

**GEORGE ELIOT, *La gitanilla española: Poema dramático*, ed. e intro. María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia, trad. María Donapetry Camacho, Soria, Vertere. Monográfico de la revista *Hermeneus* (Universidad de Valladolid), nº 22, Diputación de Soria, 2020, ISBN:978-89-16446-65-0, 303 pp.**

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The remarkable exponent of the nineteenth-century Anglo-American literary scene, the outstanding Mary Ann Evans, delights us with her exquisite portrayal of fifteenth-century Spain. Upon visiting our country with the renowned Hispanist George Henry Lewes, she devoted herself to this poem, getting absorbed by a whirlwind of fascination and intellect, as her vast knowledge of the history of Spain is proved by her text, finally publishing it in 1868. Only recently have we been granted access to the translation of this poetic masterpiece. It is owing to publisher Vertere, with a long tradition in the publishing of monographs, that we can celebrate this neat edition. The fact that Spanish people have remained unenlightened for over 150 years is a question that shall remain unanswered, but it may be connected to the fact that this dramatic poem deals with different ethnic groups in a positive light, in a period in which it was not politically correct. Nonetheless, it is now possible for us to enjoy the much-awaited translation of *The Spanish Gypsy* into Spanish and dive into the enthralling narrative poetry which George Eliot gifted us.

These five books, now combined and sagaciously translated, will become the preferred reference not only for anglophiles but also for anyone trying to delve into the concepts of race, minorities, gender, and determinism. Owing to María Donapetry Camacho, fellow at the Department of Modern and Medieval Languages at the University of Oxford, who displays exquisite care and minute attention to detail while keeping the original meaning of the author's first edition over the metric or rhyme, we can finally embrace this poem for the first time. Noteworthy editor, María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia, professor of English Studies at the University of A Coruña, has, with affectionate assurance, endeavoured to secure that this brilliant piece attains its due position. Her relentless research on the topic and her utmost care have enriched this edition and broadened its scope. Lastly, Elinor Shaffer, fellow of the British Academy, honorary professor at the Institute of Modern Languages, School of Advanced Study, University of London, and life professor at Clare Hall College, University of Cambridge, with her unique expertise in reception studies, devoted to this prime translation a most warming preface.

Eliot's work as an editor, translator and novelist gathered much attention, not only during the British high Victorianism but in other countries as well, with her pieces being translated into other languages, most notably French. Notwithstanding this situation in other countries, the Spanish situation has remained inconsistent. Disregarding the exception of the first translation of some fragments of *Felix Holt* to Spanish back in 1867, or *Adam Bede* in 1884, the Spanish readership has been deprived of this author's accomplishments until the twentieth century. And yet, those few narrations chosen had suffered manipulation, deletion, and censorship until very recently.

There is no doubt that the Spanish scenario of the twentieth century was far from suitable in welcoming the ideals of realists, philosophers, agnostics, or scientists (such as Darwin's in *On the Origin of Species*). Instead, the country was depressed after the human casualties of the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939, and incapable of reconstructing the country back from its ashes with the subsequent dictatorship. The sense of loss was pervasive, with society deprived of nourishment, commodities, and enterprises, not to mention freedom of speech or faith. Strong Christian values and morals were enacted upon society, leaving thus little space for free thinking. The ensuing outbreak of World War II by no means fostered any improvement. Consequently, the literary scene of the time was already outstretched in securing customs and militant writings, thanks to which we get a precise glimpse of the plight our predecessors had to endure. Until the defeat of the Axis Powers and the end of the conflict in 1945, much contempt was directed towards the Allies, mainly the British, as can be inferred from the expression "perfidious Albion". As a result, it is not surprising that little or even nothing about this remarkable writer had reached our borders. The consistent repression and the strict censorship endorsed throughout many decades have resulted in few or no genuinely faithful translations of the prominent George Eliot. Her prose may have crossed frontiers, and yet, two decades already into the twenty-first century, we find that her narrative poem *The Spanish Gypsy* has only just been published.

Eliot's love for Spain had started well before her trip in 1866; when accompanied by her avowed husband, George Henry Lewes, they embarked on a journey that lasted several months. The reasons for this expedition cannot be attributed to their professed affection for the Spanish language and folklore alone but also to medical aims. Be that as it may, the couple enjoyed their stay, lodging in the best places available whenever possible, visiting and admiring our most outstanding paintings, and indulging themselves in theatrical performances and live staging of dances. Lewes had already published *The Spanish Drama* in 1846, bespeaking his

enthusiasm for the Spanish scene, which Eliot shared. Not only was she aware of Lewes' work, but she had also instructed herself with Cervantes, among many others. Her fascination with the country and the Gypsy culture is evidenced in her letter to John Blackwood, where she writes:

We are both heartily rejoiced that we came to Spain. It was a great longing of mine, for, three years ago, I began to interest myself in Spanish history and literature, and have had a work lying by me, the subject of which is connected with Spain [...] it is a work very near my heart (CROSS, 1885: 7)

She is clearly alluding here to what will later become her narrative poem, *The Spanish Gypsy*. It was upon the impression that the painting *Annunciation* by Titian left on her during her visit to Venice in 1864, that she constructed the plot in her mind, where a young woman would encounter her predestined fate. She resolved to locate the action in the south of Spain, which she was so well acquainted with through her readings, as she was aware of the struggles of ethnic minorities there. In her own words: “the genuine Spanish life” (HAIGHT 1978: 341). This poem narrates the story of Fedalma, who, having been brought up by a noble Spanish family, discovers on the eve of her wedding, that she is the daughter of a Gypsy leader and that upon his death, she would become the Queen of the gypsies and would have to guide them to a promised land in exile. Her suitor is eager to abandon his faith in favour of his lover, although it proves to be fruitless, as they eventually resolve to pursue their duties, proving fate's determinism.

The first edition in Spanish follows the 1868 “Author's Edition from Advance Sheets”, published in the same year of the first edition. It includes all the corrections used by Eliot herself as well as the notes that the Victorian author had incorporated within her text explaining a variety of linguistic and cultural aspects referred to in the poem. Among her references there are explanations of *cactaceae* terms together with the derogatory word *marrano* used in order to refer to Jewish people in fifteenth-century Spain. Her literary notes include references to Dante Alighieri or to the Spanish King Alfonso the Wise and show her wide encyclopaedic knowledge and the sources used for the text. All of them are kept in this edition.

The main objective of this translation is to offer a comprehensible version to a twenty-first-century reader. Moreover, among its positive elements, it should be noted that the Spanish translation reflects the various registers present in the poem, namely Victorian literary language interspersed with Elizabethan English style, but also including many archaisms used by English Romantic authors. Another element of this translation is that it reflects the various idiolects existing in the text, for instance, the speech of aristocratic *hidalgos*, bartenders, and popular

bards. For that, the translator adapts not only the Spanish language to that of the period in which the text is set, but also to the particular sociolect of each group according to their ethnic extraction and to their respective position in the social scale.

It is distressing to conceive that such a devoted Hispanist would not get to see her poem, a work so close to her heart, reach a Spanish readership within her lifetime. Thus, it is with great enthusiasm that we can now cherish the first and unabridged translation of *The Spanish Gypsy*. It has taken more than a century for our country to be able to grasp the beauty with which Eliot depicted this epic story, together with our lands, our speech, our manners, and our lifestyle in the old days. Yet, her exquisite poetry tackles broader issues than those evidenced in her earlier works such as *Scenes of Clerical Life* or *Adam Bede*, proving her maturity and change in interest, moving her focus to questions such as gender, identity, and fate. The merging of Jews, Gypsies, and Moors against Spanish Catholic repression serves the author as a standpoint in her concerns of race and religious zealotry. How daintily would Eliot portray these historical events, that even when she considered that negative criticism might arise, it was quite the opposite, being quoted as “undoubtedly much the greatest poem of any wide scope and on a plan of any magnitude, which has ever proceeded from a woman” (HAIGHT, 1950: 1-9.)

The importance of this expected translation lies not only in the relevance that this author exerts over other instrumental Spanish literary figures or even on the depiction of our own country in the fifteenth century, but also in the need to grant our readership access to this masterpiece from one of the iconic realists in the Victorian era. George Eliot remarkably unfastened herself from her inherited values in pursuit of free-thinking ideals. In this work it is clear how Eliot was detached from her earlier religious persuasion and accepted a wider view of different faiths. Let us not forget that her period was framed by the Catholic issue in England, the Home Rule situation in nearby Ireland, the emergence of Bismarck’s Germany, and the severe economic depression of the 1870s. Yet, George Eliot blended graciously all these concerns providing her readers with much-expected realism. Alongside the pervasive uneasiness surrounding her, Eliot holds her convictions strongly, turning her poem into a beacon in defence of the female’s role within society, and in support of the social minorities, such as the Jews and Gypsies that were being persecuted and ostracised in the Spanish territory. The plot revolves around these questions, her key intention being to unambiguously declare her stance.

Great interest stems from issues such as the sense of place of minorities, which are still relevant nowadays. The delicate work of María Donapetry Camacho attests that the ideals behind Eliot's work are not only sound but also relevant in our contemporary world. Her concern for conveying the author's beliefs makes this edition even more pertinent. Whilst facing this challenging task is arduous, her exquisite skills come to fruition illustrating Eliot's passages, making them come alive before our own eyes. We vibrate watching Fedalma dance and feel for the Gypsies just like we do for the parted lovers. These protagonists leave aside their desires in favour of their sense of duty, incapable of breaking free from their heritage. Even though Silva attempts to reject his faith to support his bride thus showing free will, he eventually ends up stabbing her father and joining the Spanish cause. The idea that fate is unavoidable is ubiquitous, regardless of the magnitude of one's force.

The inclusion of certain factions within society's fabric remains unresolved, something Eliot expressly desired to bring to the fore. Hence, its pertinence is prominent for many reasons, including the feminist principles of the author, the heroic ideals instilled, and the place of minorities, to name but a few. These contingencies are still appropriate and in need of further discussion, inasmuch as they represent the plight of so many nowadays. Even within certain communities, further prejudices are inflicted upon women, who must endure discrimination in terms of race, or culture, while putting up with further affront for their sex. Our hero Fedalma has become part of our libraries and hearts forever more, coming alive from the talented writing of María Donapetry Camacho and the tenderness devoted by María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia. What if the cornerstone upon which we could erect an enlightened civilization could be made from those pieces we admire the most? Were we in the position to contribute to it, this brilliant translation should decidedly have its place. Without further ado, we can finally state that it was high time we welcomed this poem into our libraries.

## REFERENCES

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