

## TRANSLATION OF PROPER NAMES - PART 1

### What's in a Name: Juliet's Question Revisited

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During the American Translators Association's Spanish Division Conference in San Antonio earlier this year, I was browsing through my favorite bookseller's offerings when he took my arm and quietly led me to a 225-page book by Virgilio Moya entitled *La traducción de los nombres propios*<sup>1</sup> (The Translation of Proper Names). He sat me in a chair and then went about his business, catching my eye every now and then to throw me a crooked smile. A friend wandered by and glanced over my shoulder. "Vero," he said, "you're not going to buy a book that should never have been written, are you?" He was referring, of course, to one of translation's coziest fortresses: 'Proper names are not translated; not ever.' "This book must be nonsense," he added. And in one sense, he was right: Moya's siege engine gave the fortress a tilt, and then its portcullis buckled and its mighty ramparts tumbled down into the sea.

Translating proper names was common not only in the Middle Ages, but has remained an active practice to the present day.

The immediate problem, Moya states in his introduction, is that there is no such 'not ever' when it comes to handling proper names in translation. If we look for precedents, history is happy to oblige. Take the list of medieval European queens that another friend of mine compiled. The most popular names were Eleanor, Anne, Mary, and Elizabeth. The problem, he pointed out, was that these names changed according to what language you read them

in. Thus a French queen named Aliénor first had to be distinguished from all the other French queens, past and present, who shared that name—and that was usually done by appending her provenance: Aliénor d'Aquitaine, for example. Yet in Spanish she would be known as Leonor de Aquitania, and in English as Eleanor of Aquitaine. To make matters worse, when she married Henry Plantagenet, she was then known as Eleanor of England—making it really hard for future generations to know that *that* Eleanor was not English, but French. If we take into consideration the fact that medieval queens, due largely to the perils of childbirth, rarely made it past their early twenties, and their husbands—who were likely named Henry, William, or Charles—remarried other Eleanors, Annes, Marys, and Elizabeths, we end up with a royal mess.

One would think that present-day historians, given the problems stated in the previous paragraph, would refrain from translating the names of ancient royalty, but as

Harvard's expert on the Crown of Aragon T.N. Bisson<sup>2</sup> (2000) tells us, historians often have no choice in the matter if they want their readers not to lose the 'red thread.' And I quote:

*"How to render proper names in English is a problem of uncommon difficulty in a work dealing with peoples of different languages who had rulers in common. Some of these rulers and their princely offspring were Catalan by blood or preference, others Aragonese, still others Castilians, and the count-kings between 1162 and 1410, while speaking Catalan as a rule, bore the names and regnal numbers of an Aragonese dynasty. It therefore seemed awkward to refer to these rulers in the Catalan forms (and numbers) of their originally Aragonese names (Alfons I for Alfonso II, etc.), misleading to refer to them as if Aragonese, and absurd to present some in a way and some in another."*

Bisson adopts a compromise which he deems not uncommon in historical writing in what he terms "other European lands" but, he adds, is seldom preferred by Hispanists: namely, to anglicize the given names of kings (or count-kings) in one or several of the reigns making up the Crown of Aragon. Furthermore, he opted to render the names of popes, certain foreign rulers, and dynasties as well as of Hispanic countries—Catalonia, Aragon, Majorca, etc.—in what he terms their "familiar English forms." Nonetheless, Bisson readily admits that no such system can pretend to solve the problem completely and that he tolerated a few exceptions.

We can plainly see that translating proper names was common not only in the Middle Ages, but has remained an active practice (and sometimes a necessary one, as Bisson states) to the present day. If we look back across the centuries, we find that in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, respectively, Quevedo did it without success to Michel de Montaigne (Miguel de Montaña), while Shakespeare did it to great acclaim to the lovely Giulietta dei Capuleti. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, someone with a strong classical bent did it to the poor Louvre (la Lobera)—mercifully it did not take hold. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Spanish literary translators did it to Balzac and called him Honorato, and historians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did it to Engels and dubbed him Federico. And in our own century, Harper Collins<sup>3</sup>, in the 2002 edition of its bilingual *Spanish Dictionary*, still does it to most English first names, tacitly encouraging translation tyros to continue the practice.

In spite of Harper Collins, it is quite obvious to all of us that Bill Gates oughtn't be rendered as Guillaume Portillons into French, nor Jimmy Carter as Santiaguito Acarreador into Spanish. And no matter what you hear in the Spanish version of the *Sabrina* remake with Harrison Ford, Sabrina and Linus did not go to 'el viñedo de Marta' in order to get drunk with Marta in her vineyard, but rather took pictures in that quaint Massachusetts whaling town called Martha's Vineyard without any wine ever touching their lips. But it is also equally obvious that Cristoforo Colombo must be translated as Christopher Columbus, and Henrique o Navegante as Henry the Seafarer.

Why is this so? Because if a translator wants his target language text to be accepted and understood by its readers, he must behave in accordance with what is expected and meaningful in the target culture. Furthermore, as Bisson made clear, the translator must often guide readers if they are to understand a given historical period. And although we may now generally refrain from translating proper names of our contemporaries, I, for one, am grateful for historians such as Bisson who take me by the hand in order to walk me through history without getting lost. Moreover (and I admit this is much less rational), I also want the Bard's tragic Italian heroine to remain forever Juliet, and for her Romeo to remain a Montague, not a Montecchi, and I don't want to remember the doomed and love-struck Abaelardi et Heloysae by any other names than those they had when we first met. These translations of proper names may have been 'blunders' of the past or 'necessities' of the present, but they are nonetheless now carved in stone and in my heart.

When I first started studying the subject of proper names, I wanted to find order—better yet, find rules. I wanted to be able to write a prescriptive article offering solutions. What I found, instead, were not rules, but conventions. Conventions are arbitrary, in the sense that in other times, another behavior could well have been the norm. Conventions are also diachronically interchangeable, because sometimes fads overlap. This explains why we may find two texts in Spanish published around the same time, one referring to the author of *Das Kapital* as Carlos Marx and the other as Karl Marx. For a very long time it was fashionable to translate proper names in order to 'naturalize' them; but the current trend in most Western languages, perhaps due to the immediacy of global communication, is to not translate them. It sounds like a simple mantra to follow, but then there's a woman named Mariluz Padilla Soto, a man called Earnest, and another called Benedict Arnold whose only business is to complicate our lives.

I met Mariluz the same day I met Moya, while sitting in that chair at the bookseller's stall. She is the creation of one of the foremost contemporary writers of Spanish, Antonio Muñoz Molina, in his delicious novella entitled *Carlota Fainberg*.

Here is Mariluz's husband speaking:

*"You'll see that Argentine women carry themselves like no others, they seem to be more worldly, perhaps because of their ethnic mix, perhaps because they are all psychoanalyzed, or perhaps because of those names and last names they are given. You have to admit that it's one thing to be called Mariluz Padilla Soto, and quite another to be named Carlota, Carlota Fainberg."* [Trans. by VA]

I have no doubt that an English-speaking reader would have little difficulty identifying the layers of meaning in a name such as Carlota Fainberg. The problem lies with Mariluz Padilla Soto—an extremely ordinary name—that to a speaker of English might seem much more exotic and alluring than Carlota Fainberg. Furthermore, Spanish-speaking readers will recognize that 'Mariluz' is the contraction of 'María de la Luz,' an

ancient Eucharist of a name, now yellowed and stale, but nonetheless still starchy, whereas English-speaking readers likely would not.

Fortunately, Muñoz Molina is such a gifted writer that a translator attempting to convey the hidden meanings of the names in the novella will be spared the challenge, for all readers will know exactly what Mariluz stands for, even without the clues given by her name.

What I did with proper names in the above translation of *Carlota Fainberg* is what is known as *transference*. It works well only when dealing with names of very well known people or entities—Jacques Chirac, John Major, George Bush, Microsoft, Enron—where the name and its layers of meaning are understood by all who keep tabs on current events. But it doesn't always work otherwise.

Consider Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The play was translated into Spanish as *La importancia de llamarse Ernesto* and as *La importancia de llamarse Ernesto y de ser honesto*; into French as *L'importance d'être constant*; and into Italian as *L'importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto* and *L'importanza di chiamarsi Ernest*. Let's take a look at the different strategies employed.

What the Spanish translators did in the first rendering was what Harper Collins tacitly invites translators to do, and it fails miserably; the second solution attempts to solve the problem of the play on words between the proper noun Earnest and the adjective 'earnest' by adding an explanation. Regrettably, the English adjective does not mean 'honorable' or 'decent' (as it was rendered into Spanish), but 'serious.' Perhaps they thought they could compensate for those losses by relying on rhyme even though the adjective chosen is not quite right.

The French also recognized the play on words but in rendering Earnest as '*constant*' the translation is irretrievably doomed. It loses, first of all, the use of a proper name in the title and also the word play. To add insult to injury, this solution also rendered the meaning of the English adjective incorrectly. The Italians botched it even further, for in the first attempt they made the same mistake as their Spanish counterparts, and in the second came up with a spelling that doesn't even exist in English.

In addition, according to a review of the recent film based on Wilde's play in <http://uk.gay.com/article/entertainment/movies/714>, in 1895 the term 'earnest' was slang for gay. If this is indeed the case, the difficulties of rendering this title in other languages become insurmountable. The translator would be well advised to *transfer* 'Earnest,' translate everything else, and then add a translator's note.

Although outside the scope of this article, it is worth noting that only the French translators respected the verb 'Being,' and avoided falling into the trap of using 'to be named' or 'to be called' that could further muddle meaning.

Finally, let's assume that we are asked to translate "He is the Benedict Arnold of IBM." There are two proper names in this sentence. IBM is a contemporary brand name with international recognition, so we don't need to worry about it; it can be *transferred* as IBM. But even though all reasonably well-educated Americans will know of Benedict Arnold, the rest of the world may not.

Transference, then, is not an option. Neither do we have the option of translating Benedict Arnold as Benedetto Arnoldo following the fate that befell poor Vincent de Beauvais, as told by Alfonso Reyes<sup>5</sup>, when he was turned into Vicente Belovalense by a writer eager to show his knowledge of Latin.

Given that we know that Arnold is a historical figure in the U.S. (and a long-dead one at that) and that IBM is a contemporary company that did not exist in Arnold's time, we know for sure that his proper name is being used connotatively. This, needless to say, leads us into the dark territory of rhetorical figures. Proper names can be more than mere labels; they can be allusions, analogies, similes, metaphors, metonymies, or synecdoches.

We need to ascertain which of Benedict Arnold's characteristics, whether moral or physical, is significant in this hypothetical sentence. My advice is not to take a leap of faith and limit yourself to what you immediately know of Benedict Arnold. What we need to do is find out all of the ideas associated with Arnold in the source-language culture before deciding which tack to take. Failing to do so could have serious consequences.

Let me give you an example cited by Moya<sup>6</sup> of such carelessness on the part of a translator. "Not long ago," Moya states, "German Chancellor Helmut Kohl compared Gorbachov to Goebbels," and the English translator for Newsweek—thinking that his audience would not necessarily know who Goebbels was—added that 'he was one of those responsible for the crimes of the Hitler era'" (Newsweek 27:10.1986). The political repercussions were immediate, and the Russians swiftly canceled German Minister Riesenhuber's visit. [Trans. by VA]

The apple of discord? In comparing Gorbachov to Goebbels, Kohl meant to highlight their expertise in handling mass media, and nothing more. It was a clumsy comparison on the part of the German Chancellor, no doubt, but the translator should have red-flagged Kohl's comment and done some research instead of jumping to a wrong, and incendiary, conclusion.

If we pay heed to this Newsweek incident and do our research, it becomes clear that we shouldn't assume that the name Benedict Arnold was used as a synonym for 'traitor.' Could it be possible that Benedict Arnold's name was used in this hypothetical sentence not because he schemed to hand over the fort at West Point, but as a synonym for a closet anglophile, an accomplished general, an ambitious maverick? Could it be because he was a ladies' man? Or blond? Or tall? I don't know if he was any of the last three, but as a translator I cannot afford to avoid doing a little research.

Let's assume that the name was used, after all, as a synonym for 'traitor.' We could try to convey that meaning in the target language through analogy. The problem then is that Spanish, for example, is spoken in 22 countries—each with its own roster of traitors—so this strategy might afford little advantage. Yet, we could still rely on analogy if we spread our wings a little wider and consider the Judeo-Christian tradition (assuming, of course, that we are translating into a language that partakes of that tradition). We would now need to find out whether or not Arnold sold out, like Judas, for money, or if their treacherous behavior had altogether different reasons and meanings. A flawed analogy is never any good.

But when analogy does work, translators have two options. The first is to insert a comparison of Arnold to Judas (this allows us to leave the name Benedict Arnold in our translation) and the second is the strategy called *substitution* that again offers us two options. We can either dispose entirely of Arnold and replace him with Judas, or dispose entirely of proper names and just use 'traitor,' and hope that by so doing we haven't ruined the flavor of the dish.

In searching for an answer to just one of the many problems in handling proper names in translation—that of connotation of given names and last names for some European languages using the Roman alphabet—I have found only more questions and more problem cases, such as handling toponymic terminology, names of institutions and landmarks, patronymics and gender desinences, to name but a few. There are no beacons, no seagulls, no rescue boats. There are no good answers to Juliet's question. But there is certainly adventure. May St. Jerome—or should we call him St. Hieronymus?—lead us to shore.

1. Moya, Virgilio. *La traducción de los nombres propios*. Cátedra. Madrid: 2002
2. Bisson, T.N. *The Medieval Crown of Aragon*. Oxford University Press. New York: 2000
3. Harper Collins Spanish Dictionary, Standard Edition, 2002
4. Moya p.14
5. Ibid p. 23
6. Ibid p.116