



# THE SPANISH GOLDEN AGE SONNET

JOHN RUTHERFORD

IBERIAN AND LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

*The Spanish Golden Age Sonnet*

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*The Spanish Golden  
Age Sonnet*

JOHN RUTHERFORD



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*For Ricky, Abel and Olivia*

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# Series Editors' Foreword

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Over recent decades the traditional 'languages and literatures' model in Spanish departments in universities in the United Kingdom has been superseded by a contextual, interdisciplinary and 'area studies' approach to the study of the culture, history, society and politics of the Hispanic and Lusophone worlds – categories that extend far beyond the confines of the Iberian Peninsula, not only in Latin America but also to Spanish-speaking and Lusophone Africa.

In response to these dynamic trends in research priorities and curriculum development, this series is designed to present both disciplinary and interdisciplinary research within the general field of Iberian and Latin American Studies, particularly studies that explore all aspects of Cultural Production (inter alia literature, film, music, dance, sport) in Spanish, Portuguese, Basque, Catalan, Galician and indigenous languages of Latin America. The series also aims to publish research in the History and Politics of the Hispanic and Lusophone worlds, at the level of both the region and the nation-state, as well as on Cultural Studies that explore the shifting terrains of gender, sexual, racial and postcolonial identities in those same regions.

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# Preface

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Spain's Golden Age of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is so named because it was a period when the country flourished not only politically, becoming the dominant power in Europe, but also in the arts. The example of the great Italian writers inspired its literary culture with new life, and one of the Italian forms enthusiastically cultivated by Spanish poets was the sonnet, thousands of which were written in Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This book tells the fascinating story of the Spanish Golden Age sonnet by offering a representative selection of over a hundred of the best examples, together with verse translations and commentaries. Many of these sonnets, particularly the canonical ones, have already been translated into English, some of them several times. Most such translations are of two types. One prioritises content, and aims to be as semantically accurate as possible; these translations are in prose or in free or blank verse that approximates to a greater or lesser extent to sonnet form. The other type prioritises form, translating the content with great freedom in order to make it fit into the sonnet's scheme of rhyme and rhythm, and the result is more properly called a version or a paraphrase than a translation. My aim has been to prioritise neither and to reproduce both, writing accurate translations that bring the originals to life in modern English as true sonnets, poems in their own right.

Any selection is bound to be in large measure arbitrary. I have included all the famous sonnets by the most important poets of the period, as well as some of their less well-known pieces that are also

worthy of attention. With great regret, I have had to omit many good sonneteers and excellent sonnets. I have put the selected poets in chronological order of their dates of birth, and within each section I have followed the ordering of their sonnets that is used in the first editions. For each sonnet I have provided a verse translation and a commentary that, for reasons of space, attempts to be helpfully suggestive rather than exhaustive. For each poet there is a brief summary of life and works.

It is normal practice to modernise old texts for presentation to today's readers, because their very different original punctuation and spelling would cause unnecessary and unhelpful problems of comprehension. Editors modernise in different ways; so, for the sake of consistency, I have gone back to the early editions and done my own editing. I have, however, left unchanged the Marquis of Santillana's sonnet (page 18) and the sonnet by Cervantes that he attributes to Solisdán (page 110), the former to demonstrate the extent of any modern editor's necessary interventions and the latter because its comicality is based on its archaisms. In the typographical presentation of sonnets there are also different traditions, different combinations of indentation and spaces, usually the work of editors rather than of poets; and here, too, consistency is desirable in a volume like this. Presenting a sonnet as one compact unit uninterrupted by indentation or spacing between lines gives the best visual sense of its tightness and strength, and this is what I have done. For the same reason I do not use capital letters at the beginnings of lines unless the normal rules of orthography require them.

For all the advice and encouragement I have received from my family and my friends I am deeply grateful. It has been a great pleasure to work with the University of Wales Press, and I am indebted to (in order of intervention) Sarah Lewis, Duncan Wheeler, Henry Maas and Dafydd Jones for their kindness and efficiency.

# Introduction

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## The sonnet

The sonnet, a celebration of the intricate patterns that rhyme and rhythm can create, developed in Italy in the first half of the thirteenth century, when elegant Gothic tracery was supplanting Romanesque stolidity. It emerged as a love poem written in hendecasyllables, with an unusual asymmetric form, an octave followed by a sestet, and with a change in thought and rhyme dividing the two. The new departure at the beginning of the ninth line, the sonnet's pivotal point, is called the *volta*, the turn. Like that of another lovely little artefact, the violin, the sonnet's structure has hardly changed in the centuries since its invention. The octave's rhyme-scheme was at first ABABABAB, but in the second half of the thirteenth century an ABBAABBA rhyme-scheme was adopted, and it became the standard one, used by all the major Italian sonneteers such as Dante Alighieri (*c.* 1265–1321), Francesco Petrarca, 'Petrarch' (1304–74) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75). The sestet often consists of two tercets rhyming CDECDE, although other threefold rhyme-schemes are allowed so long as no contiguous lines rhyme with each other. CDCDCD sometimes occurs, too. These rhyming patterns were inherited by the Spanish sonneteers.

Italian hendecasyllables originally had both duple and triple rhythms (the latter with stresses on the fourth, seventh and tenth syllables), but Petrarch brought more regularity to them, imposing a predominantly duple rhythm with most stresses falling on even-numbered syllables. (In this account, to avoid tiresome repetition, I use the word 'stress' to indicate a strong stress: to divide Spanish syllables into 'stressed' and 'unstressed' ones is a simplification that is helpful but misleading, because in reality they have various



degrees of stress.) The Petrarchan hendecasyllable, with a rhythm like that of the English iambic pentameter, was the line used in Spanish Golden Age sonnets. The similarities between the stress-patterns of these two romance languages smoothed the transition from Italian to Spanish. Various methods have been used to analyse the rhythms of the Spanish hendecasyllable, and I use here a pared-down version of the one that accounts for the facts in the simplest way. The hendecasyllable's eleven syllables include a final unstressed one, because a large majority of Spanish and Italian words are stressed on their penultimate syllable. Every hendecasyllable therefore has a stress on its tenth syllable, as does every iambic pentameter. In addition, it must have a stress either on its sixth syllable or on its fourth and eighth syllables, a rule making for a duple rhythm in the second half of the line, since adjacent syllables are not normally stressed. There is more scope for rhythmic variation in the first half of the Spanish hendecasyllable. One of its first three syllables is usually stressed. Most frequently the second syllable carries this stress, giving a duple rhythm throughout the line, stressed on syllables 2, 4, 8 and 10, on 2, 6 and 10, on 2, 4, 6 and 10, or on 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10. The rhythmic differences between these four variations are not great, because when two stressed syllables are separated by three syllables, a secondary stress falls on the central one. These Spanish hendecasyllables stressed on the second syllable have come to be known as heroic hendecasyllables, because their regular, marching rhythm makes them appropriate for noble subjects. Less frequent are hendecasyllables stressed on the first syllable or on the third. The former (1, 4, 6, 10, or 1, 4, 8, 10, or 1, 4, 6, 8, 10, with the third syllable sometimes stressed instead of the fourth) are known as emphatic hendecasyllables, for an obvious reason. The latter (3, 6, 8, 10, or 3, 6, 10) are called melodic hendecasyllables, because of the lilting effect of the shift from the triple rhythm in the first half of the line to the duple rhythm in the second half. This is the principal difference between the hendecasyllable and its English near-equivalent, the iambic pentameter, in which most English sonnets are written, because a stress on the third syllable is not normally permitted in the latter. Spanish allows more rhythmic variety, which can also be achieved by not infrequent variations to the above patterns caused by stresses that fall on adjacent syllables.

The principles for counting syllables and locating stresses within a line of Spanish verse are straightforward. A Spanish word of two

syllables or more that ends in a vowel, 'n' or 's' is stressed on its penultimate syllable, and a word ending in any other consonant is stressed on its last syllable, unless a written stress indicates otherwise. When two vowels occur together within a word they form a diphthong and therefore one syllable if either or both of the weak vowels, 'i' and 'u', are involved, unless a written stress indicates otherwise; if only the strong vowels, 'a', 'e' and 'o' are involved, they do not diphthongise, and form two syllables. Word-divisions are not necessarily syllable-divisions, nor are divisions between phrases and even sentences, because when two vowels occur together within a line, one at the end of a word and the other at the beginning of the next word, they form one syllable, regardless of whether weak vowels are involved, and even if a punctuation mark intervenes between them (the latter fact demonstrates that, in Spanish poetry, metre has priority over syntax). The letter 'h', not being pronounced, is ignored, except in poetry of the early sixteenth century, when it sometimes represents an aspirate sound. The letter 'y' counts as a consonant when between vowels or at the end of a word, and as a vowel otherwise. Minor words like articles, prepositions and most conjunctions do not have stresses, which fall on semantically strong words like nouns (including emphatic pronouns), verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Poetic licence allows a writer occasionally to contravene any of these principles. The following lines from Sonnet XXXVII by Garcilaso de la Vega illustrate all this. Strokes mark syllable-divisions, and bold letters indicate stressed syllables:

A/**ho**/ra /**suel**/ta el /**llan**/to al /**cie**/  
 lo a/**bier**/to, / (stressed 2 4 6 8 10: heroic)  
 o/ra /**va**/ras/tre/**an**/do /por /la /**vi**/a; / (stressed 1 3 6 10: emphatic)  
 ca/**mi**/na, /**vuel**/ve, /**pa**/ra, y /to/da/**vi**/a / (stressed 2 4 6 10: heroic)  
 que/**da**/ba /des/ma/**ya**/do /co/mo /  
**muer**/to. / (stressed 2 6 10: heroic)

Petrarch's sonnets are about his love for Laura, but other Italian poets found the form to be suitable for more varied subject matter. In the Spanish Golden Age, love continued to be an important sonnet subject, but poets wrote a great variety of other kinds, such as moral, philosophical, religious, encomiastic, necrological, burlesque and even pornographic. In the many centuries that have elapsed since their invention, sonnets have never stopped being written, in vast numbers and in all the European languages. Their

extraordinary versatility and enduring popularity derive from the fact that they are lovely miniatures in words. The Petrarchan sonnet's key structural feature is its curious asymmetrical division between the octave and the sestet, which demands a change of focus and perspective at the volta. This difference in length between the two parts of a Petrarchan sonnet is essential, because it calls for a corresponding difference in content. The octave opens the subject, the sestet takes a little less time to close it, a slight quickening of pace that encourages the closure to be appropriately forceful. This bipartite scheme offers all sorts of interesting practical possibilities, such as observation and conclusion, question and answer, argument and counter-argument, crescendo and decrescendo, problem and solution, event and consequences, action and reaction; and a Spanish speciality, subordinate clause and main clause. In all sonnets the relationship between metre and syntax is important. Sometimes these two coexisting structures coincide and work together, with end-stopped lines and an overall feeling of calm and stasis; and sometimes they clash and work against each other, with enjambement, sentences ending within lines, and a sense of drama and dynamism, like syncopation in music. Within the tiny, tightly defined space of the sonnet, infinite variation and great concentration of meaning are possible. The sonnet's strict formal constraints have proved to be an inexhaustible stimulator of creativity, providing a practical contradiction of one of the principal arguments in favour of free verse.

### **The historical background**

What we now call Spain and Portugal was in the early Middle Ages a series of separate Christian kingdoms stretched across the north of the Iberian peninsula, with the Moors, who had invaded it in the eighth century, occupying a progressively smaller part of the south as the Christian Reconquest advanced. By the beginning of the sixteenth century Spain was a unified country, after the marriage of Isabella I of Castile (1451–1504) and Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452–1516) in 1469 and the taking of Granada, the last part of Spain in Moorish hands, in 1492. This was also the year in which Spanish Jews were forced either to convert to Christianity or to go into exile (or to maintain their faith clandestinely). Spain was at

peace after a long period of unrest. The kingdom of Castile, having fanned out to the east, south and west from its original position in the centre of the north coast of the Peninsula, had established its hegemony in political, cultural and linguistic matters. This internal consolidation made Spain ready for external expansion into Italy, Africa and America. The close political relationship with Italy brought a heightened perception of this country's cultural superiority, which in turn gave rise to the sense that Spain's literary achievements were lagging behind its military and political achievements. The initiator of the necessary poetic revolution, Garcilaso de la Vega, commented in 1534, in his preface to Juan Boscán's translation of Castiglione's *Il Libro del Cortegiano*: 'apenas ha nadie escrito en nuestra lengua sino lo que se pudiera muy bien escusar' (hardly anybody has written anything in our language except that which we could very well do without). Spain reached its height of power in the sixteenth century, when it was dominant in Europe, and yet this was not when its literary production reached its zenith, despite Garcilaso de la Vega's great achievements. Political decline started in the late sixteenth century and accelerated throughout the seventeenth century, and this was the period that saw a splendid flowering of Spanish literature. Economic and political decay gave rise to spiritual and moral turmoil and to wonderful writing, for failure more than triumph, particularly evident failure immediately after spectacular triumph, encourages the questioning for which literature is well adapted.

Literature is believed to flourish in an atmosphere of freedom, and yet the Roman Catholic Church exercised control of thought throughout Spain's Golden Age. The Inquisition was active, and from the middle of the sixteenth century, following the deliberations of the Council of Trent (1545–63), the Counter-Reformation – the Roman Catholic response to the threat offered by Protestantism – imposed further control. The first *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, a list of forbidden books, was issued in 1557, and it was revised at intervals. The Jesuits, members of the Society of Jesus, founded in 1534 by the Basque nobleman Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), were energetic, especially in education. Intellectual control and censorship inhibit artistic production, but they encourage subtle writing and reading.

### The literary background

Galician, spoken in the north-western part of the Iberian peninsula, was the language in which most lyric verse was written by both Galicians and poets from other parts of Spain until the emergence in the fifteenth century of a large body of poetry written in the now dominant language, Castilian, which was beginning to be called 'Spanish'. This poetry was published in anthologies known as *cancioneros* (song-books). It depicted a version of courtly love in which the male lover, the poet, renders constant and faithful service to a beautiful but cruel lady who never rewards him. There is no escape from this love, and it gives rise to a suffering that is like a living death, accepted and even welcomed by the poet, who believes that it is better to love and to suffer than not to love. All this is often expressed in religious terms, for courtly love is a cult of suffering in which the man sees himself as a martyr and his lady as a goddess. The *cancioneros* included some good poetry, but it had evident limitations. It worked within very narrow conventions and between a few much-repeated abstractions. There was little room in it for variety, and the development of any individual poem was predictable. The love it depicted was idealised and disembodied, as if it existed in a vacuum: the obsessive narcissistic introspection that characterises such poetry can give rise to something like claustrophobia in the modern reader. It was principally written in octosyllabic lines, which impose a certain rhythmic monotony. Longer lines were available to fifteenth-century Spanish poets in the *copla de arte mayor* (verse of higher art), used principally, however, for didactic writing. These were lines of usually eleven or twelve syllables divided into two hemistichs with two stresses in each, giving the repetitive, indeed pounding triple rhythm of the amphibrach (a poetic foot in which a stressed syllable is preceded and followed by an unstressed one). Both the positive and the negative qualities of fifteenth-century Spanish verse are abundantly displayed in the *Cancionero general* of 1511. It shows that the lyric tradition of the previous century had exhausted its limited resources and that in those rapidly changing times Spanish poetry was in urgent need of renewal.

In such crises help has to come from abroad, and the eyes of some Spanish poets turned towards Italy, Europe's cultural leader, with which Spain was developing close political relationships.



Petrarch was universally admired. A few fifteenth-century Spanish poets, notably the Marquis of Santillana (1398–1458), had already imitated the Italian sonnet, but with little success, principally because they did not reproduce Petrarch's rhythms, so different from the Spanish ones. Their efforts showed, however, that the three extra syllables provided by the Italian hendecasyllable give precious space for the expansion of both content and rhythm, especially when rhythm is enriched by enjambement. Furthermore, Petrarch's introduction into the hendecasyllable of a rhythm that is predominantly binary but that allows occasional variation offers an attractive combination of repetition and variety, patterning and surprise, sameness and difference, fundamental to all art. The Spanish long line of the *copla de arte mayor* did not offer serious competition, because it was really two short lines joined together, and it contained excessive rhythmic repetition, patterning and sameness, and too little variety, surprise or difference.

The first Spaniards to master the new Italian rhythms were the early sixteenth-century poets and close friends Juan Boscán (c.1490–1542) and Garcilaso de la Vega (1503–36). Their mission to write Spain out of the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance met with resistance at the beginning, some prompted by budding Spanish nationalism, some for poetic reasons. As Boscán explains in his preface to Book II of his collected works, some readers complained that 'en las trobas desta arte las consonantes no andaban tan descubiertas, ni sonaban tanto, como en las castellanas' (in poetry of this sort the rhymes did not stand out so well nor did they sound as clearly as in the Castilian sort). The longer lines of the new Italianate poetry stopped Spanish readers or listeners from perceiving the rhymes, and it sounded to them like prose. In fifteenth-century Spanish octosyllables, rhymes are never more than twenty-three syllables apart, and are usually closer than that, whereas in Petrarchan sonnets thirty-two syllables separate some of the rhymes in the octave. In the longer lines of the *copla de arte mayor* the division of each line into two hemistichs and the pounding rhythms make the rhymes all too unmissable. The Spanish ear had to acquire greater refinement in the perception of rhymes. This gradually happened, as Garcilaso's importance came to be recognised. Other Spanish poets followed Garcilaso's example, although some time elapsed before his cultivation of the Petrarchan sonnet was widely emulated. Garcilaso's canonisation was confirmed in

1580 when the great scholar and literary critic Fernando de Herrera (1534–97) published an edition of his poetry with extensive erudite commentaries. Herrera himself was the first major Spanish sonneteer after Garcilaso.

Two influences dominated the content of sixteenth-century Spanish lyric poetry: enduring medieval courtly ideas of love on the one hand, and on the other a philosophy that was new, although rooted in the remote past, and that challenged those medieval ideas: Neoplatonism.

The medieval ideas came from two directions: from Spain itself, in the continuing influence of the *cancioneros*, and from Italy, especially in the ubiquitous and massive presence of Petrarch. Thus the old ideal of courtly love survived well into the Renaissance and even later, as did many other medieval ways of thinking. Petrarch continued to provide much of the poetic language of love with his concept of the perfect woman, every aspect of whose beauty is superior to its equivalent in the world of nature: her hair is more brilliant than gold, her eyes are brighter than the sun, her lips are redder than rubies, and so on. From Petrarch, too, came the symbols of fire for the poet's passion and ice for the woman's disdainful rejection. There were endless variations on these and many other Petrarchan commonplaces in sixteenth-century and even in seventeenth-century Spanish poetry.

The new philosophy, Neoplatonism, entered Spain through two Italian books: *Il Libro del Cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*, published in 1528) by Baldassare Castiglione (1478–1529) and *Dialoghi d'amore* (*Dialogues of Love*, published in 1535, although written and circulating in manuscript much earlier) by Leone Ebreo (c.1465–c.1523). Garcilaso persuaded his friend Boscán to write a Spanish translation of the former, which was published in 1534; and Spanish translations of Ebreo's book were published in 1568, 1582 and 1590. Many Spaniards, however, particularly poets, did not need a translation from Italian. Neoplatonism takes from courtly love the idealisation of woman, excluded from Plato's theory of love, and teaches that through woman's beauty man can progress from the physical plane up to the intellectual and spiritual planes. Beauty, then, is the more perfect the more it is removed from matter, and perfect love is the non-material union of minds, wills and souls. Physical beauty is a reflection of spiritual beauty, and the contemplation of physical beauty leads to the contemplation of God. The

physical union of lovers can be surpassed and transcended in the union of their souls, which leads in turn to union with God. There is, then, a natural ascent from the human to the divine. It was inevitable that the *Dialoghi d'amor* should be placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, but that did little to impede the circulation of its ideas.

Another Italian poet who was influential in sixteenth-century Spain was Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), with his conviction that the chief aim of poets should be to imitate Greek and Latin models. This advice was widely followed, and it causes grave problems for today's readers and critics, because most of us are much less well read in the classics than educated Spaniards of the Golden Age.

Throughout the Renaissance of the sixteenth century, and despite the invention of printing, Spanish poetry continued to circulate principally in manuscript. It was usually not published in book form until after the poet's death. Poetry was regarded as a dilettante activity, and poems were written to be shared among friends.

The term that has proved most useful to cover the literary period between the decline of the Renaissance at the end of the sixteenth century and the coming of the Enlightenment at the beginning of the eighteenth century is 'Baroque'. It is a slippery and problematic term borrowed from art history, but it can broadly be characterised as a new appreciation of the value of complexity and difficulty, stretching readers' powers of comprehension and confining literature to the educated classes. Two key words in Spanish Baroque are *ingenio* and *agudeza*, both of which refer to acuity, the mental sharpness needed to spot and make sense of remote connections. In practice, though, Spanish literary Baroque meant a combination of *conceptismo* and *culteranismo*.

*Conceptismo* is the cultivation of the conceit, the extreme metaphor. A metaphor states that one object is another object because they have some quality in common. A conceit defies logic even more radically by equating two objects that seem to have nothing in common. Conceits are, then, catachresis, violent metaphor. They produce a double shock in the reader: first, with an ostensibly absurd statement, and then with the realisation that it is justified.

*Culteranismo* is the widespread introduction into Spanish poetry of words, grammatical constructions and allusions from classical languages and cultures. It resulted in an abundance of neologisms and much extreme hyperbaton, giving rise to a self-consciously

artificial diction that was intended to be as far removed as possible from everyday discourse, and hence to exclude the vulgar masses from the lofty realms of literature. Its many classical allusions are often made in an indirect way without naming the characters involved, which presupposes highly educated and intelligent readers with a detailed knowledge of the Latin and Greek cultures.

*Conceptismo* and *culteranismo* combined to bring about a massive enrichment of the expressive power of the Spanish language. They have often been regarded as opposing and mutually exclusive movements, because Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645) was the leading exponent of *conceptismo*, as Luis de Góngora (1561–1627) was of *culteranismo*; and these men were bitter enemies. The word *culterano* was an attack mounted on Góngora from the Quevedo camp, being a witty fusion of *culto* (learned) and *luterano* (Lutheran): Góngora and his followers, it implies, took their Latinisation of poetry to such absurd extremes that they were wicked heretics of literature. In fact, though, the two movements complemented each other, and there are many classical elements in Quevedo's poetry and many conceits in Góngora's.

By the end of the sixteenth century the optimistic and perhaps ingenuous idealism of Neoplatonism was no longer tenable, and it gave way as the dominant philosophy among Spanish intellectuals to the grim pessimism of neo-Stoicism. The general perception that Spain was in decline no doubt contributed to this development, but it is not a complete explanation, since neo-Stoicism was also fashionable in other European countries that were not declining. That one of the leading Roman Stoic philosophers, Seneca, was born in the Iberian peninsula also facilitated its acceptance in Spain. Neo-Stoicism was an attempt, particularly associated with the Belgian humanist Justus Lipsius (1547–1606), to reconcile classical Stoicism with Christianity. The two systems of belief were in important ways so far apart, however, that no complete reconciliation was possible. The Stoics believed, for example, that the rational man could achieve autarky, total self-sufficiency – in which case humanity would have no need of the divine grace that is central to Christian teaching. In practice, though, Spanish neo-Stoicism insisted on the prime importance of *desengaño*, undeception, the unremitting application of cold reason to distinguish between the pleasant appearances of things and people in this wicked world and the ugly realities underlying them. By not being misled by the feelings and

the passions, one can order one's daily life so that it is a preparation for a good death, according to neo-Stoic philosophy.

The seventeenth century also saw the emergence in Spain of the professional writer, a person who perhaps earned a living with the pen and certainly defined him- or herself as a writer. For most of the previous century, *sprezzatura*, a term coined by Castiglione to refer to the aristocratic cultivation of an appearance of effortless superiority, had defined dominant attitudes, and poets had seen, or at least presented, themselves as first courtiers, or soldiers, or priests, for example, and then as dilettante poets. As a consequence of this change in attitude, the early seventeenth century was a time of bitter professional and personal rivalry and hostility between writers.

The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the Romanticism of the nineteenth century and the many literary movements of the twentieth century have distanced our sensibility from that of the Spanish Golden Age, and they interfere with our understanding and appreciation of its achievements. The powerful and enduring influence of Romanticism made many twentieth-century critics assume that poetry must relate personal experience, and blinded them to the fact that it is more fiction than autobiography, often written not for self-expression but for the construction of a linguistic artefact. This is particularly true of the Spanish Golden Age, when poetry was shaped by rearranging existing material much more than by creating new material. To call its images or expressions 'conventional' or 'commonplaces' is not, therefore, an adverse criticism. Even in poems that do have a direct connection with the poet's life, such as Garcilaso de la Vega's sonnets about his dead brother and about his war wounds, the poet could be expressing not so much his own thoughts and feelings as what the cultural conventions of the time or the literary traditions that he was following inclined him to express. It follows that when, in the commentaries, I refer for the sake of convenience and brevity to 'the poet' or 'Garcilaso', 'Quevedo' and so on, I mean the poetic, fictional voice, not the real person.

Often the material remodelled by Golden Age poets is not so much individual works (the 'sources' for which so many literary critics have searched) as collations of motifs accumulated by many successive poets. The keenest tools used in this craftsmanship were versification, already discussed, rhetoric and poetic logic. Rhetoric



has acquired in modern discourse negative connotations, and it is seen as a cover for superficiality of thought; but Golden Age writers and readers suffered from no such prejudice, and regarded rhetoric as the organisation of language for maximal eloquence and persuasive effect. The development of an argument is central to many Golden Age sonnets, but philosophical logic uses dry, repetitive language in the interest of clarity and precision, and such language is unsuitable for poetry. In Golden Age poetry, therefore, we often find logic that in philosophical terms is unacceptable, and that could be called poetic or rhetorical logic, designed not to prove but to persuade. So to say that the logic of a poem is defective is not to say that this is a poetic defect. Metaphor, which is radically illogical, is the trope at the heart of poetry. It is not the job of a poem to prove anything.

### **Translation**

Conventional wisdom insists that translators of sonnets have to choose between reproducing form and reproducing content, that simultaneous accuracy in both areas is impossible. Accuracy in translation is always relative, because the lack of isomorphism between languages ensures that no translation can repeat all the original's meanings and nuances. Yet the losses in semantic accuracy of a verse translation need only be a little greater than those of a prose translation, and they are amply counterbalanced by the huge gains in rhythmic accuracy and in musicality. This impossibility of total accuracy has led to the common belief that every translation is doomed to inferiority. Phrases like 'lost in translation', 'traduttore traditore', 'a pale shadow of the original', and 'the reverse of a tapestry', Don Quixote's contribution, are endlessly repeated, yet I know of no platitude that is favourable to translation. That imperfection is inevitable in translation is true, but it is no truer of translation than of any other serious and worthwhile human activity; and it is both strange and unfortunate that translation has been singled out in this way. We do not resign ourselves to being abject failures in communicating with each other or in searching for the truth or in loving another person just because perfection in these activities is impossible. We strive to come as close as we can to the impossible goal. Yet many translators have

been persuaded to accept the self-fulfilling prophecy that their work is doomed to inferiority.

In the translations in this book there is, though, one area of loss, and this is the extreme hyperbaton in Góngora's poetry. It occurs, fortunately, less often in his sonnets than in his other poems. A Latin-derived language like Spanish allows Latinate syntax much more readily than a language not derived from Latin, such as English with its much less flexible word order. Góngora's syntactical disruptions, when reproduced in English, look like the clumsy manipulation to convey rhyme-words to the end of lines of which many verse translators are guilty. This, then, is a feature of Góngora's poetry that cannot be well reproduced in English. The problem is particularly acute in Góngora's Sonnet LIV (page 122), where the most that the English language allowed me to do was to recapture some of the linguistic compression of the original with mild hyperbaton and the omission of definite articles.

But we do not have to bewail all the differences between originals and translations, or regard them as losses. We can celebrate some of them as new insights. The 'pale shadow' view of literary translation depends on the untenable Romantic notion that the original work is a perfect creation of an inspired genius. If, however, we think of the original work as the best that a fallible human being could manage in circumstances that were inevitably trammelled by linguistic, cultural and personal limitations, our attitude to literary translation will be different.

For one thing, the target language must have expressive possibilities not available in the source language (the converse is also true, of course, as we have seen when considering Góngora's hyperbaton). The English language's meaning-packed synthetic verbs are one example. To state in Spanish that a person is walking slowly one has to use a general verb such as *andar* or *caminar* together with a suitable adverbial expression. But in English we can choose between a very large number of verbs that define, in one or two syllables and with eloquent precision, a multitude of different ways of walking slowly: stroll, saunter, shuffle, trudge, traipse, waddle, stagger, toddle, plod, clump, stomp, tramp ... and many more. A literary translator can exploit such strengths of the English language and try to avoid its weaknesses. The following brief illustrative comments on my own practice in this volume are offered not as self-praise but as praise of the English language. A literal translation of

the fourth line of Garcilaso de la Vega's Sonnet XXIX (page 58) would have been feeble, because of its imprecision and abstraction. English accepts such abstraction much less readily than Spanish; so a literal translation of this line would not have been a faithful translation. The English language allowed me to give a more dynamic brief description of a storm at sea than the Spanish language allowed Garcilaso to give, because a vague adverbial phrase was all that Spanish made available to him, but his translator had an array of vigorous verbs at his disposal. Sound effects in the ascending triad of verbs that emerged make them even more immediate and powerful, with one change at each step: 'see...d, sur...d, chur...d', which can be read as mimetic of the rolling waves. Sometimes such phonetic patterns appear spontaneously, gifts of the English language that provide the translator with useful alliterations, for example, as in the first line of Garcilaso's Sonnet VI (page 36), the last line of his Sonnet XXXVIII (page 68), line 8 of Quevedo's Sonnet IV, I, xli (page 182) and line 12 of his Sonnet IV, II, xlv (page 192). Such serendipity is essential in literary translation; the trick is to be in a constant state of readiness to receive it and make the most of it when it occurs. Many consider that it is literary heresy to suggest that a translation can improve on the original, but heresy can be productive, as the *culterano* poets demonstrated. Herrera comments that in line 12 of Garcilaso's Sonnet IV (page 34) the demands of rhyme made the poet place the least important of the three nouns at the end of the line, where it receives inappropriate emphasis. The English language allowed me to place the three nouns in an ascending order of which I hope Herrera would have approved.

Not only the language but also the poetic culture into which a poem is translated will have strengths not available in the source poetic culture. One of the options available to the English sonneteer is the Shakespearean sonnet with its final couplet, which offers many possibilities for a powerful ending. The Golden Age Spanish sonnet, however, is Petrarchan, and a final couplet is not allowed. The energy of the last line of Garcilaso's Sonnet IV (page 34) is intensified by the concluding couplet that the translator, but not the first author, was able to write. Something similar could be said about the last two lines of the first rose sonnet (page 236) by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–95), and about many other final couplets in this collection.

It might even be that the translator has certain personal qualities or resources not available to the original writer. Doggedness can achieve what eludes brilliance. At all events, whereas the first author's attention is divided between content and language, all the translator's creative powers are concentrated on the latter. The literary translator can aspire not to produce the reverse of a tapestry but to weave another tapestry that, presenting the same subject from a slightly different perspective, enhances the viewer's appreciation of the original. Much can be found and gained in translation, as well as lost.

The form of the Petrarchan sonnet can give rise, though, to serious losses in translation. It has just two rhymes in the octave, which poses grave problems for English sonneteers, because it is much more difficult to rhyme in English than in Spanish or Italian. The Spanish language has five vowel phonemes, whereas English has twenty. There are also more consonant-clusters in English, and more consonants can occur at the ends of words. Thus there are many more, and therefore on the whole much smaller, families of rhyming words in English than in Spanish. Many English words do not rhyme with any other. The word at the heart of all lyric poetry, 'love', only rhymes with 'dove', 'glove', 'above' and 'shove', which is normally excluded by considerations of tone and linguistic register; yet many hundreds of words rhyme with its Spanish equivalent, *amor*. This is why the Shakespearean sonnet, rhyming ABABCDCEFEFGG, has been so successful in English: the change of rhyme-scheme in the second quatrain makes all the difference. Many English sonnets have, then, instead of an octave and a sestet, three quatrains and a couplet.

In my translations I have used iambic pentameters and three sonnet structures: Petrarchan, Shakespearean, and a hybrid of the two that has a Shakespearean octave and a Petrarchan sestet. It is possible, of course, to write Petrarchan sonnets in English, despite this language's rhyming difficulties, and very many have been written. But the constraints that this imposes on an English translation, as opposed to an English original, are usually excessive, because the first poet can alter content to facilitate rhymes and can even allow rhymes to lead content, whereas these options are not available to the translator. Consequently, English translations into Petrarchan sonnet form usually involve either extensive alteration of content or ugly distortion of syntax with the sole and sadly