

Larry Krakauer

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Cyrano Composes a Ballade - A Study in Translations

In this paper, I am going to compare seven different English translations of "Cyrano Composes a Ballade" with the French original, by Edmond Rostand. I will compare them as to rhythm, literary allusion, use of language, and use of images, giving examples.

The eight poems do not vary much in their rhythm, which is fitting for good translations. All of them have eight syllables per line, and they seem to use two different schemes of accents. The original, the Kingsbury version, and the Untermeyer version have accents on about every third beat, like this:

./..././

The other versions use the following scheme:

./..././

Hook transition →
The accent, however, does not set the entire feeling for the verses. The words themselves are an important contributing factor. The original words give a slightly slow, calm feeling; "Je jette **avec grâce** mon feutre,/Je fais **lentement** l'abandon." The Hooker version, the Kingsbury version, the LeClercq version, and the Bissell - Wyck version share this slowness. I don't mean that these poems are not lively, but that compared with the others, their language tends to keep them from being read too fast. This is done with such lines as "with **nonchalance** I doff my hat", "With **grace** I cast my felt aside," etc. On the other hand, the rest of the versions give a faster feeling; "I **gaily** doff my beaver low," "My hat is **flung swiftly** away," etc. All eight of the poems, of course, use the classic

no 9 The Kingsbury version, made in New York, retains both Celadon and Scaramouche. The Wolfe version, made in London, uses Alcibiades instead of Celadon. Alcibiades was a Greek leader. The LeClercq version, New York, uses two totally new allusions, Ganymede and Mercury. Perhaps LeClercq did this because he thought that American audiences would not be familiar with Celadon and Scaramouche. In Greek mythology, Ganymede was a beautiful youth carried off to be the cup bearer of Zeus, and Mercury was the god of speed. The Hooker version used Launcelot and Spartacus, probably for the same reason. Launcelot was the bravest and the most famous of the knights of the round table, and Spartacus was a Roman slave who led a slave revolt in 73 B.C.

no 10 The Untermeyer version is unique in that it doesn't use any literary allusions at all. Perhaps Untermeyer thought that allusions would only slow the poem down for most Americans, who would not understand them anyway. In any event, Untermeyer is the only translator who solves the problem of allusions by ignoring them completely.

To translate a poem well, the translator must capture, in addition to the meaning, the feeling and mood of the poem. The mood is set by the use of language and by the use of images. *I think you can omit this rather bold statement.* I will go into the use of language first. Knowing French, I can compare the use of language in the original to each of the translations. The original, it seems to me, has a deliberate, playful air, but a little aloof, and not overfunny or ridiculous. These moods are set by such phrases as "...je tire mon Espadon;/Elegant comme Celadon," (...I draw my sword/Elegant as Celadon), "Ou vais-je vous larder, dindon?" (Where shall I carve you, turkey?), etc.

no 11 The Thomas - Guillemard version does not, I think, keep the same mood. It is faster, it is more lighthearted and less grave. This mood is set by such phrases as "I gaily doff my beaver low" and "You wriggle, starch white, my eel." The Wolfe version also has this fault, to a higher degree. It refers to a sword as a snickersnee, and uses such phrases as "Look! Here's a gnat; don't blink at it!", "Have you, perchance, a rhyme to spare?", and "You'll find the envoy scores a hit."

These, I think, are out of keeping with the mood of the original. The LeClercq version does the same, using such phrases as "hi-diddle-di", "sparks would fly", and "On the sad last line--presto!--I thrust." The Untermeyer version also does the same thing; for example, "My hat is flung swiftly away", "if you please", and "...as the blade makes a breeze." It is likely that these translators had a more lighthearted interpretation of the poem.

no it On the other hand, the Kingsbury version, the Bissell-Van Wyck version, and the Hooker version seem to me to be more in the mood of the poem. They keep its light humor, but don't overdo it. I think the Hooker version is one of the best in this respect. It is hard to pick any particular words or phrases which give these poems this quality.

The original poem has quite a few images to be translated. The literary allusions are images, of course, but I have already gone into that. Some of the other images in the poem are where Cyrano refers to his opponent as a dindon (turkey), "... Les coquilles tintent, ding-don!" (The blades ring, ding-dong!), "Ma pointe voltige: une mouche!" (My point whips about; a fly), and "plus blanc qu'amidon" (whiter than starch). How do the translations handle these? In the Thomas-Guillemard version, turkey is changed to cock, and the translations are, in order, "Ho for the music of clashing steel", "What now, a hit? Not much!", and "starch-white." It is interesting to note that "une mouche" (a fly) has been translated by the similar sounding "not much." Could this have been misinterpreted? In the Kingsbury version the translations are "fowl", "Ding dong! ring your bright trappings all", "my point flits like a fly on the pane", and "...you turn white as the wall." The Wolfe translations are "goose", "hark! the hilt music on the breeze", "Look! Here's a gnat; don't blink at it", and "...white as cheese." LeClercq does not translate turkey, but continues "Our blades ring, bell-like, hi-diddle-hi", "Mark how my sword point hovers", and "white as lye." And so on. There are many reasons for changing an image. One is simply to make it fit the rhyme scheme, and another is to make it fit the

context. These translations retain most of the images.

We see, then, that translating is no easy task. The translator must try to keep the meaning, the feeling and mood, the allusions, and the images. And because of all these things, it is a lot harder to translate poetry than to translate a simple paragraph, although that has problems too. Now, if I find a translation that I don't think is too accurate, I'll have a good idea of what the translator was up against, and I will not be so harsh with him.

A - You have done a thorough piece of work.