



Es mi intención mostrar en este artículo la mediocre calidad como traductores literarios del hispanista británico Gerald Brenan (1894-1987) y de su esposa la poetisa norteamericana Gamel Woolsey (1895-1968). Analizo para ello las versiones al inglés que realizan de los pasajes y poemas medievales españoles que insertan en *The Literature of the Spanish People* (1951) de Brenan. Éstas están repletas de errores de interpretación. Muestro asimismo los recursos que el matrimonio Brenan emplea para disimular su mediocridad como traductores, de la que parecen ser empero conscientes.

Gerald Brenan and Gamel Woolsey as translators: an analysis of their English versions of the medieval poems included in Brenan's *The Literature of the Spanish People*

*In this paper I endeavour to portray the mediocrity of the British hispanist Gerald Brenan (1894-1987) and his wife the American poet Gamel Woolsey (1895-1968) as literary translators. I therefore analyse the English versions of the Spanish medieval passages and poems that they have included in Brenan's *The Literature of the Spanish People* (1951). Their versions are full of errors of interpretation. I also analyse the resources employed by the Brenans to disguise their mediocrity as translators, a fact of which they seem to be aware.*

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One cannot but admit that Gerald Brenan's *The Literature of the Spanish People* (1961)¹ is a unique work, for, unlike most conventional literary manuals, it is not merely a study of different literary periods and authors who write in Spanish, but a personal account of the works of writers through all the different literary periods which were written in «Spanish» languages. In Brenan's eyes literature written in Latin, Arabic, Mozarabic, Catalan, Galician or Basque is as «Spanish» as literature written in Castilian, the latter being the one he concentrates on the most. When Brenan analyses works written in Latin or Arabic or in any Peninsular language, he tries to find all the hispanic references that they contain. One can thus say that the title «The Literature of the Spanish People» is a faithful reflection of the author's intention to include all the cultural, racial and linguistic aspects that embody a study of the literature belonging to the different Spanish peoples.

Bearing in mind that Spanish literature had been studied relatively little in English-speaking countries up to the time of the book's publication and that any study had been monopolised by critics such as G. Ticknor, J. Fitzmaurice-Kelly, J. B. Trend, Aubrey F. G. Bell or E. Allison Peers, Brenan is the first one to present a popular approach to Spanish literature. His intention was to make this subject accessible to the non-specialist English-speaking reader. His work is not directed towards the reader who reads to check intellectual opinions and profound critical judgements previously uttered by the critics considered to be specialists. As Brenan explains in the «Preface» (1961: xxi-xxii),

I make no claim to special knowledge and, though I have done my best to absorb the work of scholars in the field I covered, the point of view from which I have written has been that of the person who reads literature for pleasure. (...) It is becoming more and more the custom today for literary critics to leave all discussions of the early periods of literature to specialists, who alone are supposed to have the qualifications necessary for writing upon them.

The aim of this paper however is not to study the quality of Brenan's work as a manual of Spanish literature but to make a modest contribution to the analysis of Brenan's quality as a translator of Spanish medieval literature (poetry and prose) into English.² In doing this one must not forget that the Hispanist claims in the above-mentioned «Preface» that he is grateful to his wife, Gamel Woolsey, for her collaboration in translating the poems, although he does not indicate exactly which translations she is responsible for. From Brenan's words (1961: xviii) we deduce that Woolsey appears to be the translator of a large number of the poems and prose passages following her husband's advice and not merely an assistant translator, for he claims,

It is only fair to state that *I set her* an almost impossible task by insisting that they [her versions] should, in almost every instance, be word for word translations of the original (...). It was only within these limits that *she was free to seek* what is the natural goal of every translator -some equivalent in English of the form and spirit of the original poems. (My italics)

¹ Though originally published by Cambridge University Press in 1951, I have used the edition of New York and Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1961.

² For more details, see my paper «La difusión del villancico anónimo 'Tres Morillas me enamoran en Jaén' en inglés. Aciertos y errores retóricos y estilísticos de la traducción de Gerald Brenan.» *Boletín del Instituto de Estudios Giennenses* (1996) 159. 137-143.

Brenan continues by saying that «both» agreed to be as loyal as possible to the original in their translations, but if they were not successful in being so for the whole passage or poem chosen to translate, that that would not be anything too serious:

Here we both agreed that, if this [equivalence] could be obtained for a few lines, a certain lameness in the rest of the passage could be tolerated. (xviii)

Therefore it is clear that they were conscious of their limitations as translators, but they do not seem too worried about this.

Woolsey's role as a translator was not limited to *The Literature of the Spanish People*. In 1951 she translated Benito Pérez Galdos's *La de Bringas*, published under the title of *The Spendthrifts* (1951), her only venture in the literary translation of fiction. Brenan, naturally, was far from sparing of praise for this feat. Indeed, in his *Personal Record 1920/1972* (1975:189) he wrote that Woolsey was an excellent translator and that she managed to produce flexible English of great quality. It is not surprising that he should be so generous in his praise of his wife's work and therefore I think that one should not give too much credibility to his word on this subject. Nevertheless others can be a judge of her quality as translator. Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy (1992:397-98), Brenan's biographer, assures us that «verbs were never Gamel's strong point» and even gives concrete examples of the mistakes she made. He continues by saying that «when speaking [Spanish] she tended only to use the present tense» (398). However, he reports on V. S. Pritchett's favourable review of Woolsey's translation (397) in *The New Statesman*, but let us not forget that Pritchett was one of Brenan's closest friends. Frances Partridge (1988:viii), a close friend of Woolsey's, admits that «her [Gamel's] spoken Spanish was limited». Their friendship no doubt justifies Partridge's praise of Woolsey's

translating skills. She calls *The Spendthrifts* an «excellent translation from the Spanish of *La de Bringas*» (viii) and adds that «other books of his [Pérez Galdos's] have since been published in versions less skilful than Gamel's, for she had a rare gift for the difficult art of translation» (viii).

Any effort to compare the text of *The Spendthrifts* with *La de Bringas* in some depth confirms that there are innumerable examples of misinterpretation and lexical imprecision. Due to logical reasons of space, here I include a short fragment of Galdos's novel with its respective English translation which may serve as an example of Woolsey's quality as a translator of literary Spanish:

Sin aguardar a que Paquito se hiciera licenciado en dos o tres Derechos, habiale adjudicado un empleillo en Hacienda con cinco mil reales, lo que no es mal principio de carrera burocrática a los dieciséis años mal cumplidos. Toda la sal de este nombramiento, que por lo temprano parecía el agua del bautismo, estaba en que mi niño, atareado con sus clases de la Universidad y con aquellas lecturas de Filosofía de la Historia y de Derecho de gentes a que se entregaba con furor, no ponía los pies en la oficina más que para cobrar los cuatrocientos dieciséis reales y pico que le regalábamos cada mes por su linda cara. (1984:11)

Without even waiting for young Paquito to pass his Law examinations, he had got him a place in the Treasury with a salary of five thousand reals -not a bad beginning to a bureaucratic career at the age of sixteen. And the best part of it was that the boy who already had plenty to do, what with his classes at the University and his beloved lectures on the Philosophy of History and Common Law, didn't even have to put a foot inside the office except at the end of the month, when they made him a present of four hundred and sixteen reals and a few odd pennies for the sake of his handsome face. (1951:5-6)





However, as far as the history of literature is concerned it is Brenan's name alone that is recorded as translator of selected passages and poems that are used to illustrate *The Literature of the Spanish People* (1975). Proof of this is that Robert S. Rudder (1975:600) only cites the Hispanist as translator and editor of this literary anthology and makes no mention of Woolsey. We know of Woolsey's collaboration in Brenan's work mainly as a translator because the latter mentions this in the Preface.

In the chapters that Brenan dedicates to «The Roman and Visigoth Periods» and «The Arab Period» in *The Literature of the Spanish People* the translations of the Latin and Arab texts in English are scarce in number, five and none respectively, no doubt due to two reasons. Firstly, the Latin that Brenan had learnt — there is no record that Woolsey understood this language — was a result of his autodidactic learning. Brenan admits in the «Preface» (1961: ix): «I do not read Arabic». In the chapter «The Early Middle Ages» the passages selected from the *Poema del Mio Cid* are short and not difficult to understand, even for a Spanish-speaking reader not used to reading old Castilian. Whether the translator was Brenan or Woolsey, what is clear is that the versions in English that we are given show up to three different deviations from the original text:

a) Nos de natura somos de condes de Carrión; devimos casar con hijas de reyes o de emperadores.

We are sprung from the Counts of Carrión; by right we should marry daughters of kings or emperors. (48)

As the reader can appreciate, the translator takes a certain liberty with the translation in the present simple of «devimos casar» to «by right we should marry»: The words «by right» are the translator's own words, and do not belong to the author of the text.

b) A priessa cantan los gallos e quieren crebar albores.

Hurriedly crow the cocks and the day seeks to break. (48)

In the old Spanish text the expression «quieren crebar albores» means that the cocks wanted to break the dawn and give way to the new day. In the translation however it seems that it is the day that wishes to break and the protagonism is taken away from the cocks. Subsequently the original image that the anonymous author sought to create is lost in this English version.

c) Martín Antolínez mano metió al espada, relumbra tod el campo, tanto es limpia e clara.

Martín Antolínez put his hand to the sword; all the field lights up, so clean and clear it was. (49)

The first line of the original is in the past simple («metió») and the translator puts the verb in English in the past («put»). But both «relumbra» and «es» are in the present simple in the original yet in the translation only «relumbra» is translated into the present simple («lights up») whereas «es» is translated into the past simple («was»), which evidently creates a verbal imbalance which the original lacks.

The attempts at translating Galician-Portuguese are also unfortunate as there are more misinterpretations of the original. In the «alvorada» with which the translator illustrates this literary period, there are several mistakes in the translations of verbal tenses, especially in the first stanzas:

toda-las aves do mundo d'amor *dizian*

All the birds in the world of love *are discoursing*

toda-las aves do mundo d'amor *cantavam*

All the birds in the world *are singing* of
love (55) (My italics)

On the other hand, in the stanzas that follow the «alvorada» the translation of the verbs «pousavam», «siian», «beviam», «banhavam» is correct; they are translated into the past continuous or past simple. Brennan and Woolsey do not seem comfortable in their roles of translators of Galician-Portuguese to English. Their escapist reaction is reaffirmed when faced with the task of translating six repetitive stanzas written by the Galician minstrel Pero Meogo. They opt for an easy way out, that of simplifying the text. Maybe we should ask ourselves if this is due to the fact that Brennan and Woolsey found the translation a touch too difficult?:

Levantou-s'a velida,
levantou-s' alva,
e vai lavar camisas
en o alto.
Vai-las lavar alva.

Levantou-s'a louçana,
levantou-s' alva,
e vai lavar delgadas
en o alto.
Vai-las lavar alva.

E vai lavar camisas,
levantou-s' alva,
o vento lh'as desvia
en o alto.
Vai-las lavar alva.

E vai lavar delgadas,
levantou-s' alva,
o vento lh'as levava
en o alto.
Vai-las lavar alva.

O vento lh'as desvia,
levantou-s' alva,
meteu-s a alva en ira
en o alto.
Vai-las lavar alva.

O vento lh'as levava,
levantou-s' alva,
meteu-s'a alva en sanha
en o alto.
Vai-las lavar alva.

The translation can be given in two lines.
'The girl got up at dawn and went to wash
her shifts on the hill. The wind blew them
away, the girl was angry. (61)

There is no doubt that the Hispanist and his wife find the poems written in Spanish much easier to translate. The translations of both the introduction to Berceo's *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* and selected passages of *Vida de Sancto Domingo de Silos* are very faithful to the original text and do not sacrifice one bit of their literary quality (65). Yet once again we are forced to wonder why their translation of the fragment of Berceo's *Vida de Sancta Oria* is not quite up to scratch. The translator chooses to paraphrase the text but fails to show complete understanding of the lines in question. Here I include the original text and its ambiguous translation that appears in Brennan's work:

Estando en el árbol estas dueñas contadas,
Sus palomas en manos alegres e pagadas,
Vieron en el cielo finiestras foradadas;
Lumbres salían por ellas, de duro serían
contadas.

(...), the column turned into a leafy tree,
on the branches of which the three virgins
were standing gaily with their doves in their
hands. In the distance she could see piercing
the sky the innumerable lighted windows of
the Celestial City. (67)





Furthermore, the translator «forgets» to translate or paraphrase a stanza written by Juan de Mena which obviously is of great syntactic and lexical complexity:

Con dos quarentenas e más de millares
le vimos de gentes armadas a punto,
sin otro mas pueþlo inerme allı junto (sic)
entrar por la vega talando olivares. (91)

Instead of offering a translation an observation is made that Mena's poem reminds Brenan of Gray's *Amatory Lines*. Faced with an impossible task or maybe his own inability to translate a given passage or Spanish poem, Brenan decides to include a passage or quote an English, French or Italian literary work which resembles the Spanish text in question. In the chapter dedicated to Spanish literature in Arabic, a chapter in which English versions cannot be offered, Brenan mentions that the texts are reminiscent of other authors, such as Milton, Stendhal, Rimbaud, Marini, Marcial, Guillaume de Poitiers and Ramón Gómez de la Serna's «greguerías» (18, 19, 21, 21, 22, 22, 30). Indeed, while the translation of Mena's stanza is made all the more conspicuous for its absence Brenan has no alternative but to assure us that this selected fragment reminds him of Gray, which we assume has to suffice.

Brenan also refuses to translate the Arch-priest of Hita's «serranillas». He quotes one in its entirety, but admits that «a translation of this that will convey something of the spirit of the original is beyond my powers» (77), which leads him to offer a rather prosaic and literal (though faithful) version. When it comes to *Libro de Buen Amor* Brenan includes a brief representative stanza, but as he becomes conscious of the fact that his translation is losing the original spirit of the fragment, he conveniently decides to take the same attitude as he had done with the previous «serranilla»:

My translation fails to show the raciness of the language, but anyone who has lived in Spain will recognize that the observation is as true today as it was then. (83)

As the reader can appreciate, Brenan is relatively sparing of illustrative passages of medieval texts. The few that appear in his work either come without a translation or a paraphrase, let alone a poetic version. He only dares to attempt the poetic translation of short, popular stanzas of relatively little syntactic or lexical complexity, and yet still allows us to observe the odd mistake.³ To reaffirm this we have to look at a few lines of some of the Marqués de Santillana's famous short poems:

Sospirando iba la niña
e non por mí,
que yo bien se lo entendı.

Sighing went the girl,
and not for me,
too well I knew.

La niña que amores ha,
sola, ¿cómo dormirá?

How shall a girl who is in love
sleep alone? (96)

Evidence of Brenan's interest in only translating what is popular or easy is precisely the reason he gives for not translating or paraphrasing the Marqués de Santillana's «Querella de Amor», which is far more complex than the latter's pastoral poems. Brenan justifies his unwillingness to translate or paraphrase it by saying that «there is nothing popular about this» (97).

Jorge Manrique's «Coplas», which Brenan never says were written «por la Muerte de su

³ One of them is for instance his rendering of the anonymous «villancico» «Tres Morillas me enamoran en Jaén». See my article cited in footnote 2.

Padre», are represented in the Hispanist's work by stanzas xvi and xvii (99). The reason for this choice is undoubtedly the fact that they are the easiest to understand. They are a mere list of rhetorical questions related to the characteristic medieval theme of «ubi sunt»: «¿Qué se fizo de...?» / «Qué se fizieron de ...?» Brenan translates them correctly but they are so easy that he cannot avoid succumbing to the temptation of summarizing them in one sentence: «What has become of them?» (98). Brenan justifies his choice of these lines above others in Manrique's famous work by saying that they are the most beautiful ones in the poem. Is this really true? Are they really the most representative? What about the famous first stanza that begins with «Recuerde el alma dormida / abiu el seso y despierte / contemplando / como se passa la vida...»? What about the third one, «Nuestras vidas son los ríos / que van a dar en la mar...»? Are these not the most representative of Manrique's «Coplas»? What is true is that they require a translation that is more complex and elaborate than any that Brenan or Woolsey are prepared to give.

Finally, we may conclude that Brenan is not exactly worthy of the prestige that some grant him for *The Literature of the Spanish People*.⁴ Furthermore, bearing in mind that he is thought to be an expert on «cosas de España», his role as a translator subsequently detracts much from the image that one should have of such a famous Hispanist. Neither Brenan nor Woolsey could be considered accomplished translators, and this fact—along with the characteristic mediocrity of the above-mentioned work—serves to highlight the idea that although perhaps the author deserves due

merit for his autodidacticism he has been somewhat overvalued as a Hispanist. *The Oxford Companion to Spanish Literature* (1978:75) makes a biting remark of *The Literature of the Spanish People* as «a dangerous tool for students and an inappropriate one for scholars». Indeed, one needs only a rather shallow study of this work to understand why.



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⁴ Jacobs (1994:416) gives evidence of Brenan's fame as a leading Hispanist: «Though regularly criticized by academics, Gerald Brenan's *The Literature of the Spanish People* (Cambridge, 1951) is surely one of the most exciting literary introductions to have been written to any country.»