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Appropriating KING LEAR in Early Twentieth Century Spain

Abstract: *The reception of Shakespeare in Spain can be considered to begin in 1772 with the performance of Hamleto, King of Denmark, a translation of Shakesperean descent allegedly written by Ramón de la Cruz. From that year onwards, a number of Spanish playwrights, novelists and poets have shown a keen interest in translating the Bard's plays. From the Hamlet translation published in 1798 by Leandro Fernández de Moratín to the Hamlet play translated by post-war playwright Antonio Buero Vallejo in 1960, a wide range of Shakespearean plays have captivated the Spanish imagination, with Hamlet being the undisputed favourite. It is therefore intriguing that the only translation Nobel Prize winner Jacinto Benavente wrote was that of King Lear- a play that, despite the place it has in the Shakesperean canon, was hardly known to Spanish audiences throughout the 19th century. King Lear never enjoyed the popularity of Hamlet, Othello, Romeo and Juliet and Macbeth, and few Spanish readers and theatre goers had actually heard about it by the turn of the 20th century in Spain. The aim of this article is to determine the reasons that lead Jacinto Benavente to write this translation. In the first part of this research, I will study the influence of Shakespeare in Benavente's works. In the second, I will analyse a number of examples from his translation in order to establish its defining features and the place King Lear has in Benavente's literary production.*

Key words: Translation, Spain, Shakespeare, King Lear, Benavente.

1. Shakespeare and Benavente



Figure 1. Cervantes, Benavente and Shakespeare

“Read Shakespeare after Cervantes”. Such a statement from Benavente is striking if we bear in mind Shakespeare’s influence in his works is stronger than that of Cervantes. In the above picture, the Spanish playwright is flanked between Shakespeare and Cervantes. The shadows of the three writers are those of his most important literary creations: left to right, Don Quixote, Crispín from *Los intereses creados* [*The bonds of Interest*] and Hamlet. Not only did Benavente consider Cervantes superior to Shakespeare, but he also praised other Spanish playwrights such as Calderón de la Barca and Lope de Vega over the Bard. Benavente considered Calderón’s *La vida es sueño* [*Life is a Dream*] as “superior to all Shakespearean plays” and he also believed Lope de Vega to be “far better than Shakespeare, Corneille, Racine and Molière”. As he clearly stated:

In the field of tragedies, many of our plays stand comparison with the best that Shakespeare wrote, and in the field of comedies, never did the English author ever reach the wit, humour and refinement of our Spanish writers (Benavente 1958:608-609) ¹.

It is not my wish to contradict Jacinto Benavente, but this study will qualify his statement. As we shall see, for all the praise he dedicated to the Spanish writers, Benavente turned to Shakespeare for inspiration throughout his dramatic career.

The first stage of Benavente’s works is clearly defined by a series of plays which showed the playwright’s fascination with modernist and symbolic performances. Collected under the title *Teatro fantástico* (1892) [Fantastic Theatre], Benavente’s early plays can be considered a milestone in early 20th century Spain. As Huerta Calvo and Peral Vega highlight:

With his *Teatro fantástico*, Benavente leads the way to modernist theatre in Spain. Moving away from realism and situating himself in a subjective perspective, Benavente writes a truly poetic theatre, far more poetic than the plays that Villaespesa, Marquina or the Machado Brothers would later pen (Huerta Calvo and Peral Vega, 2000:38) ².

Teatro fantástico includes four short plays: *Amor de artista*, *Los favoritos*, *El encanto de una hora* and *Cuento de primavera*. Of these, *Los favoritos* [The Favourites] recreates an episode from *Much Ado about nothing*, and it was first staged in Seville the 28th December 1892. Shakespearean characters, plots and situations not only appear in this short play, but also in many other of Benavente’s plays, such as *El bufón de Hamlet* [Hamlet’s Fool] *La historia de Otelo* [Othello’s Story] *Titania* [Titania] and *Cuento de amor* [A Love Tale]. The latter was based on *Twelfth Night* and staged at the beginning of 1899. The key feature all

¹ “En lo trágico hay obras de nuestros autores que en nada desmerecen de las grandes tragedias de Shakespeare, y en lo cómico no llegó nunca el autor inglés a la riqueza de invención, a la gracia, a la finura de nuestros autores” (My translation).

² Con su *Teatro fantástico*, Benavente abre las puertas del teatro modernista en España. Alejándose del realismo y colocándose en un punto de vista meramente subjetivo, consigue levantar un teatro en verdad poético, mucho más poético que el teatro en verso que habrían de cultivar Villaespesa, Marquina o los hermanos Machado (My translation).

these plays have in common is a remarkable symbolist content, and that can be explained due to Benavente's spirit of theatrical renewal. When at the end of the 19th century, Spanish plays were burdened with worn out formulas and stereotyped characters, Benavente took a stand against the prevailing and agonising stage tradition in Spain and fostered a new theatricalization, a process that meant going back to the true origins of drama, that is, to pantomime and farce. In order to enrich the stale imagination of an equally stale Spanish audience, Benavente turned to ancient forms of Greek theatre, but also to Shakespeare: The recreation of the fantastic world in *A Midsummer's Nights Dream*, the adaptation of the witty dialogues of *Much Ado About Nothing* and the games of sexual ambiguity of *Twelfth Night* served his renewal purpose, and channelled his symbolist tendencies. Benavente can then be said to have resorted to Shakespeare in an attempt to regenerate Spain's exhausted national theatre, which revived in many plays thanks to the Bard's influence.

However, once his symbolist and modernist interests had been thoroughly explored, Benavente started to write the kind of plays he had rebelled against at the beginning of his career, that is, conventional plays that adhered to the traditions and conventions of the late 19th century- and which had a very high commercial success. Benavente thus moved away from the symbolist theatre that had marked the beginning of his career and adopted a realist trend to which his high comedies and rural dramas belong. The playwright defended himself against the critics' attacks claiming that there were too many impositions and commercial limits to modern playwriting; that the stage was lacking appropriate funding and that the audience demanded shows that suited their jaded taste. Benavente justified his new plays in the following way:

Our audience likes prairies, even the smallest hill deters our spectators from advancing: our audience wants little square gardens where they may walk with little effort [...] It's not a sense of reality what the Spanish spectators demand: they demand their reality, their thought and their idea of life, which is not rich or wide enough to understand great things (Benavente: s.a:668)³

This being so, and although Benavente's works are too varied for formal classifications, a chronological categorization may be established regarding two clearly opposed tendencies: a first stage characterised by symbolist ideas and trends, where *Teatro Fantástico* would be included; and a second mature stage featuring an emphasis on realistic theatre where his most successful and popular dramas appeared. These were *Señora Ama* (1908) [*The Lady of the House*]; *La Malquerida* (1913) [*The Wrongly Loved*] and *La infanzona* [*The Ancient Noblewoman*] (1945).

Benavente's *King Lear* appeared in 1911, so it was written between the *The Lady of the House* and *The Wrongly Loved*. Shakespeare was very much present in Benavente's second stage as a playwright, but what could be the reason of this presence? If at the beginning of his

³ Nuestro público ama las llanuras, el más insignificante altozano le detiene, quiere jardinitos muy urbanizados para pasear sin fatiga [...] no es realidad lo que pide el público en el teatro: es su realidad, su idea y su sentido de la vida, que no suele ser de una amplitud en la que haya comprensión para grandes cosas (My translation).

dramatic career Benavente turned to Shakespeare to obtain inspiration from the fantastic world of his comedies, what could be the reason for resorting to *King Lear* at the high point of his literary career?

In “Shakespeare’s influence on Benavente’s Plays”, Kessel Schwartz refers to the speech Benavente gave in 1944 to a Medical Association in Cádiz, where he explained in part his love for *King Lear*:

When Benavente was a youth his father sat down to read the first volume of the Biblioteca Clásica, the first volume of which was the works of Shakespeare and the first book of which was *King Lear*. [...] As soon as his father let the book drop, young Benavente pounced on it because he was so anxious to read it, for he had read almost all the other works of Shakespeare except *Lear*, he sat down "dispuesto a no acostrarme hasta haber leído mi Rey Lear" (O.C., XI, p. 228) “to read *King Lear* in one go”. Suddenly, his older brother entered to tell him that his father had just died. Many years later, when Benavente undertook a translation of a Shakespearian work for a publishing house, he chose without any hesitation whatsoever *King Lear*, the last book which his father had read before dying. (Schwartz 1960: 38)

Although the sudden death of his father while reading *King Lear* probably made Benavente become emotionally attached to the tragedy, I believe there could be other reasons to explain his full time dedication to render this particular play. In the first decade of the 20th century, Benavente was starting to cultivate the rural drama genre, a genre that would make him very popular amongst Spanish audiences. These plays take place in small Spanish villages which are inhabited by vulgar speaking characters of low origin who are beset by family conflicts. Could there be a link between Benavente’s rural dramas and *King Lear*?

In order to understand the relationship between *King Lear* and Benavente’s rural dramas, we first need to understand the defining features of the latter. In rural plays, rusticalness is a mere excuse to show conflicts that transcend the local frame and acquire a universal dimension. Strong passions such jealousy, hatred, revenge or envy transform unknown characters of low origin into widely recognised universal types any audience could identify with. Rural dramas are also characterised by showing a strong leading female character, who will become a tragic heroine by the end of the play. These dramas take place in a suffocating family atmosphere, where long suppressed feelings and shameful secrets shake the family foundations to their very core, altering its structure irrevocably. As Huerta Calvo and Peral Vega sum up:

Suffocated passions, extreme and secret [...] incest as the latent threat that shapes the characters’ feelings and the brutish, tyrannical and oppressive power of men, which is often approved and mirrored in the figure of the servant, can be considered as the defining features of

Benavente's trilogy [*The Lady of the House, The Wrongly Loved, The Ancient Noblewoman*] (2000:2282)⁴

After leaving his playful symbolist comedies behind and before venturing into the unexplored territory of rural dramas, I believe think Benavente turned to Shakespeare in order to learn how the Bard had tackled issues such as filial love, betrayal and ingratitude. If we take into account Benavente's classical background and his knowledge of Shakespeare's tragedies, it comes as a little surprise that he chose to translate *King Lear*, since all the issue he was interested in exploring are masterly depicted there. The gradual and inevitable destruction of Lear's family, the King's blindness and the rebellious strong daughter are themes that resonate powerfully throughout Benavente's *The Wrongly Loved*, the rural drama that appeared two years after *King Lear*'s translation. It is therefore surprising that no critical attempts have been made to establish a link between *King Lear* and *The Wrongly Loved*, and that the accepted precedent to Benavente's tragedy is thought to be *Oedipus King*. In my opinion, however, Raimunda's blindness, which prevents her from seeing the betrayal of her daughter Acacia until it is too late for both of them, is closer to Lear and Gloucester's blindness than to Oedipus'.

Therefore, Shakespeare can be said to have had two very different but equally important roles in Benavente's career; on the one hand, the Bard's comedies were a source of inspiration and renewal in Benavente's early stage as a playwright; and on the other, *King Lear* was key in Benavente's exploration of dysfunctional family relationships and crucial in his evolution into his second mature stage.

In this way, if we come back to the quote we mentioned at the beginning, "Read Shakespeare after Cervantes", we cannot help but to think that this is only one more sign of what Huerta Calvo defined as a "complex and purposely ambiguous personality". (Huerta Calvo 2005:185).

2. Jacinto Benavente's *King Lear* (1911)

Benavente's rendering of *King Lear* can be considered as a landmark in the history of Shakespeare in Spain. It was the first translation of *King Lear* that was published in the 20th century, and the second since the beginning of the Shakesperean reception in Spain. Prior to Benavente's version, *King Lear* had only been rendered by Guillermo Macpherson in 1885- the version Benavente's father was reading when he died. This nineteenth century translation was written in hendecasyllabic verse and prose, whereas Benavente's is entirely in prose. This is coherent with the rest of his original dramatic production. Besides, prose allowed the playwright to meet the objectives he had decided to meet in the prologue to his translation:

⁴ Pasiones extremas, forzadas a permanecer en silencio [...] el incesto como amenaza latente que condiciona los sentimientos de los personajes; el poder animal, opresor y despótico ejercido por los hombres que, de ordinario encuentran refrendo a su actitud en la figura del criado; son las características de esta trilogía [*Señora ama, La malquerida y La infanzona*] (My translation).

Clarity has been the main objective in this translation of mine [...] After clarity, I aimed to achieve fidelity; I have tried to be a faithful translator whenever possible [...] Lastly, I didn't want my translation to be cold and lifeless. My attention has not always been focused in keeping literary elegance, but in making the stage dialogue spontaneous and lively (Benavente 1911: viii)⁵

Benavente's translation is definitely not a philological one- there are no lengthy introductions to the play, preliminary notes or scholarly epilogues to the text. As Benavente himself declared, he didn't want his translation to be "tiring and boring to read" and so he devoted much time and thought to emphasise the crispness and spontaneity of dialogue. I believe Benavente aimed this translation at readers, first because the rendering *King Lear* was a process that allowed him the opportunity to explore the family conflicts he would later develop in his plays, and second because as an extremely prolific author, Benavente was interested in achieving success through his own dramas, not through other's. However, it should be noted the translation makes a very good performance text, and it was actually used as such with little to no significant alterations in the theatrical production of 1916.

In his remarkable translation, Benavente shows he had a very good knowledge of the Shakesperean text. The translator was very much aware of the text variants and although he doesn't explicitly mention which edition he used, it is obvious the text he was made of the 1623 Folio and the First Quarto of 1608. Benavente includes a considerable number of footnotes throughout his translation, where he explains the meaning of difficult allusions and refers to the French and previous Spanish translations to justify his solutions. However, the field where Benavente excels as a translator may be found in his command of the Spanish language: the high, elevated language of the noblemen and the low, vulgar language of the servants is keen and spot-on; his wide range of vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and sayings fit the characters according to their class, and although his use of prose makes the speeches far longer than the original iambic pentameters, they are never dull or boring. As a matter of fact, the Spanish reader of this translation may have the impression that he or she is reading a play in their native language. This illusion is only broken when Benavente includes a footnote to clarify the textual meaning, such as in this example from scene 4 act 1:

I do profess to be no less than I seem, to serve him truly that will put me in trust, to love him that is honest, to converse with him that is wise and says little, to fear judgement, to fight when I cannot choose, and **to eat no fish**. (1.4.12-14)

⁵ En esta traducción mía [...] he procurado la claridad ante todo. [...] Después de la claridad he procurado la fidelidad; siempre que he podido ser fiel traductor, lo he sido. Por último: he procurado que mi traducción no fuese del todo fría y descolorida. Más que a la corrección del lenguaje y a la elegancia literaria he atendido a la espontaneidad y a la vida del diálogo teatral. (Benavente 1911: viii) (My translation)

Benavente's footnote explains what could be an awkward reading for Spanish readers in the following way: "Eating fish was associated with Catholicism in the Elizabethan period. Since papists were considered enemies of the state, the proverb went: 'He's an honest man and eats no fish'" (1911:376). As it was previously mentioned, in some other cases, Benavente uses footnotes not to only clarify meaning, but to justify his decision when translating:

Draw, you rogue! For though it be night, yet the moon shines. **I'll make a sop o'th'moonshine of you**, you whosreson cullionly barber-monger, draw! (2.2.26-29)

¡Desenvaina bergante! Aunque sea de noche, hay luna clara; ven a donde su luz te blanquee, y haré **merengada** contigo. ¡Desenvaina hideputa afeminado, frecuentador de barberías; desenvaina! (1911:390)

In the lengthy footnote included at this point, the translator explains "sop o' the moonshine" is a dish made of beaten eggs, and uses the idea of "beating" in a culinary association with "merengada", which is "whipped milk" in Spanish. Benavente also points out previous translators rendered the line in "ambiguous and inaccurate" ways. This cultural adaptation seems a good solution to Kent's intention of beating Oswald black and blue, and will be easily understood by Spanish audiences.

There are some cases, however, where Benavente seems to be unaware of the cultural context of the original, and renders a few complex allusions using a literal translation only:

My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like **Tom o'Bedlam** (117-118)

Mi parte es simular tristeza como **loco de Bedlam**. (1911:374)

Is it the fashion that discarded fathers

Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?

Judicious punishment: 'twas this flesh begot

Those pelican daughters. (2.4.67-70).

LEAR. Como veis, ahora es uso que los padres despedidos traten sus carnes tan despiadadamente: muy justo castigo, que fue **esta misma carne la que engendró pelícanos por hijas**. (1911:410)

"A Bedlam fool" makes little sense in Spanish, the same happens with "pelican daughters". This last allusion is particularly important in *King Lear*, since it was the belief at the time that pelicans fed their newly born brood with their own blood. Once the young birds

grew older, they turned against their parents, very much as Goneril and Regan do in the play. It is therefore a missed opportunity for Benavente to comment on Lear's sad and meaningful words, which are completely lost for the Spanish readers. Actually, the apparent groundless comparison could be considered to be one more sign of the king's madness, when it is a lucid remark by an otherwise desperate father.

Another important aspect of Benavente's translation can be found in the fidelity the translator shows when rendering sexual allusions. Even though *King Lear* is not a play with a strong presence of sexual references, the few that appear are rendered with a good degree of faithfulness on the part of Benavente. Such is the case of the following lines spoken by the fool, who, before leaving the stage at the end of the first act, addresses his audience in the following way:

She that's a maid now, and laughs at my departure,

Shall not be a maid long, unless things be cut shorter. (1.5.42-43)

"Things" is here used by the fool with the connotation of sexual organ, something which Benavente paraphrases in his translation as:

BUFÓN. *La que es virgen todavía* y se ríe al verme partir, no será virgen mucho tiempo, si no es que hay en los usos gran mudanza. (1911:385)

Although not as explicit as the original, "unless there is much change in custom" makes for a wry, ironic comment on how short-lived virginity is among the youth.

Another defining feature of this translation is the wide variety of Spanish sayings and idiomatic expressions Benavente uses throughout it. So, for example, at the end of the second scene of the second act, Kent exclaims:

Good King, that must approve the common saw,

Thou out of heaven's benediction com'st

To the warm sun. (2.2.143-145)

This is translated as:

Buen Rey, por ti puede decirse: *huyendo de la sartén diste en las brasas*. (1911: 393).

Literally, this means "you escaped from the frying pan to fall into the fire", a common Spanish saying that conveys the original meaning in a more matter-of-factly way. Similarly, at the end of the fourth scene of the second act, the Duke of Cornwall says the following words regarding Lear's wish to leave his daughter's castle:

‘Tis best to give him way; he leads himself (2.4.291)

Benavente uses another popular saying which will be widely known by Spanish audiences to render this line:

CORNUALLES. Al loco y al aire dadles calle. (p.402).

It is difficult to translate this into English, but a possible solution could be “The fool and the air should roar in the street”. Once more, Benavente’s creativity adds a Spanish flavour to the translation, which establishes a very strong linguistic link with Spanish readers.

However, the most important feature of Benavente’s translation can be found in the subtle manipulation he carries out of a number of key episodes with the aim of increasing the tension between parents and children and highlighting the cruelty and disdain the latter feel for the former. A good example can be found in Edmond’s words at the end of the second scene of the first act, when he is talking to himself about his intention of robbing Edgar of his lands:

A credulous father and a brother noble,
Whose nature is so far from doing harms
That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty
My practices ride easy. I see the business.
Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit.

All with me’s meet that I can fashion fit. (1.2.151-156)

It is interesting to check that Benavente has omitted the reference to Edgar’s lands in his translation, and so, the resulting impression is that Edmond’s motives to plot against his brother are solely grounded in his cruelty and wickedness:

EDMUNDO. ¡Un padre crédulo, un noble hermano, tan incapaz de una mala acción que no puede sospecharla en nadie! Sobre su honrada simplicidad cabalga mi ingenio prestamente.
Bien lo veo; todo me favorece, y de todo sabré aprovecharme. (1911:375)

A further example of obvious manipulation on the part of the translator may be found when both fathers, Gloster and Lear, are finally faced with their children’s betrayal. In this moment, Benavente introduces a number of lines which are not in the original with the sole purpose of stressing the depth of their conflict. So, when at the beginning of the second act

Edmond poisons Gloster's ear with the supposed betrayal of his legitimate son, the torn father exclaims:

O strange and fastened villain!

Would he deny his letter, said he? (2.1.76-77).

Benavente does not only render these two lines, but adds a harrowing third:

GLÓSTER. ¡Empedernido, avezado en traiciones! ¿Negará su carta? **¡No le he engendrado!**
(p.388)

The added line may be translated as: "I didn't father him". Benavente therefore highlights Gloster's pain by making him disavow his very own son with an appalling exclamation that, for all the pain it conveys, sounds a bit too melodramatic at this point.

Similarly, after being mercilessly mistreated in his daughter's castle, Lear faces Goneril with the following words:

Thou shalt find

That I'll resume the shape which thou dost think

I have cast off forever. (1.4.263-265)

Benavente stamps the character with his own melodramatic style making him say:

¡Yo te prometo que volverás a verme, recobrada mi soberanía, que tú juzgas perdida para siempre! **¡Volverás a verme, yo te lo prometo!** (1911:383)

The words in bold mean: 'I promise you will see me again... You will see me again, I promise'. This threatening oath belongs to Benavente's creativity, not to Shakespeare's. It is possible the Spanish playwright took the liberty of appropriating *King Lear* in this particular moment of the play to make him speak what a character of his would have probably said in a similar situation. The outcome, however, apart from calling Benavente's fidelity into question, adds a soap-opera like dimension to the translation of an otherwise too serious play.

However, the most striking fact about Benavente's manipulation lies in the way he consciously modifies the feelings both fathers have for their children. It is fascinating to notice that in the Shakespearean text, Gloster and Lear vehicle their pain by detaching themselves from Edgar and Goneril, who are addressed with coldness and indifference. However, Benavente consciously changes the original text to emphasize the kinship that still links parents and children in an indissoluble bond. In this way, when in the fourth scene of the second act Lear disavows Goneril after learning the way she had treated Kent, the king asks:

‘Where is *this* daughter?’ (2.4.54)

But Benavente translates this as:

‘¿Dónde está *mi* hija?’ (1911:396)

thus effectively intensifying Lear’s pain and denying him the distancing strategy he uses in the original.

Similarly, when Gloster disavows Edgar, he states:

I had a son,

Now outlawed from my blood; he sought my life

But lately, very late. (3.4.150-152).

Despite the very clear meaning of the original, Benavente manipulates Gloster’s words to stress that, despite knowing Edgar’s murderous intentions, he still considers him as his son:

GLÓSTER. Un hijo tenía, **no puedo dudar que era de mi sangre**, y atentó contra mi vida, poco ha, muy poco. (1911:412)

The intrusive sentence in bold means “a son I cannot deny to be of my very own blood”. Benavente’s conscious modifications make Lear and Gloster appear as resigned fathers who cannot deny the inevitable bond that tie them with their children, even in the face of their offspring’s most abject and unkind ingratitude. Moreover, the translator suggests the children’s betrayal is unrelated to their fathers’ mistakes, an idea which clearly contradicts what Shakespeare wrote. If we take Lear’s following words, we will see he defines Goneril as the evil yet logical illness that originated in his corrupted blood:

Thou art a boil,

A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle

In my corrupted blood. (2.4.216-218)

Benevente modifies the original text to subtly imply Goneril is a corruption in Lear’s otherwise clean and untainted blood:

LEAR. Eres una úlcera, un protuberante carbunclo, **corrupción de mi sangre**... (1911: 400)

This rendering suggests Gonreil's wickedness infected Lear, who is not guilty of his daughter's depravity. The idea of sons and daughters not being responsible for their parent's mistakes throws a very different light into the conflict that besets these two families in Benavente's translation.

To sum up, we may conclude Benavente's manipulations of the original text modified the relationship between fathers and children according to the playwright's personal views. The translator believed the key to this conflict lay in the resigned love a father felt for his children despite their obvious betrayal, a love born out of a natural, inevitable bond and the father's guiltless conscience. This being so, I believe Benavente's King Lear is not just a fascinating example of Shakespearean translation in Spain, but an exceptional text that documents the passions and views Benavente would later explore in his original dramas.

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