to reproduce this effect in the translation.

A LA SALIDA DE LA CÁRCEL      ON COMING OUT OF PRISON

*Aquí la invidia y mentira*      Here Envy and perfidious Lies

	<i>me tuvieron encerrado.</i>	Kept me shut in prison strait.
	<i>Dichoso el humilde estado</i>	Blessed is the low estate
	<i>del sabio que se retira</i>	And wisdom of the man who flies
5	<i>de aqueste mundo malvado,</i>	Out of a world so reprobate.
	<i>y con pobre mesa y casa</i>	Who with but lowly house and food
	<i>en el campo deleitoso</i>	Lives in the country, quiet and free,
	<i>con sólo Dios se compasa,</i>	Where with God's peace he is
		endued
	<i>y a solas su vida pasa,</i>	And spends his life in solitude,
10	<i>ni envidiado ni envidioso.</i>	Envied by none ; none envies he.

### Notes

line 1: I have given capital letters to Envy and Lies in order to emphasise the personification; this reinforces the anger that springs out of Fray Luis' words and looks good on the page.

4-6 Literally '...of the wise man who retires from such an evil world'.

7 *deleitoso* 'delectable, delightful'. I have expanded this to 'quiet and free'.

8 *con sólo Dios se compasa* 'he is satisfied with God alone'.

### Commentary

It is really superfluous to comment on the perfection of this *décima* (*a b b a b, c d c c d* in both Spanish and English versions). Reputedly composed by Fray Luis at the moment of his leaving the prison in Salamanca, it gives the impression of having come from the poet's brain in a single flash of inspiration—whether such was really the case or not. The last line (literally 'nor envied, nor

envying') is as fine an antithesis as ever concluded a poem. It was the hardest part of the work to translate effectively and even now the version is not quite satisfactory. It is worth noting (see Durán and Atlee, 1983 p. 140) how the poet roundly condemns his oppressors in the opening two lines (yet, through the personification, condemning the action, not individuals) before spending the rest of this short piece in contemplation of the peace and quiet of the countryside. It would be hard to find a more concise way of expressing these thoughts.

### **Don Luis de Góngora y Argote**

(Born 1561 in Córdoba. Father's name (which usually precedes the matronymic in Spanish) Argote, but the poet reversed the order and gave precedence to his mother's name out of a preference for the dactylic rhythm. In 1576 took minor orders and went to study at Salamanca; his arrival coincided with the return in triumph of Fray Luis de León, noted above. Left without taking a degree. 1585—post at Córdoba cathedral. 1588—brilliantly defended himself against charges of poor conduct. Began to be known as a poet. From about 1603 began his long rivalry with Quevedo, who represented the *conceptista* school of Spanish writing, broadly equivalent to the English 'metaphysicals' in its fondness for elaborate and unexpected imagery and fantastic ideas, while Góngora was developing the *culteranista* school, more like Euphuism in its reliance on classical allusions and recondite latinist constructions, which overlies a fundamental simplicity of thought and interest in the most ordinary people and events, cf. *Soledades*. 1613—Góngora wrote his masterpieces *Polifemo* and *Soledades*, which aroused intense controversy. 1617—now a priest, Góngora settled in Madrid; From 1621 in decline,

though still busy as a poet. Evicted from his house by Quevedo, who by an accident of fortune had become his rival's landlord, he died in Córdoba in 1627. Works banned by the Inquisition but published 1633. Long in eclipse, revived with modern appraisals by Dámaso Alonso and García Lorca.)

<p><i>LETRILLA BURLESCA, 1581</i>  <i>Ándeme yo caliente</i>  <i>y riase la gente.</i></p> <p><i>Traten otros del gobierno</i></p> <p><i>del mundo y sus monarquías,</i>  5 <i>mientras gobiernan mis días</i>  <i>mantequillas y pan tierno,</i></p> <p><i>y las mañanas de invierno</i>  <i>naranjada y aguardiente,</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 4em;"><i>y riase la gente.</i></p> <p>10 <i>Coma en dorada vajilla</i>  <i>el Príncipe mil cuidados,</i>  <i>como píldoras doradas ;</i></p> <p><i>que yo en mi pobre mesilla</i>  <i>quiero más una morcilla</i></p>	<p><i>BURLESQUE LETRILLA, 1581</i>  Let my belly have its fill  And folks may laugh if they will.</p> <p>How the world's nations should  be led  May trouble other men—not me!  For aye my governor shall be  Fine loaves with butter thickly  spread,  On winter morns no cold I'll dread;  Of brandy and orange I'll drink  my fill,  And folks may laugh if they will.</p> <p>Princes off golden platters eat,  And many a care they eat, I'm told.  Their bitter pills are wrapped in  gold,  But as for me, nothing can beat  Some tasty morsel—ah, what a  treat!</p>
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15 *que en el asador reviente,*

*y ríase la gente.*

*Cuando cubra las montañas  
de blanca nieve el Enero,*

*tenga yo llena el brasero  
20 de bellotas y castañas,*

*y quien las dulces patrañas  
del Rey que rabió me cuente,*

*y ríase la gente.*

*Busque muy en hora buena  
25 el mercader nuevos soles ;*

*yo conchas y caracoles  
entre la menuda arena,  
escuchando a Filomena*

*sobre el chopo de la fuente,*

30 *y ríase la gente.*

*Pase a media noche el mar  
y arda en amorosa llama  
Leandro por ver su dama ;*

On my rough table, straight off  
the grill,

And folks may laugh if they will.

When January snow is cast  
On mountain tops so white and  
steep,

Why then, my brazier let me heap  
With acorns and chestnuts, while  
they last ;

Let one tell tales about the past ;  
Of the mad King's frolics I'll hear  
my fill,

And folks may laugh if they will.

At early dawn, to some new land  
Let merchants go in search of trade ;  
For me, another course is laid  
To search for shellfish in the sand,  
While Philomel's sweet song is  
fann'd

From the poplar hanging o'er the  
rill

And folks may laugh if they will.

Let bold Leander cross the sea  
At midnight, with his heart a-flame  
With eagerness to see his dame ;



<p><i>que yo más quiero pasar</i></p> <p>35 <i>del golfo de mi lagar</i></p> <p><i>la blanca o roja corriente,</i> <i>y riase la gente.</i></p> <p><i>Pues Amor es tan crüel,</i> <i>que de Piramo y su amada</i> <i>hace tálamo una espada</i></p> <p>40 <i>do se junten ella y él,</i> <i>sea mi Tisbe un pastel,</i> <i>y la espada sea mi diente,</i>  <i>y ríase la gente.</i></p>	<p>But how much greater joy to me The red and white that flows so free From my wine-press the vats to fill. And folks may laugh if they will.</p> <p>Since Love so cruelly strikes dead Both Pyramus and his fair bride And lays a sword where side by side They lie as on a marriage-bed, No Thisbe, but a cake instead My sword-like tooth will quickly kill, And folks may laugh if they will.</p>
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### Notes

- Title 'burlesque' in the sense of a paradoxical joke.
- line 1 *caliente* 'warm', here meaning 'warm in the stomach'  
i. e. well fed.
- 8 *naranjada* 'orangeade', perhaps drunk warm in winter.
- 10-15 The literal sense is 'Let the Prince eat a thousand cares  
off golden dishes, like gilded pills; I prefer...' Note the  
echoes of Fray Luis de León's *Vida retirada* lines 71-75.
- 20 'while they last' is my addition.
- 22 Which 'mad King' (*Rey que rabió*) is intended is not  
certain, but use of this phrase underlines the poet's subver-  
sive attitude.

- 25 *nuevos soles* 'new suns' i. e. new countries. The literal sense of these lines is 'Let the merchant seek, early, new lands'.
- 26 *conchas y caracoles* 'oysters and snails'.
- 27 *menuda arena* 'fine sand'.
- 31-36 In this stanza there may be a play on words with the chess terms *dama* 'queen' and '*blanca y roja*' white and red. cf Góngora's *letrilla ¡Oh, qué lindico!*
- 41-2 Literally 'Let my Thisbe be a pastry, and the sword my tooth'.

### Commentary

The earthy, rather subversive atmosphere of this poem, with its frank delight in gastronomic imagery and cynical rejection of contemporary ideals (the responsibilities of Empire, the dignity of Royalty, the diligence of early-rising merchants, the appropriateness of romantic sentiments, the tragedy of star-crossed lovers) makes it refreshing to the eyes of any age, not just Góngora's. The relish with which food and drink are discussed must make this poem an early candidate for attention by anyone selecting Góngora poems for translation.

It is interesting to see how little English poetry of this or any time deals with the subject of food. There is Ben Jonson's *Inviting a Friend to Supper*, and *A Song of Sack*, formerly attributed to Cleveland, and of course the carousing songs in Shakespeare, but otherwise what is there to compare this poem with? The *letrilla* genre, with an opening line or lines repeated in whole or in part at the end of each stanza, is peculiar to the Spanish verse of the time. I have made the translation quite free, lengthening the lines but keeping the *a b b a a c c* pattern of the original.

**Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca**

(Born Madrid 1600. Educated by the Jesuits and later at Salamanca. First play, *El carro del cielo* (The Chariot of Heaven), written when he was only 13. Fought in the Low Countries and then invited to Philip IV's court as a dramatist. Became a Knight of Santiago in 1636. Concentrated on religious plays after taking orders in 1651 and becoming a Canon of Toledo. His immense output includes *La vida es sueño* (Life's a Dream), a philosophical drama known to the English-speaking world chiefly through the nineteenth-century translation, much adapted, of Edward Fitzgerald; *El mágico prodigioso* (The Prodigious Magician), a distant variant of the Faust theme, *El alcalde de Zalamea* (The Mayor of Zalamea) and *El médico de su honra* (The Physician of his Honour), plays on the theme of jealousy and the Spanish honour code, and *El príncipe constante* (The Constant Prince), a historical drama. There are also many *autos sacramentales*, dramatic allegories associated with the religious festival of Corpus Cristi. Calderón died in 1681.)

SONNET FROM ACT II OF *EL PRÍNCIPE CONSTANTE*

*Estas, que fueron pompa y alegría,  
despertando el albor de la mañana,  
a la tarde serán lástima vana,  
durmiendo en brazos de la noche fría.*

5 *Este matiz, que al cielo desafa,  
iris listado de oro, nieve y grana,  
será escarmiento de la vida humana,  
¡ Tanto se emprende en término de un día !  
A florecer las rosas madrugaron,*

10 *y para envejecer florecieron ;*  
*cuna y sepulcro en un botón hallaron ;*  
*tales los hombres sus fortunas vieron,*  
*en un día nacieron y espiraron ;*  
*que pasados los siglos, horas fueron.*

These roses, that were splendour and delight,  
 Waking the pearly freshness of the morn,  
 Shall by the eventide be turned to scorn,  
 Sleeping fast wrapped in chillest arms of Night.

5 This hue that cast a challenge to the skies,  
 A rainbow deck'd with scarlet, gold and snow,  
 Shall be a stern reproof to human show ;  
 Such changefulness in one day's compass lies !

10 At dawn, to blossom were these roses bound,  
 And, ageing, saw their blossoms lose their powers ;  
 Cradle and grave within the bud they found.

Men's fortunes are no different from these flowers ;  
 With birth, with death, the same day sees them crown'd,  
 Which, as the ages pass, will seem but hours.

### Notes

- line 1 : I have inserted 'roses' to make the sense clearer. The original just has *Estas* 'These'. In the play the Prince points to the fading roses, thus establishing the meaning.
- 8 : Literally 'So much is contained in the space of one day'.
- 12-14 : I have changed the tense from past simple to present simple, as this sounds more natural in English.

14: Literally 'which, centuries having passed, were hours'.

### Commentary

The original sonnet is the Petrarchan *a b b a a b b a c d c d c d*. I have adopted *a b b a c d d c e f e f e f*, a combination of Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms, with two quatrains and a sestet. The third and sixth lines of my sestet are both made up of a dactyl and four trochees.

Both Elizabethan / Jacobean drama and the Spanish *siglo de oro* theatre favour the set-piece speech at climactic points of a play. In some Calderón plays, such as *La vida es sueño* and *El mágico prodigioso*, this is accomplished by a lengthy speech with a complex rhyme scheme, but in *El príncipe constante* it is in the form of a magnificent sonnet. Its commentary on the vanity of earthly hopes throws into relief the courage and resignation of the Portuguese prince, Don Fernando, who has been captured by the Moors and now refuses to allow himself to be ransomed in exchange for the city of Ceuta. Condemned by the angry Moorish king, his resolve remains unshaken. If one looks for equivalents in the English theatre—poems designed to provide a brief interlude in the action—there come to mind 'Hark! now everything is still' and 'Call for the robin redbreast and the wren' from Webster's *Duchess of Malfy* and *White Devil* respectively. Neither of these poems is a sonnet (the first is longer, the second shorter) but they seem to perform a similar function, relaxing the action in a manner that lets us reflect on its significance, to this sonnet of Calderón's.

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To conclude these translations and commentaries, I can do no better than append Fray Luis de León's own words on the matter of trans-

lating poetry, in his dedicatory epistle to his friend Portocarrero at the front of his own planned (but apparently unpublished) edition of his original poems and translations:

'Of my original poems, let everybody judge as he pleases; but if one would judge of my translations, let him first of all study what it means to translate elegant poems from a foreign language into his own without adding or taking away anything and keeping as far as possible the spirit and poetical figures of the original, and to make them speak in Castilian and not as strangers and interlopers, but like true-born natives. I am not arrogant enough to claim that I have done this, but I do claim to have made the attempt. And if anyone says that I have not succeeded, let him try for himself, and then perhaps he will have more regard for my efforts.'

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