A ROMANTIC SPIRIT IN CÓRDOBA: AN EXAMINATION OF THE LIFE AND POETRY OF THE UNSUNG ANDALUSIAN TRANSLATOR, GUILLERMO BELMONTE MÜLLER

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the life and poetical development of Guillermo Belmonte Müller, a relatively obscure Córdoban poet whose unusually refined literary upbringing led to an interest in languages and world travel, as well as a love of English and French poetry. It discusses some aspects of his Romantic spirit, which was physically expressed in the events of his life as well as in his poetry. An examination of some of his translations and adaptations of Shakespeare and Byron leads us to believe that he had a great interest in and love for English poetry and to conclude that Belmonte Müller was an assiduous translator, traveller and a decidedly unique cultural figure.

KEY WORDS: Guillermo Belmonte Müller, translation studies, English poetry, Spanish poetry, Shakespeare, Byron, Musset, Córdoba.

RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda la vida literaria y la evolución poética de Guillermo Belmonte Müller, un escritor cordobés poco conocido cuya esmerada formación le permite desarrollar un interés en diversas lenguas, realizar viajes allende las fronteras así como cultivar su amor por la poesía francesa e inglesa. Este trabajo plantea algunos aspectos de su espíritu romántico los cuales se plasman tanto en acontecimientos de su vida como en la temática de su obra literaria. El análisis de algunas de sus traducciones de Shakespeare y de sus adaptaciones de Byron nos permite subrayar su interés en la poesía inglesa. Con todo, deducimos que Belmonte Müller es un traductor, un viajero y una figura cultural única.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Guillermo Belmonte Müller, estudios de traducción, poesía inglesa, poesía española, Shakespeare, Byron, Musset, Córdoba.

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The subject of this study, Guillermo Belmonte Müller, was a relatively unknown Andalusian writer with a cosmopolitan background whose life spanned from the end of the nineteenth century into the dawn of the twentieth. In addition to his dedication to poetry and translation, he is interesting as a figure in Córdoba's literary history. In particular, he is of interest to us due to his translations and adaptations of the works of the English poets Shakespeare and Byron. A brief examination of the biography and lineage of Guillermo Belmonte Müller can shed some light on his consequent literary development (Torralbo, *Comienzos* 102-108). He was born on October 16, 1851 in Córdoba. His paternal grandfather, Carlos Müller, was a native of London with French citizenship who ultimately settled in Seville, together with his wife M. Stone and two daughters, Elisa and Ana, both of whom were born in Paris. There, Ana married a viscount, the Vizconde de Brenier de Montmorán, and in around 1843 Elisa was married in Seville to Manuel Segundo Belmonte y Camacho. Guillermo Belmonte Müller's parents, Manuel Segundo Belmonte and Elisa Müller subsequently moved to Córdoba where their son was born.

In Córdoba, the family home opened its doors to the local literati, following the French fashion of the salons of Recamier, Stäel and Chateaubriand. In the Córdoban salon of Belmonte Müller, opera could be enjoyed and discussions about art and literature were encouraged. Elisa Müller (Guillermo's mother) was educated in Sevillian high society and attended the salons of the Duke of Arco Hermoso (Fernán Caballero's second husband,—Fernán Caballero was the pen name of the Spanish writer Cecilia Francisca Josefa Bohl de Faber). She was also received in San Telmo by the Dukes of Montpensier. Moreover, in Córdoba the Liceo Artístico y Literario (the antecedent of the Círculo de la Amistad) named the couple "socios de mérito" ("honored members"). It is evident that Guillermo grew up in a literary and learned atmosphere.

In 1969, Vicente Orti Belmonte published Belmonte's work *Espuma y cieno*, adding his own study that shows that the poet's family environment was instrumental in helping him amass a vast cultural knowledge, as well as providing an advanced training in modern languages:

> He always received foreign correspondence, French and English newspapers, and above all long letters from his sister, Ana, the Viscountess of Brenier, which recounted details from various places around Europe and Asia... In the atmosphere of art and culture offered by his home, rare in those times and in a small agricultural city such as Córdoba, the poet Guillermo Belmonte Müller grew up and was educated, the only surviving male child of the marriage. His mother taught him French, English and music... (Orti 3, 23)

In addition, it is evident that many voyages across Europe helped provide this cosmopolitan writer with experiences and ideas. Belmonte made many journeys to Paris and London, Portugal, and Italy. He covered almost all of Spain, including the Canary Islands and throughout his travels gathered impressions which would later provide him with inspiration for his verses. Belmonte studied at the

Instituto Romero Barros in Córdoba. Afterwards the family moved to Madrid so that the young man could study a law degree. Although he occupied several bureaucratic posts in Puerto Rico, Madrid and Córdoba, without doubt his vocation was elsewhere. From his youth up until his death on the May 7, 1929, from Córdoba to Madrid, the Puerto Rican archipelago, and back to Madrid or the "City of The Mezquita," he was prolific in his writings, which ranged from *guajiras* (Cuban folk songs) to adaptations or translations of English poets.

In 1894, he published *Poemas de Alfredo de Musset, traducidos en verso castellano por Guillermo Belmonte Müller*. This small book was created in Madrid, at the Biblioteca de Autores Españoles de Rivadeneira on the Calle del Barco, number 9. Salvador Rueda's prologue uses Belmonte Müller as an example of a poet who takes a work written in a foreign language and adapts it to make the work more accessible and attractive to his audience.When discussing Belmonte's translation of Musset's poem "Namuna," Rueda makes a comparison with Byron. This critical juxtaposition demonstrates the knowledge of the English Romantic poet that existed at the time amongst intellectuals, and which influenced Belmont's poetic development:

> I do not like "Namuna." It is an imitation of Byron's *Don Juan*, where it lacks the elegance, the delicacy of style and the personal stamp of the admirable Musset. Byron captivated many of his contemporaries with his works and Musset was one of those carried along with the flow even if it were only in a work, as he was carried away another time by the cynicism and the satire of the extremely complicated Heine. Musset had his "copa" as he called it, his own personal style, and I consider that in an artist of his magnitude it is disgraceful to genuflect before any idol. (Rueda 11)

As an indication of the acclaim that Belmonte's accomplished verses received, we can highlight another excerpt from Rueda's prologue that praises Belmonte's version of "El Sauce" (*The Weeping Willow*). As we can see below, Rueda elevates the mastery of Belmonte Müller above the proficiency of the original author:

> The translation that Guillermo Belmonte Müller has done appears to me to be the best that can be done in this class of work: "El Sauce." Above all, I greatly doubt that it were better written, in some passages, in French than in Castilian, and that is as much as one can say of any translator. (Rueda 12)

At the end of the book of poems we encounter a reference to Belmonte's ode entitled "Sardanápalo." The theme of the poem looks back to the mythical King of Nineveh and builds on the work that Byron published in England in 1821. Here we are presented with a work that is emblematic of Romanticism, not only in the material's topic, but also in the choice of the author involved—Byron, the prototypical Romantic poet. It is also interesting that Belmonte employs the hendecasyllabic meter in "Sardanápalo," which is the poetic meter that he uses to translate Musset's verse.

> Belmonte has turned to the hendecasyllable in order to convey the spirit of the poet from one language to another, and the choice is well done, from amongst other reasons, because it is how Belmonte writes his original poems, such as in one of his odes entitled "Sardanápalo." (Rueda 12)

To highlight this point, we can extract a selection of verses from "Sardanápalo," which recreate the denouement of the Assyrian king who, seeing his power vanish because of a conspiracy and realising his inevitable defeat, decides to throw himself into the flames of a gigantic fire, together with his favourite slave, Myrrha. The chosen verses demonstrate Belmonte's descriptive style when describing the twilight of power as well as his reference to the lady:

> Llama fatal, destruye
> Los regios atributos consagrados
> Al poder que concluye.
> Derrite pronto mi corona, quema
> Mi púrpura y deshace sus labrados:
> ¡No tuvo ningún rey manto o diadema
> Con más oro o más sangre fabricados!
> (...)
> Todo lo invade el fuego y lo conquista,
> Y de la hoguera sube
> Un aye intenso, universal y agudo
> Que el humo lleva en su gigante nube.
> Que este alcázar derrúmbese a mi vista,
> Y así que el aire mudo
> Ni una cúpula azote ni una arista,
> Tú llama rugidora y concentrada
> Que estés voraz por las cenizas sola,
> Ondulando cual sierpe en su desierto,
> Aproxímate airada
> Y en mi tálamo abierto
> Mi ser consume entre sus ígneos lazos,
> Y al mismo tiempo inmola
> A la esclava que tenga entre mis brazos. (Belmonte, *Poemas* 12-13)

This composition by Belmonte is an epitome of the Romantic spirit, which belongs to the generation of Campoamor or Núñez de Arce. According to this work, one can infer that perhaps Guillermo is not a prototypical Romantic poet, such as Byron or Bécquer, but is a literary follower of the latter Sevillian poet and prose writer. He did not live during the Romantic period, per se, but he is surely a proponent of the movement nonetheless. His soul belonged to the school of Rousseau, Goethe, Byron, Shelley, Keats or Espronceda as can be seen in the titles of some of the poems he composed in Spanish ("To Sleep," "The Dream of the Death," "Velut Umbra," "Night and Day").

To continue the theme of Romanticism, one can examine the poems in three of Belmonte's works which are: *Acordes y disonancias*, *Espuma y cieno*, as well

as *Obeliscos y fosas*. In these works, we can further apprehend his Romantic style, an approach that was echoed in the events of his life. Is not his departure for the New World and establishment on the exotic isles of the West Indies an example of his Romantic spirit? By considering his knowledge of languages and his various travels one is better able to understand the multicultural consciousness that distinguishes him. In addition to his Romantic spirit, Belmonte Müller should be known for his translations of Shakespeare into Spanish. He was one of the first Andalusian translators to do this and his translations of Shakespeare's sonnets are amongst the best in the Spanish language. We should take a moment to examine the two examples below, in both the original version and Belmonte's translation. By looking at these poems closely, we can see that, although they belong to the Elizabethan era, they display several Romantic nuances in their subject matter of nature, mortality (or immortality) and the suffering or pain of love (Vendler).

SONNET VII

Lo! in the orient when the gracious light
Lifts up his burning head, each under eye
Doth homage to his new-appearing sight,
Serving with looks his sacred majesty;

And having climb'd the steep-up heavenly hill,
Resembling strong youth in his middle age,
yet mortal looks adore his beauty still,
Attending on his golden pilgrimage;

But when from highmost pitch, with weary car,
Like feeble age, he reeleth from the day,
The eyes, 'fore duteous, now converted are
From his low tract and look another way:

So thou, thyself out-going in thy noon,
Unlook'd on diest, unless thou get a son.

This poem compares the rise and fall of a human life with the ever-recurring progress of the sun across the horizon. Three quatrains depict the three main stages in life: youth, middle age and old age, while the last couplet summarises the poet's moral message: having children is presented as a way to make our life meaningful and save it from a total, useless decay. A stylistic analysis reveals the use of a regular verse and the lines rhyme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Both the content and structure selected by the poet, for example the enjambment in line two, serve to emphasise the pervasive effects of the sun over the earth. In the first line, the poet uses a metonym, referring to the sun as "the gracious light" and throughout the poem the sun is present, but not directly named. In line two, the sun is alluded to again, this time in terms of a cultural reference, through the image with which the star is traditionally represented. At the same time, this reference ("his burning head")

is a personification of the sun. Lines two and three bring to mind the image of ancient sun worship, and this image coincides with the adoration of youth that is all-pervading.

The second quatrain summarises the information introduced and looks forward: "and having climb'd the steep-up heavenly hill..." seems to suggest that there is still something else to come. That rising, which was stunning, was nothing but the beginning of a process that inevitably has an end, but people still idealize this "midday of life." However, a contrast is introduced in the third quatrain where the poet refers to the fall of the sun from the sky, to the point where it sets. Along its way the sun is guided by a "weary car," thus referring to Helios, who was depicted as driving the chariot of the sun. The following two lines describe the fall, the fading, and the lack of interest in those eyes that, not so long ago, were admiring the sun. Finally, the couplet has a vocative. At last, the main addressee of the poem is revealed, and it is "you" (*thou*). Suddenly there comes a succession of second person pronouns, as if highlighting the importance of self. And the solution to this fall, procreation, is presented as the way in which you will be remembered and admired when you are elderly. This is Belmonte Müller's translation of Sonnet VII:

Apenas en oriente el sol glorioso
asoma su ígnea faz, nuestra mirada,
llena de luz, un culto fervoroso
rinde a su antigua majestad sagrada.

Cuando llega del cielo a la alta cumbre,
cual fuerte joven a la edad madura,
todavía el mortal busca su lumbre
y presta adoración a su hermosura.

Más al bajar su carro con el día
como anciano que lleva un lento paso,
la fiel mirada al punto se desvía
de la pálida ruta del ocaso.

Ir, como él, a la muerte es tu sentencia,
y sólo un hijo advertirá tu ausencia.

The translated text respects the structure of the English sonnet (three quatrains and a couplet) thus maintaining the feel of the original (Torralbo, *Breve*). The translator has made an effort to keep the rhyme; the lines have eleven syllables and follow the pattern ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. This desire to maintain rhyme leads to a series of changes in both structure and meaning from the original text.

The first quatrain makes an explicit reference to the sun. We miss therefore the simile that was so literary in the original poem. However, the poet seems to make up for this loss in line four, when he introduces the adjective "antigua," which was not in the original. The translator has used the same enjambment but the effect is slightly diminished as "nuestra mirada" is less emphatic than "each under eye."

Lines three and four mention the worship that people profess, but the translation again lacks some practical knowledge of this. The original makes explicit that people adore the sun by paying attention to it, turning their looks to its beauty, and this same idea was summarised in the very last line of the poem with "unlook'd." The translator has omitted this information, using less explicit ways to convey this. The second stanza uses hyperbaton (disordering of the syntactic elements) for the sake of rhyme. "Mortal looks" is replaced by "el mortal." This change emphasises the aforementioned loss of adoration by means of looking at it. The depiction of the sun in this stanza is then more down-to-earth (if this adjective could be used to explain it!). The translator presents a practical relationship between the star and people living on earth: "el mortal busca su lumber." This is a day-to-day necessity, and there is no adoration present here, whereas the author of the original still refers to a "golden pilgrimage," emphasising the idea of the sun as a god.

Next, the translator goes on to describe the descent. He introduces the idea of "carro," that is conveyed by "car." This strategy introduces the figure of Helios. In both texts the authors keep the simile of the day getting dark and of a life waning. Eyes stop looking at the sun and look the other way, and this line is made more poetic in the Spanish version by projecting the idea of the sunset as a path the sun has taken. Finally, the last couplet is less powerful, because it doesn't quite convey the direct warning to the reader that is clear in the original. The translation is also not so successful in conveying the sense of egotism, due to the lack of pronouns in this couplet. As in the opening line, another very explicit reference is made to death, which is not directly mentioned in the original. Rather than talking explicitly about death, Shakespeare uses the image of "thy noon," successfully making the connection clear between the stages of life and the inevitable progression of death. The condensed lines of the translation do not convey exactly the meaning of the original, since the original warns the reader that if we die childless, we are going to slip away unnoticed, while in the translation what we expect is simply death. The main message of the original poem is not to remind us of the fact that we are going to die, as the translation does, but rather that leaving this world without having brought offspring into it is a mistake.

SONNET XC

Then hate me when thou wilt; if ever, now;
Now, while the world is bent my deeds to cross,
Join with the spite of fortune, make me bow,
And do not drop in for an after-loss:

Ah, do not, when my heart hath 'scoped this sorrow,
Come in the rearward of a conquer'd woe;
Give not a windy night a rainy morrow,
To linger out a purposed overthrow.

If thou wilt leave me, do not leave me last,
When other petty griefs have done their spite

But in the onset come; so shall I taste
At first the very worst of fortune's might,

And other strains of woe, which now seem woe,
Compared with loss of thee will not seem so.

The poem has an unhappy and disconsolate tone as the poet asks the beloved to leave him now so that any other pains or woes will feel like nothing compared to the loss of love. He describes a series of unhappy circumstances as if the whole world and fortune is against him, pointing out that all of these would make him suffer if followed by the loss of his love. But if the beloved hates him now, then all such "petty griefs" will feel like just that: petty. He begs to be hated now and his discourse appears to be that of a forlorn man with nothing else to fight for. The poem's rhythmic pattern: ABAB CDCD EFGF HH is somewhat unusual and it may be that the mismatch in lines nine and eleven are due to historical changes in the pronunciation of the words, although this is unlikely.

The love story central to the poem uses the metaphor "love is war," which can be seen in the use of the words "make me bow," "conquer'd woe," and "overthrow." Despite the dejected tone of the poem, the use of the imperative is striking. It gives the impression that the poet still has something to say. He sets the date and conditions for the betrayal. So, he has some sort of power amidst his desperation. But the recurrent words are "sorrow," "woe," "loss" and "grief," and they confirm that in this fight for power there are no winners. In the third quatrain the poet compares the grief caused by the beloved with other "petty griefs," so that it seems milder. Perhaps there is still some doubt as to whether his beloved will leave and hate him or not, but he appears resigned to this parting. This is Belmonte Müller's translation of Sonnet XC:

Ódiame, al fin, un poco, si has de odiarme,
mientras el mundo me combate: aunque oses
uniéndote a mi estrella doblegarme,
no por detrás mi corazón acoses.

Cuando apenas salir he conseguido
de otro dolor, maltrecho y victorioso,
a una noche de viento enfurecido
no des un triste amanecer lluvioso.

Si me vas a dejar, hazlo primero
que otra desgracia hiérame importuna;
pues yo, por ti, desde el principio quiero
sufrir todo el rigor de mi fortuna.

Y las que hoy me parecen aflicciones
nada serán después que me abandones.

As in the previous analysis, the translator struggles to keep the rhyme pattern. The structure is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. On this occasion the translation compensates for the possible mismatch in the original and makes lines nine and eleven rhyme. Again, in this translation the translator recurs to hyperbaton to make the lines rhyme (lines three and five). With that exception, the rest of the translation is not very complex and it is perhaps more easily accessible to the reader than the original poem.The message sounds very modern, stating several conditions to love which go against the rules of romantic love. However the translator achieves a more archaic effect in the selection of words such as "oses," "doblegarme," "importuna," "maltrecho" and "hiérame." The Spanish version keeps the metaphors comparing love to war. The fight between lovers is represented by words like "oses," "doblegarme," "acoses," "victorioso," and "hiérame." The repetition of the word "woe," despite occurring throughout the original poem, is not found in the translation. This may be because the word is so short in English that it is very easy to use it liberally throughout the poem. However, the use of a polysyllabic word like "aflicciones" (line fourteen) makes it impossible to repeat so often. In this sense, the last couplet sounds weaker than in the original, although, from the perspective of the rhyme, to Spanish ears it may sound better.

In summary, when looking at the examples above, it is clear that Belmonte Müller was an accomplished translator of Shakespeare, conveying his complex themes and messages whilst maintaining the poetic meter and spirit of the poems. He was amongst the first Andalusian translators to translate Shakespeare into Spanish, and more importantly, one of the first to translate Shakespeare as poetry, not as prose. His interest in and love of English poetry is shown through his selection of some of the greatest poets from the English canon. When considering the life and works of the Cordoban poet, Guillermo Belmonte Müller, we can see poetic and geographical strands linking him with Seneca, Juan de Mena and the Duque de Rivas and, in certain artistic similarities, with Juan Valera. Belmonte Müller was an assiduous translator, a traveller and a truly unique cultural figure. An unusual Andalusian, situated in the period between centuries, in his choice of subject matter he often illustrated his own vital temperament, the duality of his own soul, along with the refined environment in which he grew up, matured and prospered.

To conclude, we must highlight the bravery of Belmonte Müller, who managed to combine a legal career with his own literary ambitions. His cultural contributions were not limited to the Academia de Córdoba or to his contributions to the city's *Diario*. From his lyrical work his poetry and the translations or versions that he carried out in various languages, including English, attract attention. In his legacy he leaves us an adaptation of a work by Byron and several translations of Shakespeare's poetry that makes these English poets more accessible to the Spanish reader.

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