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Adapting *La dama boba* and *The Taming of the Shrew* for a Foreign Audience

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Translating Golden Age plays for contemporary British audiences recalls a legacy of performance history established over the last twenty-five years. The process of translation raises questions of adapting storytelling devices and cultural customs, especially when negotiating antiquated racial, religious, and gender stereotypes. In 2013, Lope de Vega's *La dama boba* was translated by David Johnston as *A Lady of Little Sense* and directed by Laurence Boswell for performance in the United Kingdom.¹ It ran the same year as Propeller's production of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, adapted by Edward Hall and Roger Warren, and directed by Hall for an international tour.

Both plays dramatize similar aspects of an old tale involving two beautiful, wealthy daughters whose father wishes to marry them off; in both, the elder sister is shrewish or cunning, and the younger sister is naïve. Although categorized as comedies, the stories involve the female's negotiation of the patriarchal ideals of dominance and submission, which may make audiences critical of, and indeed hostile to, the culture represented onstage. Despite the similarity between plots, the challenge in terms of making any comparison about how the two plays can be translated for a modern audience is offset by Shakespeare's global status and international familiarity with his works. Stage history, film history, and popular culture cannot be ignored when analyzing the dramaturgy of Shakespearean performance. *Taming* in England and *A Lady of Little Sense* (*La dama boba*) in Spain are known as plays that explore gender relationships. But in production, *Taming* in Spain (*La fierecilla domada*) recalls Francoist politics, whereas the 2013 production of *A Lady of Little Sense* was the play's premiere in England. Because of their antithetical stage histories, the productions of *Taming* and *A Lady of Little Sense* illuminate how the dramaturgy of foreign plays is affected by recent stage histories, especially when translating plays with questionable gender paradigms for the stage.

Simply stated, both playwrights are from a culture and country that are different to the places where these productions were staged, so that effectively

the plays were translated from the original language of the script into the primary language of the country in which they were performed.² Boswell's *A Lady of Little Sense* was translated from seventeenth-century Spanish into a stylized modern English. Propeller's *Taming* was spoken in Shakespeare's English, with some phrases modified by Hall and Warren, and translated and condensed for audiences in non-English-speaking countries through supertitles. Along with the foreign origins of each play and the need for linguistic translation, each production contained varying levels of the foreign and familiar stage elements that illuminate the complexities of translation. Here I will address how stage histories, actors in repertory, and a repertoire of dramaturgical signifiers work together to familiarize and translate foreign plays for contemporary audiences.

***A Lady of Little Sense* in the United Kingdom**

The visual and aural elements of *A Lady of Little Sense* relayed a varied experience of time and place. The linguistic translation removed not only a foreign language for the British audience, but also an antiquated one. Although the spoken language was contemporary, the Renaissance-style clothing and mise-en-scène of *A Lady of Little Sense* suggested an older Spanish setting. Rich upholstery, red embroidered curtains, and costuming grounded the time period in the Golden Age; yet casting decisions did not attempt to replicate a Spanish-looking ensemble and Spanish accents were not employed to suggest a Spanish locale.

Despite these disjunctive theatrical elements, and the status of *A Lady of Little Sense* as a British premiere, the production itself was not foreign to British audiences because of its relationship to the history of performance of both Shakespeare and Golden Age theatre in the United Kingdom. Firstly, the newness of *A Lady of Little Sense* facilitated an easy comparison to *Taming* for English audiences. A number of reviewers, including Michael Billington in *The Guardian*, Dominic Cavendish in *The Telegraph*, and Ian Shuttleworth in *The Financial Times*, compared the show to *The Taming of the Shrew*. The marketing for the show and the theatrical programme did not reference Shakespeare or any of his plays, but these leading critics made this connection in order to facilitate a relationship between a highly-recognizable play and one that had never been performed in the United Kingdom.

Along with the analogy to the plot of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespearean acting methods and directorial strategies also affected the performance of Golden Age drama. In an interview with David Johnston, Boswell spoke of the influence of Shakespeare on the 2004-2005 RSC season that traveled to Spain:

Something of our style of performing Shakespeare
had infused our way of doing *Lope*. The English

actors from the RSC had brought their style, their confidence, their buoyancy with language, their experience of humanizing language, making it accessible and dynamic, and fused all of this with a very Spanish play (152). Boswell's extensive directing experience of Golden Age drama is, as he notes, infused with Shakespearean actors and their training and experience. The dynamic of the rehearsal room, of the exchange between English and Spanish, Shakespeare and Lope, actor training and the roles portrayed are all part of the non-linear process of translation for the stage.

The play was made more familiar to British audiences by these relationships to Shakespeare, but it was also anchored to British stage history through its relationship to past productions of Golden Age plays. The dramaturgical style of *A Lady of Little Sense* followed a legacy of Golden Age performance in the United Kingdom, much of which has been helmed by Boswell or influenced by his work. One of the signatures that characterizes this presence of Golden Age theatre in the United Kingdom is the incorporation of flamenco dance and music into performance. Originating in the eighteenth century, Spanish flamenco is from a later time period than Spain's Golden Age. But flamenco music and dance has been present throughout most of the RSC's productions of Spanish Golden Age theatre, from Danny Boyle's 1990-1991 production of *The Last Days of Don Juan* and Boswell's 2004-2005 Golden Age season to the RSC's 2011 Shakespeare-inspired and Spanish-themed *Cardenio*. Flamenco footwork and stomps, incorporated both to add humor and as presentational dance numbers that engage the audience, have broken the theatrical fourth wall, so that flamenco has helped accentuate a Spanish mise-en-scène, lending an air of "authentic" Spanishness to Golden Age productions.³

Although the British audience is arguably accustomed to flamenco in Golden Age theatre, this production played with those expectations by incorporating flamenco dance into Golden Age theatre in a new way. Here Boswell responded to, and deviated from, prior productions. Flamenco's nuanced role in *A Lady of Little Sense* was used to integrate Spanishness through movement, as a tool for character development, and as a recreation of a Spanish theatergoing device. Lope's script includes a dance instructor to educate Finea, a role that was preserved in Johnston's translation, although in performance the instructor was characterized as French, distancing his nationality from the other characters. This instructor's French accent and characterization served to reinforce the Spanishness of the other characters by putting one culture in opposition to

the primary one represented. The dance sequence in Act 3 therefore served as an intercultural experience for Nise and Finea, in an effect similar to the audience's experience in viewing a Spanish Golden Age play. In this way, what served as a plot point for Lope became an opportunity for cultural translation and interpretation for Boswell's audience.

Furthermore, both Nise and Finea had unique dance styles, with Nise's indicative of her overall knowledge of the world, and more specifically, of her quick ability to learn from the tutor. Nise dominated the first portion of the dance as a sign of her intellectual superiority in the first portion of the play. The dance showed the characters' places in familial and societal hierarchies. At each turn, Nise moved sharply and flipped her *abanico* before Finea. But after Finea successfully negotiated a particularly complicated pirouette, she then flipped her fan first and became the leader for the remainder of the dance. The choreography thus staged a turning-point moment in the story through dance, providing visual confirmation of this key transition to the audience of a new play in the United Kingdom.

Finally, the dance sequence introduced the British audiences to the tradition of a Spanish *entremés*, a performance between acts. Here the *entremés* was not a skit, but a lengthy piece of choreography and singing which included six minutes of dancing to music, followed by the sisters' singing while dancing. In both Lope's and Johnston's scripts, the dance lesson is part of Finea's education, but in performance, the dance became a cultural interlocutor for understanding Spanish theatrical practices. What Boswell's production illustrates is that Golden Age theatre can be contextualized within the history of British stage history while simultaneously being compared to a Shakespearean play and performance. This multi-faceted aspect of the process of translation becomes part of the performance, with disjunctions in time, space, acting methods, and performance styles.

The Taming of the Shrew

Shakespeare's work is of course well known in Spain, and the specific history of *The Taming of the Shrew* is closely tied to Francoist issues of censorship and control. In his performance history of *Taming* in Spain, Keith Gregor writes:

After its disappearance from the repertoires during the period of the Second Republic (1931-1939), *The Taming of the Shrew* would, following the success of the play in Nazi Germany, spring back to theatrical prominence. This play was the most performed by professional commercial theatre companies in Spain, operating mainly during the 1940s and 1950s. (151)

Along with its high-profile position on the stage in early Francoist Spain, the successful 1956 film *La fierecilla domada* is characterized by “the ascription of Catholic and Francoist morality” (Cerdá). The film and most stage productions reworked the play so that it was presented as a farce—of which the popular 1975 production by Juan Guerrero Zamora is an excellent example.⁴

Propeller’s production of *Taming* deviated from prior interpretations of the play in Spain, but was made familiar through its relationship to the stage history of British Shakespearean productions. Recent British Shakespearean productions in Spain have all been performed by non-traditional Shakespearean companies, designating a new style of performance to a breadth of Shakespearean plays. In the annual Festival de Otoño, which focuses on contemporary work, Spanish Golden Age plays have not appeared in any form during the last five years, but there have been five Shakespearean productions, one by British company Cheek by Jowl in 2010, and the remaining four by Propeller. This includes Propeller’s 2011 tour of *The Comedy of Errors* and *Richard III* and the 2013 production that I address here, that is, *The Taming of the Shrew* and the play that toured with it, *Twelfth Night*. Held outside Madrid, Spain’s most renowned theatre festival takes place annually in Almagro and is dedicated to early modern and Golden Age theatre performed by Spanish and international companies. In the last five years at Almagro, there have been thirty-three Shakespeare or Shakespeare-inspired productions, of which only six were comedies, with *The Taming of the Shrew* not among them.⁵ In other words, in the context of the way in which Propeller’s style has been shaping the new legacy of British Shakespearean performance, *Taming* stood in a peculiar space that was inside recent performance styles but outside the history of performance of the play.⁶

The Taming of the Shrew was a revival of Propeller’s 2006-2007 staging,⁷ and it replicated the prior production’s ability to modernize through the mise-en-scène. Large, moveable set pieces and costuming gave a highly-stylized, colorful, and comical effect to the action onstage.⁸ Costuming did not signal any one particular location, with Katherine’s dress reminiscent of the 1980s London rock scene, Petruchio in a jockstrap and a cowboy hat, and an ensemble member in a ranger shirt from Lake Havasu, Arizona. Just as the set pieces and costuming did not designate a particular time period or country, the actors spoke in British and Irish accents for their characters, and in doing so created an accessible pastiche that did not encapsulate stereotypes of any one particular culture.

Edward Hall’s theatre company, Propeller, has a repertory cast of all-male actors. It is not that Propeller’s productions attempt to replicate Shakespearean acting conditions in which boy actors played female roles; indeed, all of the actors are adult men. But Propeller retains the notion that the actors in Shakespeare’s company were also musicians and that elaborate sets and lighting design were not part of theatre-making. In this way, the premise of their

company incorporates some original practices of Shakespearean performance while retaining a resoundingly contemporary focus by setting their productions in a modern, if not explicitly identifiable, time period.

One of the primary elements of translating *Taming* for a contemporary performance in Spain and other non-English speaking countries was to accentuate the non-verbal, aural aspects of the soundscape. Actors played a range of instruments, including an electric guitar, saxophone, organ, an Asian pot, and even a rubber band. There was jazz-style music as the show started, Hortensio entered to disco music, and the actors sang a capella from different periods during the wedding scene. Along with music, the soundscape was accentuated with beats when actors' bodies were pushed against the large armoires, so that the weight of the production's all-male brutality became the percussion to the musical storytelling. These sounds were counterpointed by significant silences, such as that of Petruchio as he waited for Kate's reply to marriage.

Like Boswell's use of an *entremés*, Propeller emphasized physicality and music to move the story forward. The cast sang, danced, pushed, yanked, and moved all over the stage, on top of the set pieces, in the audience, and into the intermission hall, creating multiple tableaux of physicalized storytelling that counteracted the condensed supertitles and fully translated the dialogue spoken onstage. During the interval, the cast entertained the crowd by singing Van Morrison's "Brown-Eyed Girl" amongst other songs, in English, showcasing an even greater range of musical genres in their repertoire. It was here that the cast performed as actors, not as characters. Like Boswell's *entremés*, Propeller's broke the fourth wall and provided an auditory disjunction as the actors sang contemporary songs but upheld early modern theatergoing practices of musical entertainments at the theater. The *entremés* for *Taming* stretched across the interval and into an original musical number written for the first scene of the second act. Because of *Taming*'s recent absence from the stage in Spain, the translation of the words into supertitled Spanish, and its highly adapted presence in Spanish film history, it may not have been evident to the audience that the song at Petruchio's house was an addition to the script for this production.

Just as the use of flamenco is essential to any discussion of Golden Age theatre in English, the staging of two key scenes in *Taming* must be considered in any analysis of the play in performance. The staging of these scenes is an essential part of *Taming*'s stage history because they both involve possibilities to distance the play (and Shakespeare as playwright) from accusations of misogyny.⁹ The first is a theatrical frame and the second is the use of irony to metaphorically wink at the audience. These are the Induction scene and Katherine's final speech.

The Induction scene from *Taming* allows the production to mitigate the perception that the play is anti-feminist and to counter accusations of misogyny

leveled at Shakespeare as playwright.¹⁰ In this opening scene, a drunkard named Christopher Sly falls asleep, and a company of players leads him to believe when he wakes that he is a nobleman. They perform the story of *Taming* for him, allowing a distance between the observer, Sly, who is a stand-in for the audience, and the main story.¹¹ The Sly induction is part of *Taming*'s script, but it is never mentioned again once the story begins. For that reason, the scene is often cut in performance, as it is a lead-in that has no resolution. Propeller's adaptation retained the Induction scene and included a closing scene. In *The Taming of A Shrew*, published in quarto in 1594, Sly remains onstage throughout, commenting on the action of the story.¹² After the primary story concludes, Sly is turned out by the players and awakes with a new satisfaction that he now knows how to tame his wife. This formation establishes the separation between the theatergoer's experience and the numerous fictive worlds, allowing the audience a safe critical distance from Petruchio's questionable behavior.

The second distinguishing scene for all productions of *Taming* is Katherine's final speech, and particularly the tone in which it is delivered. Over forty lines in length, it is here that Katherine articulates that it is the husband who works and in return asks for nothing "But love, fair looks, and true obedience" (5.2.159). Propeller's Kate grew in confidence as she progressed in the speech, so that her treatise on marriage to the widow and Bianca concluded by instructing them to "place your hands below your husband's foot," which she said with much resentment, and motioned that her "hand is ready, may it do him ease" as she knelt for Petruchio to step on it (5.2.183, 185). Although Propeller did not employ a revisionist use of irony to invoke a feminist staging of the play, the company used the Sly narrative and a pastiche of dramaturgical elements to distance the play from any particular time period and culture, as well as its history in Spain.

The Role of Repertory

With antithetical stage histories, Boswell's production of *A Lady of Little Sense* and Hall's production of *The Taming of the Shrew* shared several strategies for translation in the production of early modern/Golden Age theatre for a foreign audience. First, both involved a company of actors performing multiple roles across plays in repertory. The production of *A Lady of Little Sense* at the Ustinov Studio in Bath was part of a three-production season that included another comedy, *Don Gil of the Green Breeches* by Tirso de Molina, and Lope's tragedy *Punishment without Revenge*. As noted earlier, Propeller's 2013 tour included *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Twelfth Night*, the two shows that Propeller toured together in 2006-2007.

Each play made itself accessible to a foreign audience through the combination of running the plays in repertory with plays from the same culture

and period, and with the same company of players. This strategy echoed recent stage histories of foreign theatre in the countries in which the plays were performed. For example, Boswell was the Artistic Director for the 2004-2005 RSC Golden Age season in which a company of over twenty RSC actors performed four plays in repertory. Although there have been stand-alone productions such as the Young Vic's 2003 production of *Peribañez*, Jonathan Munby's 2009 *Life is a Dream* at the Donmar Warehouse, and the National Theatre's 2012 *Damned by Despair*, Boswell's seasons are also intermittent. Boswell described this effect, stating, "The British theatre is a competitive industry. It welcomes these Golden Age visits like comets—everyone gets very excited and then it goes back into orbit, and everyone waits for the next comet to come into view ten years later" (Johnston 153). Propeller's strategy for taking two Shakespearean shows on tour together has functioned in a similar vein.

When plays are performed in repertory, they form a conversation with each other, not just from the perspective of the artistic director or theater, but also from that of the spectator. In Ayanna Thompson's discussion of the staging of *Othello*, a play about an outsider, she recommends staging the play in repertoire with contemporary adaptations and appropriations of the play in order to put the older text, with its problematic depictions of generalizations of a racially-charged character, into conversation with other plays.¹³ Accordingly, Thompson suggests staging *Othello* with newer plays that directly address contemporary issues of race in order to engage audiences in a discussion on race today.

With thematic concerns of misogyny and female submission, *A Lady and Taming* likewise benefitted from being put in conversation with the other plays on their tour. I am not claiming that audience members saw both of Propeller's plays and all three of Boswell's in order to make connections between the plays, playwrights, and culture. But because of the traveling nature of both (*A Lady of Little Sense* to three cities in England and *The Taming of the Shrew* to fifteen cities across five countries), the plays were advertised as part of a larger repertoire, inviting audiences to experience a selection of foreign plays enacted by the same group of actors. They were marketed as part of a collective story of a foreign culture. Offering a range of plays alleviated the burden of having one play as a stand-in for another culture's literature, and in the case of these two plays, a distancing effect that complemented the dramaturgical choices that separated them from being viewed as representative of their original cultures.

Repertory reminds the audience that the playwright does not endorse his ideas through only one of his characters, and that no stereotypical character dominates across the range of plays and players. This is simply an element of theatre, of storytelling, but accentuated with repertory casts performing a repertoire of plays. For example, the actress playing the naïve sister in *A Lady of Little Sense* also played an adulterer and sensualized lover in *Punishment*

without Revenge, and the simpleminded servant from *A Lady* played the androgen in *Don Gil*. Edward Hall cast the naïve sister from *The Taming of the Shrew* as a priest in *Twelfth Night* and the male lead who forces his betrothed into submission in the former as a drunken, aged, foul-speaking knight in the latter. In this way, repertory and repertoire assist as a constant reminder of theatricality, suspending mimetic depictions of problematic gender dynamics.

Both performance scripts were translations commissioned specifically for the productions. Johnston and Boswell have worked together numerous times before, as have Hall and Warren. These long-standing partnerships in translating Golden Age and early modern plays also contribute to the body of theatrical staging techniques that have become part of the recognized repertoire for Golden Age performance in the United Kingdom and British Shakespearean performance abroad. The translation process was not masked for either production; it was confronted, relished, and made visible and produced a familiarizing, rather than estranging, effect. Leanore Lieblién argues, “When a translation of a play is done for a specific production, it becomes part of the *mise en scène*. That is to say that the choices that are an inevitable feature of any translation interact with and are altered by the interpretive strategies that are implicit in the staging process” (77). Lieblién’s claim is enhanced by the histories of translation partnerships. The dramaturgy of both productions came from the script just as much as the staging process, both invoking a repertoire of recent stage histories as an instrumental part of translation. In this way, the challenge of translation reveals the layers of linguistic and cultural translation. The combination of repertory, or running plays concurrently, with the same company of players, and with a specific repertoire (of acting styles and stage histories), shapes a specific type of intertextuality that is key to translating Renaissance and Golden Age theatre for a foreign audience.

What these productions illustrate is that modernization becomes a key component in displacing the foreign in contemporary Golden Age and early modern performance. But this modernization does not involve a translation onto a specific contemporary setting and culture; indeed, it is the very negotiation of modern elements with traditional and original components that facilitates the readability of the shows. The linguistic translation of *A Lady of Little Sense* signaled a twenty-first century setting and worked with a seventeenth-century play and costuming and nineteenth-century music and dance style to free the play from imposing a cultural stereotype. The various aspects of modernization were employed not as a means to reset the action in a specific time period, but to evoke a feeling of cultural authenticity through movement and sound. This very cultural authenticity is a mixture of both a more legible time in Spain as well as the legacy of Golden Age performance in the United Kingdom. Audiences grasp two cultural traditions at one time, resulting in a greater facility in reception and the diminishing of gender stereotypes.

Repertory and repertoire function as stabilizing devices through the cohesion of a theatrical season and artistic direction, and through the same body of actors and elements within the *mise-en-scène*. They offset potentially essentializing assumptions about Golden Age theatre that could be drawn from a stand-alone production that could be viewed as an exemplary snapshot of Golden Age culture. Repertory and repertoire give context to new plays performed in a particular country, buttressing the foreign against a legacy of recent performance, thereby familiarizing both through their relationship to each other. Ultimately, a deliberate combination of performance practices can make the dramatic literature from another culture less foreign. Crucially perhaps, the double-seeing of this intermediary space between Golden Age and early modern theatre and contemporary performance practices and stage histories chips away at the discomfort that accompanies antiquated gender paradigms.

Notes

1. Lope de Vega's play is entitled *La dama boba*, Johnston's translation *The Lady Boba: A Woman of Little Sense*, and Boswell's production *A Lady of Little Sense*. This paper addresses the production unless otherwise noted.

2. *The Taming of the Shrew*, like most of Shakespeare's non-history plays, is set outside England, thereby displacing the characters and customs onto another setting and culture.

3. See Della Gatta (especially 193-95) for a review of RSC productions of Golden Age theatre and their varying uses of flamenco.

4. For an excellent analysis of the relationship of Francoist politics and the 1956 Spanish film *La fierecilla domada* (dir. Antonio Román), see Cerdá. For the stage history of *The Taming of the Shrew* and its relationship to Francoist censorship, see Gregor and Bandín.

5. In the five years from 2009 to 2014, thirty-five Lope de Vega plays, adaptations, and appropriations were performed at Almagro, and of those productions, three of them were of *La dama boba*. The number of Lope plays only exceeds Shakespeare because of the 2009 "de Lope" season in which seventeen Lope plays were performed. Typically, the number of Golden Age plays in any given year only exceeds Shakespeare when Golden Age playwrights are grouped together.

6. It is noteworthy that none of the reviews of Propeller's production of *Taming* in Spain were compared to *A Lady of Little Sense* by any major news source.

7. Therefore not just the play, but also the production, has a preceding stage history that plays into the reception of the 2013 production.

8. Barbara Hodgdon likewise described the 2006-2007 production as having a "sense of a stag party seen through a high-camp lens during the first half, but as the physical cruelty intensified, laughter faded into guilty silence" (123).

9. Lynda E. Boose writes, "the critical history of *Shrew* reflects a tradition in which such revisionism has become a kind of orthodoxy" (132). For a history of the performance of feminism in famous film and theatrical productions, see Randal. For a recounting of feminist productions in England from 1973-2003, see Friedman.

10. The Induction can be read in numerous ways, with Sly as a stand-in for Kate—since he is subjected to verbal ridicule by the tavern staff in the same way she will be by Petruchio—or with Sly as a stand-in for Petruchio—and patriarchal society's insistence that a man should learn how to tame his wife. What is paramount is that the scene allows for a distancing effect from the main storyline. For more on how this scene can be interpreted, see Aspinall.

11. Edward Hall and Roger Warren write that double casting actor Vince Leigh as Sly and Petruchio is meant to illustrate that "Petruchio's career is Sly's wish-fulfillment about marriage and dominating women" (11).

12. Whether this play was written by Shakespeare or a different playwright is not clear. Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* was not published in quarto; it only appears in the First Folio, published in 1623, after Shakespeare's death. It has not been determined whether *A Shrew* was a precursor to Shakespeare's play, a re-drafting of it, or an entirely separate play. For a thorough discussion of these possibilities, see Barbara Hodgdon's introduction to the Arden edition (2010), especially pages 7-38.

13. Thompson also recommends highlighting in performances of *Othello* the sources that led to Othello's characterization, and metatheatrically, how prior texts within the play help to construct Othello's character (Barbantio, Iago, Duke, Senators, etc.) (192).

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