

Letras Hispanas

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TITLE: *Four Key Plays: The Audience, Blood Wedding, Yerma, The House of B.A.*

AUTHOR: Federico García Lorca, Michael Kidd (trans.)

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To what degree, having read this or that author in translation, has one “really” read that author? Reading Unamuno’s novel *San Manuel Bueno, mártir*, for instance, with Spanish students in Spanish, and in a “great books” course in English, one will not find that the English-only students are much shortchanged by having read the novel in translation. Style is not what we read Unamuno for: as long as the translator is a good reader of Spanish, reasonably skilled at English composition, Unamuno’s literary and philosophical writing survives translation quite well.

On the other hand, Nabokov famously railed against the possibility of adequately translating Pushkin’s verse, especially the verse novel *Eugene Onegin*, out of the finely-wrought Russian in which it was composed (though this impossibility did not stop him trying it himself). It may be nonetheless that the noble attempt at translation of such “untranslatable” authors is still worthwhile, however quixotic the attempt might seem, as in Ortega y Gasset’s much-cited 1937 essay “Miseria y esplendor de la traducción,” which describes the translation of much literary and philosophical writing as an “ejercicio utópico.”

Most writers, however, do not present such clear cases—has one read Homer, or Confucius, or Avicenna, if one has not found the time to master Homeric Greek, Old Chinese,

or classical Arabic and Persian? Well, sort of, and for most readers, “sort of” will have to do. Has one read Lorca, if one has read him only in English? Michael Kidd’s translations of four of Federico García Lorca’s most important plays (*El público*, *Bodas de sangre*, *Yerma* and *La casa de Bernarda Alba*) are a potent attempt to render Lorca’s mixture of dramatic prose and verse accessible to the English-only reader, as well as to produce scripts of the plays that are not just readable but producible by English-speaking actors. Kidd faces up squarely to the challenge in his humble but confident translator’s note, observing that “there is no substitute for reading Lorca—or any great author—in the original, and I would be thrilled if my translations did nothing more than motivate the reader to learn Spanish in order to do so. In the meantime, I would suggest thinking of them as opera glasses: they can’t put you onstage, but hopefully they’ll get you close enough to enjoy the show” (lv).

How close, then, does Kidd get the English-only reader to “really” reading Lorca? The challenges Lorca offers the translator are formidable, as in the self-conscious switching between prose and poetry to express calculating coldness or lyrical warmth. The Bride in “Blood Wedding,” for instance, speaks in prose when talking to or about the Groom and their purely transactional relationship, but often speaks in verse when speaking to or

about Leonardo. The same is true in “Yerma,” in which the title character speaks to and about her husband in prose, but muses on the absent child she longs for in verse. To lose this effect would be disastrous, but Kidd manages the contrast between Lorca’s prose and Lorca’s verse skillfully, even managing to preserve some of Lorca’s Spanish poetic effects in his English version. Consider, for example, the success of Kidd’s rendering of one of Lorca’s signature tools, assonant rhyme, as Yerma laments in Act 2, scene 2: “Oh, what gray and sightless doves!/Oh, how the channels of my anguish pulse!/Oh, what pain comes from stagnant blood,/like hornet stings at the base of my skull!/But you will come, my child, my love,/because water yields salt, the earth mud,/and our womb will bear a lovely son/just as clouds deliver gentle floods” (Kidd 136). Kidd has set himself the goal of maximizing readability, and has also managed to bring across an actual technique of Lorca’s verse over from rhyme-heavy Spanish into rhyme-poor English.

Kidd’s translations of Lorca’s prose are also generally successful, tinkering just enough with how an idea is expressed that the sense of Lorca’s Spanish is made clear to the English reader without being so exegetic as to lose “what Lorca said.” A fine example of a good translator’s choice comes at the end of Act 2 of “The House of Bernarda Alba,” in a stressful and emotional scene where a young woman, unmarried, discovered to have murdered her newborn child after a covert unwanted pregnancy, is murdered in turn by the enraged townspeople. Bernarda, avid, shouts “¡Acabar con ella antes que lleguen los guardias! ¡Carbón ardiendo en el sitio de su pecado!” It is clear to the Spanish reader that Bernarda’s second shrieked sentence is a demand that the crowd violate the young victim’s body; a very direct English translation would, on the other hand, actually introduce ambiguity. “Burning coal in the *place* of her sin” could refer to the physical place where the infant was conceived, or perhaps her

home, or the place where she buried the child . . . Kidd’s freer translation, however, manages to get across the indubitable and horrifying sense of bodily violation from the Spanish: “Finish her off before the police get here! Plug that sinful womb with burning coal!” (Kidd 194). To read subtly, and bring the English reader to the best understanding of the implications of the Spanish, as well as its surface semantics and syntax, is a great achievement for a translator.

This reviewer has, of course, occasional quibbles with some of Kidd’s choices. More than once, characters who are illiterate Andalusian peasants use a diction that is somewhat out of keeping with that characterization, as when the Groom’s Mother in “Blood Wedding” fulminates against the “scoundrel” (*bribón*) who invented knives and other weapons (Kidd 47), or when the Maid in “Bernarda Alba” complains of the mad grandmother that “it took all my strength to *subdue* her [*sujetarla*]” (Kidd 166). There is the occasional line where a change made for the sake of smooth English blunts the force of Lorca’s original image, as in translating La Poncia’s gall-bitter “le estaré escupiendo un año entero” to the rounder, less aggressive “[I’ll] spit in her face until my heart’s content” (Kidd 160).

But these quibbles remain, in the end, quibbles. Kidd’s translations are excellent. The biographical and critical material included as front matter in the volume are aimed at the English-speaking layman reader, and are appropriate for that reader, but interesting to the specialist too, as Kidd’s thoughts on the texts include more reflection than is common in the scholarship on (for instance) questions of producibility, taking the plays as scripts intended to be performed, rather than only as texts to be read from a page. Kidd’s book would be an ideal introduction to Lorca’s theater for an English-speaking audience, and this reviewer endorses his hope that with such a fine introduction, a reader might be inspired to learn enough Spanish to move on to the originals.