

UPON TRANSLATING A CHAPTER IN POLYDORE'S *DE INVENTORIBUS RERUM*

Louis C. Pérez

The *De Inventoribus rerum*¹ by the Italian Renaissance writer Polydore Vergil was well-known in Spain during the XVI-XVII centuries. Its popularity is proven by the three translations of Francisco Thamara, Vicente de Millis Godínez and an anonymous one. Writers such as Miguel de Cervantes and Lope de Vega were also familiar with it.² But it was Juan de la Cueva who was smitten by Polydore's work and was inspired to write a long poem of over 2,000 lines about it telling us that his intention was to correct and to add new information to it "... le faltan muchas cosas que se hallaran en esta recogidas de varios lugares i en mendadas por las Istorias i Diccionarios."³ In spite of the fact that Cueva was a student of the classics⁴ he relied heavily on the Vicente Millis Godínez translation of the *Inventoribus rerum*⁵ for his own work entitled *Los inventores de las cosas*. Polydore divided his work into eight "books" however Cueva limited himself to the first three books which relied principally on classical tradition.⁶ I doubt that Cueva's sole reason for ignoring Polydore's five other books —religious in nature and controversial— betrayed a fear of

¹ Polidori Vergilii Vrbinat. *De Rerum Inventoribvs*, (Lvdgvni: Gryphivm, 1546).

² See Weiss, Beno and Pérez, Louis C., *Juan de la Cueva's Los Inventores de las Cosas, A Critical Edition and Study*, (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980, p. 14; pp. 24-25.

³ See Weiss and Pérez, p. 20.

⁴ We read in his *Viage de Sannio* that he had translated Tibullus, Propertius, Horace, Martial, Juvenal and others.

⁵ *Los ocho libros de Polidoro Vergilio, ciudadano de Vrbino, de los inventores de las cosas*. Nuevamente traducido por Vicente de Millis Godínez, (Medina del Campo: Christoual Laesso Vaca: 1599) Godínez used the expurgated edition of Polydore's work.

⁶ It is not surprising that Cueva chose only the first three books. He was interested only in things and their inventors.

grappling with the authorities of the church. One of Cueva's brothers was an Inquisitor and the author traveled with him to the New World where the post of Inquisitor was to be exercised.⁷

In dealing now with the Godínez translation of Polydore's *Inventoribus* we hasten to note that translations have a way of revealing more than factual information of going beyond mirroring the original. Perhaps one is left with this impression due to the careful reading one gives the original in order to translate it.⁸ Reading the Spanish, instead of the Latin, one is left with the sense that Polydore, a church man, held a deep hatred for the Moslems. Of course this impression may be a result of reading the more verbose translation of the Spanish, plus a knowledge of the attitude and culture of the period. Godínez was out to influence the masses, and in this respect we recall Goethe's advice: "if you want to influence the masses, a simple translation is always best. Critical translations vying with the original really are of use only for conversations the learned conduct among themselves."⁹ Of course, one could say at this point that "Not all features of the original" could be acceptable "to the receiving culture, or rather to those who decide what is, or should be acceptable to that culture: the patrons who commission a translation, publish it, or see to it that it is distributed."¹⁰

In Chapter VIII of Book VII of his *Inventoribus*, Polydore writes on the beginning of Mohammedism, of its precepts and laws. He begins with "We will now include appropriately the origin of the perverse sect of Mohammed, and its dogma, which both in its ugliness and filthy vices, as well as in the disgraceful customs it contains, in no way differs from the evil way of the priest of the Goddess Syria..."¹¹ He then summarizes rather unemotionally the life of Mohammed, his noble birth, how he came to know Jewish and Christian laws, how it

⁷ See Icaza, Francisco A. de, *Juan de la Cueva* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1965), pp. 85-86.

⁸ "The most careful reading one can give a text is to translate it." See Gregory Rabassa, "Slouching Back Toward Babel," in *Translation: Literary, Linguistic, and Philosophical Perspectives*, Edited by William Frawlen. (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 1984), p. 32.

⁹ Quoted by Anne Dacier in the Introduction to *Translation/History/Culture. A Sourcebook*. Edited by Andre Lefevere (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, P. 7.

¹¹ The Latin reads: "Commodissime hic subiiciemus illius pestilentis mahometanae setae initium et dogmae, quae cum libidinum nefanda foeditate, tum multijugibus praeterea flagitijs nihil omnino dissonate deae Syriae sacerdotum moribus atq: uitae turpitudinibus."

happened that his father died, how he became a slave, came under the influence of Sergius, and so on. And as in the case of well-known men whose life and history is embellished with legend, we are also offered an alternate account. Polydore tells us that this is what many write about Mohammed's adolescence and of his good nature, although, he adds, some Greek authors say that he was an Ismailian and basely born, and that in his youth he supported himself by stealing. Mohammed, Polydore tells us, became dangerous to the Persians, and gained fame by participating in different battles in one of which he was wounded, when he dared attack the borders of the Roman Empire. At this point in his narrative Polydore finds an opportunity to editorialize: "But since this man [Mohammed] was astute and deceitful with the magical arts that he knew, and also beneath the cloak of religion (which is something that easily occupies the minds of men) he came to acquire greater and greater favor and credit among the Barbarians (who by nature are filled with lewdness) and so with this he gained more power, and began to call himself a prophet of God."¹² Polydore or his sources¹³ tell us that he invented a sect, "the most pernicious to mankind" (*rem perniciosam humano generi*) based on his knowledge of Judaism and Christianity: and would preach to the Jews and Christians as to where their errors lay. He proclaimed himself to be "the first most important prophet of God" (*praedicans esse se Dei prophetam primarium*), Polydore's depiction of these events is sprinkled with charged words: "deceit," "pernicious," "pestilential," etc. Mohammed, after many sermons, began to give laws and precepts to his followers. Polydore goes on to explain Mohammed's views on religious infractions, punishment, his ideas on circumcision and dietary laws. Mohammed prohibited the use of wine, required his followers to fast during the month of October, and "eat only in the evening, so that with the evening meal they restore themselves and be ready to fast during the day, because then it is licit by law to drink wine, so that being drunk they could more easily commit their rapes and dishonesties with one another."¹⁴ He believed Christ was a prophet, praised the Virgin Mary, believed in miracles and had no quarrel with the gospel, as long as it did not differ from the Koran.

¹² The Latin reads: "is itaque homo callidus atq: uaffer ingenio, magicisq: artibus pollens, ut etiae specie religionis quae bonum mentes repente occupat, apud suos barbaros suapte natura leuitate imbutos, plus sibi fauoris et potentiae conciliet, se Dei prophetam nominat."

¹³ We must not overlook the fact that Polydore might be copying literally from other sources, translating, or giving his version of his sources.

¹⁴ The Latin reads: "quo diurna abstinentia nocturna satietate refarcirent, nam tum per legem licet bibere uinum, quo facile ebrij facti sese simul stupris turpificant."

Polydore underscores the aspect of pleasures of the body permitted in Mohammedism, the many wives that Moslems were allowed, and other information now common knowledge even among those not of that faith. He summarized the precepts of their faith regarding the sabbath, their manner of praying, and tells us that Mohammed promised his followers paradise after death if they show themselves worthy and follow his commands. They also would enjoy the shade of trees, that heat and cold would not be a problem, they would dress elegantly, eat fine foods and be served by God's angels. That, says Polydore, is the only way Mohammed deals with the immortality of the body. Before launching into a comparison between Mohammedism and the true religion of God—Christianity—he tells us that aside from prayers, the Moslems do not practice anything sacred, that they do not have priests of any kind, and finally the truth is they have almost no religion. By preaching his evil religion and armed with superstition, Mohammed introduced the ways of the evil demon. This "enemy of truth," died at the age of 34 or 40. Polydore lists his successors. Then he bemoans the great number of gentiles and Christians that have turned to Mohammedism; Mohammed undid in the short period of six years what had taken the Christians 600 years to build. Polydore then launches into a harangue against the Moslem faith: "But speaking of the truth the Barbarians do not have a sense of limits, given that only beastly pleasures which that damned man gave them, took away those people from the works and knowledge of the true religion, and kept them so tenaciously in their evil faith. and so every day many unfortunate people drink this deadly poison, given by such an evil man for their perpetual damnation, so that at the end they vomit it into the swamp of the Styx. Oh miserable and wretched people, and how they will regret their madness, when they can no longer do anything about it."¹⁵

Godínez was a knowledgeable person as we know from the phrases and paragraphs of additional information he inserts in his translation of Polydore's work in the form of explanation;¹⁶ yet as a

¹⁵ The Latin reads: "Vere barbara progenies nescit habere modum: solae enim belluinae uoluptates, quae ille nequa concesserat, hasce gentes a uerae pietatis officio auocarunt, ac in maleficio pertinaciter continent. Sic malum uenenum a malo homine datum tot miseri mortales ad perpetuam perniciem quotidie perbibunt, illud postremo in Stygiam euomituri paludem. Heu quam tunc infelices, sed fero, stultitiae poenitebit?"

¹⁶ H. Stephen Straight tells us "Certainly the most obvious and probably the most important factor contributing to the success of a translation is the translators knowledge." See H. Stephen Straight. "Knowledge, Purpose and Intuition: Three Dimensions in the Evaluation of Translation." in *Translation Spectrum. Essays in Theory and*

faithful translator he “seeks to convey the *same meaning* in a new language as is found in the original.”¹⁷ He is quite in agreement with Horace who advises the translator not to “worry about rendering word for word,... but render sense for sense.”¹⁸ For a brief moment one wishes that Godínez, a careful reader of Polydore, had followed the example of Antoine Houdar de la Motte who, in his translation of the *Iliad*, after being criticized for omitting a sizeable portion of it, answered: “I have a double reply to my critic: I have followed those parts of the *Iliad* that seemed to me worth keeping, and I have taken the liberty of changing whatever I thought disagreeable.... I consider myself a mere translator whenever I have only made slight changes. I have often had the temerity to go beyond this.”¹⁹ But even if we do not let our whims guide us, as they guided de la Motte, the truth is that “Translations are not made in a vacuum. Translators function in a given culture at a given time. The way they understand themselves and their culture is one of the factors that may influence the way in which they translate.”²⁰ Perhaps one could wish that Godínez had a sprinkling of the spirit of de la Motte. However, we should bear in mind, that a translator is answerable to the patron who commissions a translation. “Patrons circumscribe the translators’ ideological space.”²¹ But all these are excuses to get Godínez off the hook for his servile attitude toward Polydore’s *Inventoribus*. A close reading of Godínez’ translation, reveals he was not only in accord with Polydore’s sentiments but he even tried to enhance the *Inventoribus*’ message by underscoring negative aspects found in the original, often using two words in lieu of one, not necessarily for clarification either. We have the feeling as we read Godínez’ work that his additional words are tantamount to a workman pounding in a thumbtack with a heavy sledge hammer, where simple thumb pressure would have been sufficient. We find that in Godínez “the most pernicious to mankind” (*rem perniciosam humano*) is rendered by “la peor y más perniciosa que nunca se levantó en el género humano”(157V). We hasten to add that this longer translation may have to do with the nature of the Latin language. As Paul Valéry reminds us, “Latin is, in general, a more

Practice, Edited by Marilyn Gaddis Rose (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1981), p. 41.

¹⁷ See Stephen David Ross. “Translation and Similarity” in Rose, P. 14.

¹⁸ See *Translation/History/Culture*, Edited by Andre Lefevere, p. 15.

¹⁹ See Ann Dacier’s Introduction to *Translations/History/Culture*, p. 2.

²⁰ John of Trevisa. “The power of patronage”, in *Translation/History/Culture*, p. 14.

²¹ Anne Dacier, p. 8.

compact language than our own.”²² But it is obvious that Godínez’ lengthy translation does not elucidate the Latin. If it reveals anything it is that Godínez avidly accepted Polydore’s bias. This becomes evident from other examples, where “new sect” (*novam sectam*) is amplified and rendered as “nueva y maldita doctrina;” “deceit” (*fraude*) = “fraude y engaño;” “the most pernicious” (*rem perniciosam*) = “la peor y más pernicios que nunca;” “for that is what he called his book of laws” (*Sic dogmatum libellum appellavit*) = “que assi llamó a aquella escriptura y libro de su falsa doctrina;” “pleasures” (*voluptatem*) = “deleytes y luxurias, and other examples. At times he adds another blow, inserting phrases absent in the original: “preualeciendo de cada dia esta maldita secta” (159V). Godínez does not let us forget that when Polydore is writing Mohammedans or Saracens, he really means Moors: “que ahora llamamos Moros” (159V). Obviously Polydore’s view of the Moslems found a warm response in Godínez.

We should not overlook at this point the disservice Polydore performs in this chapter and perhaps others, in allowing his religious persuasion to color his writing to such a great extent. We should bear in mind that the ideas in this biased view—in a work purported to be historical—will multiply via the many translations done in other languages.²³ Godínez’ close rendering of Polydore’s *Inventoribus* influences or reinforces his public’s view—readers and listeners.²⁴ That is views often expressed take on an aura of truth.

It is no surprise that Polydore here mixes history with myth,²⁵ considering that he has done it throughout the writing of his *Inventoribus*. This leads one to suspect that Polydore had a strange or popular notion of what constituted history.²⁶ “The only thing that suits the historian is to tell the truth.”²⁷ a contemporary of Godínez would say.

²² He goes on to say: “It has no articles: it is chary of auxiliaries (at least during the classical period), it is sparing of prepositions. It can say the same things in fewer words and moreover, it is able to arrange these with an enviable freedom almost completely denied to us. See Paul Valéry. “Variation on the *Eclogues*.” in *Theories of Translation*” *An Anthology of essays from Dryden to Derrida*, Edited by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 113.

²³ In all fairness one should bear in mind that Polydore is rather severe with his own Christians regarding indulgences, relics celibacy, etc.

²⁴ Besides the sermons the public as is now well-known also listened to readings.

²⁵ Of course his *Anglica Historia* is highly regarded for its objectivity and the rejection of the mythical origins of the English.

²⁶ See Bruce W. Wardropper, “*Don Quixote*: Story or History” *Modern Philology*, Vol. 63 (1965), pp. 1-11.

²⁷ See Miguel de Cervantes. *Obras Completas de Cervantes*. *Persiles*, III, VI, (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1917, 1923), p. 182.

To be careless with the truth, to color the facts with preconceived or biased notions, is dishonest, for once they are in print they are taken as truths chiselled in stone, sanctioned by the king: "A fine thing, your Grace's trying to make me believe that all these good books [of chivalry] say is nothing but lies and foolishness, when they were printed with the license of the Royal Council"²⁸ Godínez' translation also bore the approval of the council "con privilegio real" and found its way into print.²⁹

By translating and adding to the diatribe in book VII, Chapter VIII, Godínez makes himself an accomplice and in a way sanctions and dignifies Polydore's book—*Inventoribus Rerum*. Fortunately however, not everyone was taken in by Polydore's work, particularly the first three books that Cueva had read and which inspired him to write what could be considered a mock poem. Cervantes found the contents of the first three books of *The Inventors of Things* amusing and pokes fun at this kind of work in his masterpiece. He introduces the character of the cousin (=Cueva), who is writing a book he calls a *Supplement to Virgilius Polydorus*. In it, the cousin tells us, he sets forth "certain things of great moment that Polydorus neglected to mention. He forgot to tell us who was the first man in the world to have a cold in the head, or the first to take unctions for the French disease, all of which I bring out most accurately, citing the authority of more than twenty-five authors."³⁰ Sancho asks the cousin: "tell me if you can, seeing that you know everything, who was the first man to scratch his head?"³¹

Although Godínez can't "improve" much on Polydore's vituperative barrage he does manage to raise the intensity of the tirade. The Spanish translation probably fed the appetite of a faction of fanatics, but the reported viciousness and perverseness of the Moslems—the Moors—wasn't, as it could not possibly be, taken as truth by all. There was in Spain at this same period of time, a nostalgia and an admiration for the Moor. In 1565 *The Abencerraje y la hermosa Jarife appeared in print, Historia de los bandos de Zegríes y Abencerrajes,*

²⁸ I use Samuel Putnam's translation of *Don Quixote*, published by The Viking Press, New York, 1949, Vol. I, Ch. XXXII, p. 278.

²⁹ On the title page we read: "Con privilegio real".

³⁰ Samuel Putnam's translation of *Don Quixote*, Vol. II, Ch. XXII, p. 652.

³¹ Samuel Putnam's translation of *Don Quixote*, Vol. II, Ch. XXII, p. 650. Sancho does not wait for an answer: "For my part. I believe it must have been Father Adam." to which the cousin replies, "So it must have been ...Seeing there is no doubt that Adam had a head with hair on it, and being the first man, he would have scratched it some time or other."

Historia de Ozmín y Daraja were very popular tales or “histories” that showed the Moor in a very good light —the realistic and the idealistic aspects were joined together. *The Abencerraje* enjoyed an enormous success. *Ozmín y Daraja*, which was included in *Guzmán de Alfarache* by Mateo Alemán, contrasted beautifully and ideally with the sordid aspects of the picaresque *Guzmán*. Lope too, and his disciples, wrote plays inspired by the historical novel *El Abencerraje*.³² And of course, we have the example of Miguel de Cervantes who in “Historia del cautivo” treats the Moorish theme in a most humane way —warts and all.³³

But, what a thorn Cervantes must have been to the members of this propaganda mill, to those enemies of tolerance and freedom who were probably instrumental in bringing about the discontinuance of religious discussions such as those that had been held in the square in Toledo. Cervantes has a touching account of the Moor Ricote —the Moor who had to leave Spain (in 1609) and found during his travels in Germany that there was more freedom there than in Spain: “...The inhabitants are not overly concerned with fine points but each one does very much as he likes, since for the most part there is full liberty of conscience.”³⁴

The role of the translator appears to have been much more important than one would at first suspect —it could very well be, and in Godínez case it probably was, an additional tool for the destruction of free thought.

I am not assuming that Godínez, Thamara or other translators of Polydore, were widely read. But there is little doubt that when these translations were preached from the pulpit, or read to groups of people, they were an additional cup of poison meted out to the listener or perhaps another nail in the coffin of religious freedom —and to the religious freedom which led to healthy debate.

A translation could be a treacherous venue, slippery and deceptive, dripping with intolerable information. As the Italian chiché has it: “traduttore —traditore.” But “traditore”, in more than one sense. Intentionally or not Godínez’ translation did contribute to warping the minds of his public for it contains venomous pages, more destructive than

³² Angel del Rio. *Historia de la literatura española*. Vol. I, (New York: The Dryden Press), p. 150.

³³ Samuel Putnam’s translation of *Don Quixote*, Vol. I, Chs. XXXIX-XLI, pp. 344-379.

³⁴ Samuel Putnam’s translation of *Don Quixote*, Vol. II. Ch. LIV, p. 864.

instructive. In the course of human events, was the translation—ergo, the propagation of the contents of chapter VIII, Book VII of Polidorus' *Inventoribus rerum* —really necessary?

Louis C. Pérez
Professor Emeritus of Spanish
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA. 16802