Adaptation or Translation? Walcott’s The Joker of Seville for a Caribbean Audience

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Adaptation or Translation? Walcott's *The Joker of Seville* for a Caribbean Audience

In her definition of translation, Mary Snell-Hornby\(^1\) provides a basis for the craft that is adaptation. According to her, "translation...is a skill demanding the utmost proficiency, specialised knowledge and the sensitivity of an artist..." She further states that this activity should be left to an expert as it is this expertise that will undoubtedly enable the translator to decide which of the many strategies available should be used to ensure the transmissibility of the work. In other words, if there is no point where a translation stops and adaptation begins, the need is even greater to understand the "art" of the original work and to produce or "craft" a new text which "integrates more easily into the receiving culture".

In *The Joker of Seville*, the subjectivity of the literary genre is evident as Walcott attempts to craft a new play at the level of the semantic construction, while maintaining the aesthetic appeal required to please the Caribbean audience: "[...] this play is my first attempt to adapt the work of any author, ancient or contemporary [...]\(^2\)". The task is challenging from two main points of view: firstly, Walcott makes no secret of the fact that his knowledge of Spanish is limited, almost non-existent:

I have no Spanish whatsoever [...] , but as with most romance languages, one can be swept along in a narrow torrent of powerful lyricism, without comprehension, propelled by the passion of its sound. On such a rapid journey, the plot, the landscape rushes past and blurs detail: cribs or translations serve as a map, but the language is my own\(^3\).

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Secondly, Walcott the writer/translator is well aware of the challenges of transferring *El Burlador de Sevilla* for a Caribbean audience. The themes have mainly been maintained although they have been given a new twist in most instances, in keeping with Walcott's perception of the kind of treatment that would most appeal to his audience, as well as his own creative mind and quest for innovation.

**Translation or Adaptation: whither the artist's choice?**

A translation of the literary genre is, by definition and design, always subjective, bordering on an act of violence: "Translation is the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target audience." According to Venuti, the translation of a dramatic text is a double act of cultural transformation—that of the literary text and that of the performance text at the same time. He argues for an end to this violence through the visibility of the translator—the "domestication" achieved in the translated work must not be allowed to replace the "foreignness" of the original text. In handling *The Joker of Seville*, Walcott was clearly aware of the multiple codes to be respected in the theatrical text: how to bring out different levels of cultural meaning, how to re-construct the identities of the characters, how to underline conflict, achieve emotional intensity, motivate the dramatic action.

The important question to ask before continuing is the following: has Walcott done a translation or an adaptation? What is the outcome and what is its relationship to the original text? The answer to this question is easy enough. Insofar as Walcott has declared his ignorance of the language of Tirso de Molina's original work, and has chosen to work from the dramatic text produced in translation by Roy Campbell, the scales are obviously heavily tipped in favour of the latter device: adaptation.

**Is adaptation a better approach to translating theatre?**

The issue of adaptation (manipulation) continues to generate serious debates with defenders arguing for both sides. Supporters of adaptation as a form of translation within itself postulate that all translation, "from the point of view of the target literature, implies a degree of manipulation of the Source Text for a particular purpose." For the Manipulation theorists, any translation

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4. The Caribbean audience in question, a Trinidadian one, is highly fun-loving in nature and spends almost six months each year preparing for the next carnival season.
is not merely a reproduction of another text, it is also an integral part of the target culture. For them, adaptation should be viewed more as a creative effort by the translator who makes allowances for an audience with little or no knowledge of the source language and/or its culture, while respecting, to a certain extent, the author’s intention. The final product, therefore, will depend on the translator’s, not the author’s, intention as well as the needs of the target audience. Kiki Gounaridou suggests that there will always be faithfulness, unfaithfulness, or some other form of “marital” arrangement between the original and the translated text: “Should the translated text point out the cultural, linguistic and temporal differences, the ‘strangeness’ of the original text... or make it familiar to the circumstances of its target culture, language and tradition?”

The issues of adaptation of “form” and adaptation of “content” are generally treated without distinction of these most important elements; in many cases they are taken together in such a way that the real craft of the translator is lost or blurred. Our own question is the following: should the creative genius of the translator be given full reign during the process of adaptation, or should the intention of the original author be preserved? In the case of a theatrical production, do not multiple interpretations enhance the transmissibility of the work for as many audiences as possible?

In the case of Walcott and *The Joker of Seville* there is no question as to whether the playwright adapted the work or whether he translated it. His poor knowledge of the Spanish language meant that he simply adapted a play already translated by Roy Campbell. Important to note at this point is the fact that Walcott’s play was commissioned in 1978 by the Royal Theatre Company in London. There is no surprise to this as many highly funded theatres commission their translations from noted playwrights whom they consider capable of handling some of the challenges posed by translations for this medium. Chief among the challenges facing translations for the theatre are what George E. Wellwarth refers to as “speakability” and “style”9. “Speakability” refers to the ease with which the translated text can be enunciated, requiring the skill of a craftsman, not only to avoid stilted language, but also to guard against the “excessive use of sibilants” in a sentence, or awkward consonantal clusters that may make a line hard to pronounce rapidly, or interfere with sound projection.

In his analysis of theatre translation, Malcolm Griffiths declares that the many issues relating to style make it near impossible for the text of a play to be

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a true representation of the author's intention, as all the structures, idioms and idiosyncrasies embedded in it cannot be successfully transmitted in the same form for the stage. This may or may not place the audience at a disadvantage as they are now viewing the work from the playwright's, director's or characters' interpretation, without the benefit of access to the original text. Walcott, although unfamiliar with the source language, has used the translation done by Roy Campbell as a mere framework for his own play. As we shall see, he has given it his personal touch and applied his own creative approach while successfully managing to convey most of Tirso de Molina's intention.

Originally translated by Roy Campbell, *The Joker of Seville (El Burlador de Sevilla)* at first glance would not appear to appeal to a contemporary Caribbean audience, given the mere fact that it was written during the Golden Age of literature in Spain. The literature of this period, which extends from the early sixteenth century to the late seventeenth century is generally characterised by patriotic and religious fervour and heightened realism. The major themes reflected in the work of writers of this period centred on religion and morality, honour and maintenance of the status quo. Although Spain was, at the time of the writing of the play, experiencing economic degeneration, there was general apathy and a mental attitude among the nobility that despised productivity. The Renaissance movement, which was introduced to the Spanish society only in the seventeenth century, had that society in a state of utter confusion as, although it advocated man's free will from a life of penance as the highest and noblest form of human activity, it also sought to revive patriotism while striking a balance between realism and idealism.

Walcott's portrayal of the main character and most of the others is in keeping with Tirso's work. He has maintained the themes that were prevalent and important to writers of the Golden Age period, although in some instances he has given them a slight twist. His vital interest, according to King, is to "create an equivalent to Tirso's rhymes and rhythm in modern English verse that can be spoken naturally", one in which, "you do not need to understand the words, like Shakespeare, you can follow what happens through the action". While *El Burlador de Sevilla* is a satire that criticises the norms of the Golden Age society, and, in particular, the hypocrisy that existed in Spain among the nobility, Walcott views other issues that relate to a post-colonial society, while falling under the same themes, as being more important than some presented by Tirso de Molina.

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Walcott’s innovations

By far, the two most significant innovations used by Walcott are the prologue and the musical form parang.

Use of the prologue

The prologue, which is absent from Tirso de Molina’s play and from Campbell’s earlier translation, serves as an introduction to the play and sets the stage for the events to follow. The prologue serves to introduce new ideas and characters such as Rafael, who is the voice of Don Juan’s conscience, the stick fighters and the Ace of Death. Consequently, the prologue serves as a first contact with the Caribbean flavour which Walcott has opted for in order to reach his Caribbean audience. The language itself is interesting: Rafael introduces the opening scene with Isabella’s seduction by Don Juan and hints that this marks the start of a scandalous affair: “...she was to play with Octavio in bed but she draw the Joker instead. When she blow out the candle, she start off the scandal”11.

Interestingly, the prologue is set on All Soul’s Eve and allows Walcott to move effectively from twentieth century Trinidad to seventeenth century Golden Age Spain. The new characters meet on this occasion to discuss Don Juan and to invoke his spirit to tell his own story, thus portraying seventeenth century hypocrisy. The prologue also sets the gambling tone of the play. The stakes in fact are very high and for Don Juan, this heightens the thrill.

The gambling tone of the play is in fact set when Rafael presents his troupe; the Ace of Death, the Queen of Hearts, the Joker and the Jack. Although Walcott’s decision to exploit the idea of gambling for the highest stakes might appear innovative because of the entire “game” that he has set up, the “card” was in fact suggested in the original Tirso de Molina play when Don Juan, having seduced Aminta, is planning to flee to Lebrija to commit another “burla”. Catalinión points out to him the danger of gambling, even for the spectators: “se suelen en el juege perder también los que miran, Yo he sido mirón del tuyo, y, por mirón, no querría que me colgiese algún rayo y me trocase en cecina”12.

Ironically, in the end, Don Juan’s downfall is quite dramatic, and is quite in keeping with Tirso’s intention.

Use of the parang

In seventeenth century Spain, there were strict guidelines regarding the type of verse that could be used for dramatic productions. Tirso used the most

common at the time, which was the 8-syllable line. Walcott has deliberately chosen not to adhere to this rhyme scheme, preferring from the outset to give his adaptation a more Caribbean flavour with the use of the lively musical form, parang. This choice is defended by Walcott himself:

What I hope I have drawn from the original is primarily the pace of its scenes and its meter [...] I was never in awe of the archaic or heraldic tongue that Tirso's language may be [...] The wit, panache, the boisterous élan of his period, and of the people in his play, are as alive to me as the flair and flourishes of Trinidadian music and its public character\textsuperscript{13}.

The parang identifies a custom belonging to Trinidad's Hispanic heritage although the word itself is neither Spanish nor English.

It is the colloquial term for parran, the abbreviation of parranda, the Spanish word which means a spree, a carousel or a group of more than four people who go out at night singing to the accompaniment of musical instruments\textsuperscript{14}.

Traditionally, in Trinidad, parang has been fused with the Christmastime season, which runs from the last week in November to the “Day of the Kings” or “Día de los Reyes”, which is January 6. The local revelry involves visits by the merrymakers to the homes of family, friends or acquaintances to sing songs, in Spanish, to the accompaniment of certain musical instruments. “There is also dancing, and the eating and drinking of fare appropriate for festivity”\textsuperscript{15}. Understandably, Christmastime is ideal for such revelry—the rainy season is past, crops are close to reaping and the evenings are cool. Parangs take place mainly in the agricultural towns and districts, not before 8pm, but may continue late into the night or early in the morning.

It is important to focus briefly on the lyrical content of the parang, given the social context of the majority of Caribbean music today:

The songs of parang contradict a general concept that the lyrics of popular songs of Trinidad are lewd, unflattering to womankind and lacking in a sense of poetry. The lyrics of parang songs do not embrace language that debases or ridicules women; they can certainly be listened to by all members of a wholesome family; and a number of them are markedly lyrical [...] Apart from calypsos, no other songs have become so stron-
gly a part of Trinidad. For comparison, calypsos may be termed the songs of the urban troubadour of Trinidad while those of Parang are of the rural\textsuperscript{16}.

Walcott admits that he had originally attempted to translate into alternating rhymes of eight-foot lines directly from the old Spanish but soon gave up. He did not feel that he was indulging in a purely literary exercise as, according to him, the verse play is not a literary device in the West Indies:

Tirso’s play is not only about a man who must have come from the folk imagination and the formal religion of the Spaniards, but it also contains their musical life and the validity of their rhetorical style. One can hear in his verse the cry of flamenco and the pulse of the guitar. Once its music entered my head, there was no artifice in relating the music and drama of the Spanish verse to what strongly survives in Spanish Trinidad, or, debased as critics may think it, to the thrum and cry of the parang, in which, with typical Spanish duality, the song of praise has the same pitch as the lament [... ] Legends find new vessels. When one oracle is exhausted, they may spring up in unexpected ground, just as vital, real, vulgar, and apprehensible as they were when they first sprang to life. The more I worked on this play, the closer I got to a feeling for the Spanish creole life in Trinidad\textsuperscript{17}.

Additionally, Walcott replaced Tirso’s long speeches and soliloquies with short prose and songs. This prose form is just one of the many adjustments that Walcott had to make for his modern-day audience. The dual nature of the parang as a music form was sufficient, he felt, to accomplish that end.

**Treatment of the themes**

As we have already stated, Derek Walcott has produced a play that caters to a more liberal twentieth-century audience. The adjustments made for a post colonial Caribbean audience are significant however, as Walcott makes statements, through his characters and other structural innovations, on certain themes which, although not radically different from Tirso’s period, must be viewed differently in light of necessary considerations of time and space. The three main aspects to which we shall give greater scrutiny are the treatment of religion, the treatment of women and the Don Juan figure.

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\textsuperscript{17} Walcott, 1978, p. 4.
Approach to women

The most significant difference between Tirso’s portrayal of women and that of Walcott is the social status that they enjoy. In Tirso’s play, rigid pressures were placed on women by society in general and by their families in particular. The women of Walcott’s time are viewed as more than mere objects of their family’s honour. Tirso’s women are as docile as their counterparts in Walcott are bold and outspoken. Tirso’s women were non-critical of the oppressive society that kept women docile and subservient. Walcott’s women possessed independent thoughts and rebelled openly against their society, which was also repressive and oppressive, although in the final analysis, they too are unable to do much to change the society’s perception of women.

Of interest is the fact that the women are drawn from both strata of the society—aristocracy and peasantry—but that both are equally worthy of punishment by the society for having succumbed to illicit passion. While the treatment of the noblewomen (Isabella and Ana) underscores the society’s perception of women as mere objects, the treatment of the peasant women (Tisbea and Arminta) helps to develop the theme of the oppressive aristocracy, both at the societal and at the individual level. While honour has been seriously compromised in the case of the women of the aristocracy, and their punishment is a means of saving face for the family, the peasant women, through a desire to gain this honour, allowed themselves to be taken advantage of. This offence is worth no more, by virtue of Don Juan’s noble birth, than a slap on the wrist.

Equally interesting to note is the fact that Walcott, unlike Tirso, is free to make statements about societal norms which appear to be unfavourable to one group of persons or another. Although the king in the adaptation by Walcott is as callous in his treatment of the noblewoman Isabella as is the King in Tirso’s play, and refers to her as someone with “the devotion of a whore” (p. 18), to be sent off to a convent in the hope that this treatment will succeed in “whipping her body of desire” (p. 19), he uses equally strong language to condemn her lover. He refers (unknowingly) to Don Juan as the “galloping duke, half-horse, half-devil who rode her to hell”18. Walcott is at liberty to openly criticize the behaviour of men who take advantage of women, while Tirso’s criticism has to be inferred through the use of satire. We must also bear in mind that the two periods are extremely far removed from each other and that even mild inferences during Tirso’s time could be considered as outward criticism of the society. Walcott, on the other hand, has the liberty of employing sexual language “the serpent stirring”, the “winking one-eyed snake”, “the monster”, the “eel

in its basket” (p. 40). There is also open criticism of society’s treatment of women as in the following statement of protest that Walcott puts in Ana’s mouth: “But we’re women, what can we do? We can’t protest, we can’t approve.”

It should be noted that the opportunistic Tisbea, while manipulated in both texts, becomes the object of our sympathy as a result of Walcott’s direct and more developed portrayal of her.

Another innovation to Walcott’s portrayal of these women is the fact that Don Juan is perceived as the liberator of these women’s sexual desires. The despised character that is Don Juan is actually portrayed as an agent of moral freedom. Isabella’s confinement to a convent not only stripped her of bodily desires by virtue of her confinement, but also gives her time to reflect on her sexuality. In the end, she acknowledges and embraces that sexuality to the point of thanking Don Juan for her new found “power”, sense of choice and for the “new freedom that was ours as women” (p. 114). According to Patricia Ismond,

> Walcott’s own portrait stresses the principle of moral freedom which Don Juan embodies. In satisfying the forbidden lusts of his women, he serves to release libido, denied by the prescribed norms of ordered decorum. He frees them thereby to face the burden of choice.

**Religion and colonialism inextricably linked**

There is no doubt that Walcott sets out to make a total mockery of the religious theme of Tirso’s play. Don Juan is portrayed as the serpent in both plays, lurking in the Garden of Eden, waiting to entrap and deceive his victims. Critics have sought to explain this image of the serpent as representation of the Europeans arriving, Bible in one hand, with the seeming intention of saving the colonised peoples, but all the time hiding the sword they held in the other hand. Don Juan embodies these two aspects of deception and enslavement as he deceives Tisbea in the name of “religion” and enslaves Catalinión who is his manservant and constant companion. Ironically, it is Rafael, Walcott’s new character and the voice of Don Juan’s conscience, who makes a comment about this: “You’re a rich man, with possessions, a servant and all: we’ve met men who believe their positions entitle them to slaves, and when they point their finger, that’s the end.”

In his treatment of the religious theme, Walcott also levels criticism at those in the society, whether ancient or modern-day, who profess to be Christians but

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who do not respect certain basic principles. Don Juan repeatedly alludes to Christian principles even as he defiles one woman after another. Ironically, he resorts to Christian sayings when necessary, notably in his mockery of those who are obsessed with honour, as supported by society and the church:

Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.
But do you Christians listen? No.
For honour's sake you break God's word.
God must have nothing left to do.  

The Don Juan figure

Walcott does not deal with this figure in any more sympathetic a way than Molina does. Indeed, Don Juan is dealt with in the end as an incorrigible seducer who receives his just deserts for having refused to heed ample warning regarding his amorous exploits and for enslaving Catalinión. Nevertheless, there is a redeeming quality to the character: in Walcott's play Don Juan is seen as the liberator of women's libido in defiance of a society which is bent on keeping them subdued and repressed. The fact that the women defiled are drawn from different strata of the society in both plays speaks to the equality of perception of women in relation to their family's honour. This is openly mocked and criticized by Don Juan himself in Walcott's play.

Although Don Juans are by no means exclusive to the Caribbean society, there is a myth that persists even today, a few decades following Walcott's adaptation, that many Caribbean men flit too easily from flower to flower, partaking of their juices and leaving the "evidence" in the form of out-of-wedlock children to mothers who are either too young or too impoverished to give them a decent upbringing. The image of the man as a stud is one that is as strong today as it was during the period of colonialism when male slaves were expected and encouraged to impregnate as many female slaves as possible in order to increase the available work force for the fields.

Walcott's language, Caribbean style

While there are obvious restrictions placed on the translator in his manipulation of the characters and the themes, the language provides an avenue for greater flexibility in responding to the needs of the target audience. Moreover,

23. Interestingly, an election campaign was fought in 2002 in Jamaica with a strong point for the opposition being the fact that its leader was capable, at seventy-five years old, to father a child by his wife who was less than forty years old. Only a small segment of the society considered this platform as unacceptable.
a theatrical production provides an obvious platform or “stage” for this type of adaptation. Walcott’s play abounds with examples of colourful language that grasp the attention of the Caribbean audience and brings the production closer to the twentieth century. Among examples identified which attest to the “Caribbeanness” of the language are the following:

**Act 1, Scene 1** (p. 19)
King of Naples (To Isabella):
*You hear me woman?*

**Act 1, Scene 1** (p. 23)
Don Pedro (To Octavio):
*Don’t joke! This is a thing for tears! You have cuckolded yourself.*

**Act 1, Scene 4** (p. 38)
Tisbea (Tending to Don Juan on the beach):
*Where hurting you? Sir, what wrong?*
(Pause)
Are you in agony, sir?

(p. 39)
Don Juan:
I didn’t ask your name
Tisbea:

**Act 1, Scene 4** (pp. 44-46) (Use of creole language in song lyrics)
Cataliñión:
*Tisbea?*
(Sings)
*Tisbea went and bathe,*
*A swordfish take she mind*
*Tisbea, oh, oh*
First fishergirl
*Hold on to the rod*
Sister Tisbea
*Hold on to the rod-oh-oh*
Though it turn like the staff of Aaron
To a miraculous serpent,
mind it jump out your hand!

Additionally, while not strictly Caribbean, Walcott employs a certain register of language that could shock even some modern-day audiences and is certainly far removed from the type of language that Tirso's audiences would have been exposed to.

**Act 1, Scene 5** (p. 47)
(After Don Juan defiles Tisbea, she assumes he will marry her)

Tisbea:
And, sir, all that you're looking for
I hope I'll give like a good wife
Juan
A wife! You calculating bitch,
You're as heartless as the average
Virgin back there!

**Act 1, Scene 7** (p. 53)

Rafael (of Jack, dressed as a girl):
No, no, sir! All these gifts are hers;
She is my adopted daughter
You could fondle the goods yourself,
Except they're not for sale.

**Act 1, Scene 8** (p. 73)

Catalinión (He stumbles on Anfriso):
O Christ!
It's that blood-crazy matador.
Poor bull. Your face now. Anfriso!
Anfriso, you damned bloody fool,
Did you come with us just to find
your honour?

**Act 2, Scene 1** (p. 101)

Batricio:
Peasant or prince, a man's a man.
It makes no fucking difference
to me. I have a woman, white
and quiet as a candle there,
and I'm going to set her alight!

*Act 2, Scene 4 (p. 123)*

Juan (to Catalinión):
When we hide in the cathedral,
You'll soon start bitching how it's cold.

**Conclusion**

When one considers the aspects (characters, themes) of Walcott's version of Tirso de Molina's play *El Burlador de Sevilla*, the most striking analogy that can be drawn is to be found in the game of cricket. In the 1980's when the appeal of cricket was waning due to spectator apathy, it was felt that the four-day test matches not only took a toll on business activity within cricket-loving societies because of worker absenteeism, but that spectators themselves had begun to lose interest in matches that extended over such a long period of time. The one-day cricket series was introduced in response to this, with each team attempting to score as many runs as possible from fifty overs each. This move not only helped to heighten spectator interest but also allowed businesses to lose staff for only one day at a time.

The adaptation done by Walcott is similar to the one-day cricket series in several respects. Firstly, at the level of its structure, Molina's division of the play into action over four days makes for a longer stretch of action each time which could lead to spectator fatigue. Walcott has divided his play into two acts and twelve scenes, thereby providing the audience with small segments of action at a time. This not only moves the play along in a seemingly speedier fashion, but also maintains the interest of the audience through frequent changes in action and scenery. Added to the other adjustments already mentioned, our question as to whether or not a translation or an adaptation has been done can resoundingly be answered by the latter device since the author has brought out different levels of cultural meaning, re-constructed the identities of the characters and crafted a text to integrate a new culture.

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24. A sequence of balls (usually six) bowled from one end of the pitch.
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