

## Translating a poem from Spanish

### A lyric by Gil Vicente (c 1465–c 1536)

**Gil Vicente** was perhaps the most well known Portuguese dramatist of his time, writing plays that were serious and critical enough at times to be suppressed by the Inquisition. But as well as writing great plays in Portuguese – in verse – he composed fine poetry in Spanish, often in celebration of the religious and national festivals of Spain and Spanish culture generally. The poetry of these *cantigas* – or songs – is often, like the lovely short lyric below, both charming and memorable.

#### 1

Your first task in working towards translating Gil Vicente's amusing poem – or song – into English is to get to know it as it sounds in Spanish, to hear the poem's lively rhythms and rich rhyming, and its 'voice'. The voice is a young woman's, whose family want her to marry. To say the least, she's not keen. One of the secrets of understanding the poem, then translating it, will be how well you hear, then 're-produce', this voice.

In a Spanish class, your teacher will first read the whole poem aloud. Then, perhaps taking a section each in your group, you could read it aloud a second, then a third time. Or the group could read it all through in chorus. Or you could do both. The more familiar you become with the poem's sounds and rhythms, the better.

In other lessons, such as English, your teacher might still 'read' the poem aloud so as to let you hear more or less how it sounds. A teacher's reading, and your own attempts to read the poem aloud, will give you some feel for the poem's basic rhythms and rhymes.

*Dicen que me case yo:  
no quiero marido, no.*

*Mas quiero vivir segura  
n'esta sierra a mi soltura  
que no estar en ventura  
si casare bien o no.  
Dicen que me case yo:  
no quiero marido, no.*

*Madre, no sere casada  
por no ver vida cansada,  
y quiza mal empleada  
la gracia que me Dios me dio.  
Dicen que me case yo:  
no quiero marido, no.*

*No sera ni es nacido  
tal para ser mi marido;  
y pues que tengo sabido  
que la flor yo me la so,  
dicen que me case yo:  
no quiero marido, no.*

After hearing it read aloud, and reading it yourself, you may begin to pick up some of the sense of the poem. You may well also pick up who she's talking to.

You will certainly hear how much rhyming there is, and how the verse moves along quickly, even jauntily. Does that suggest a confident voice, the voice of a proud young woman? The lines go along quite quickly too; they're only seven or eight syllables long – or three stresses. It is another hint that this is the voice of someone who knows her own mind.

You'll also soon notice that every line ends in an 'a' or an 'o' rhyme. Of course, there are many more rhyming words in Spanish than in English. So one of the questions you and your group will need to answer is: shall we try to rhyme in our translations?

## 2

Before deciding questions like this – whether or not to rhyme, or how long your lines will be – you ought to have an idea what the poem means ‘literally’. A rough literal translation will help. Here is mine, a non-literary translation in plain prose.

*They say I ought to marry, I don't want to be married, no.*

*I prefer to live secure on this hillside by myself rather than take a chance whether I'll be well married or not. They say I ought to marry, I don't want to be married, no.*

*Mother, I won't be married so as not to see life turn dreary, and perhaps (see) badly employed the grace God gave me. They say I ought to marry, I don't want to be married, no.*

*There won't be (born) and there isn't born a man who's worthy of being married to me. And since I know I'm the flower (of maidenhood generally) they say I ought to marry. I don't want to be married, no.*

## 3

You should now try some experimental translation in your group. You could start anywhere, but one good place might be the first two lines, which happen to be repeated throughout the poem.

*Dicen que me case yo:  
no quiero marido, no.*

My literal translation was:

*They say I ought to marry,  
I don't want to be married, no.*

Can we rhyme this in English? Supposing we did, we might need to go on rhyming to the end of the poem. But it could be worth a try.

If I were translating the poem, I'd try to rhyme. Here goes with the first two lines:

*They all want me to marry,  
I want to stay free.*

Or I could rhyme on a different word, so the line ends with her refusal:

*'You should marry', they say.  
As for me, I think, 'No way.'*

You could perhaps hear her very emphatic 'no' as approaching a shout – accompanied by a stamp of the foot? Have my words lost that emphasis? Is there any way of keeping it by rhyming on 'no', and not just on 'no way'?

Whatever way you work these two lines, that's eight lines of the poem already translated (experimentally), using rhyme.

And maybe it's only that repeated couplet that needs to rhyme?

As to the rest of this rhyming poem, one thing is worth remembering, and that is, that English has plenty of words ending in the 'y' of 'marry', and plenty ending in the 'ee' sound. It might be possible, using words ending in 'y' and in the 'ee' sound, to rhyme the poem all through. 'Marry' sounds nice with 'dreary', for instance.

You should keep experimenting, keep trying out lines and reading them aloud to each other. If one thing doesn't work, if your rhyming doesn't sound easy and natural, try something else, perhaps a non-rhyming version.

What you need to keep in mind is that every writer or pair or group working together will have different thoughts and ideas. Each translator or pair or group of translators needs to feel free to go his or her or their own way, to write their own Gil Vicente poem. Everyone needs to experiment, and take risks, and enjoy the freedom and the challenge.

**Robert Hull, 2015**

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Material about Gil Vicente and more of his poems can be found at:

[http://www.poetry-archive.com/v/vicente\\_gil.html](http://www.poetry-archive.com/v/vicente_gil.html)

<https://archive.org/stream/lyricsofgilvicen00vice#>

[http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/788396.Gil\\_Vicente](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/788396.Gil_Vicente)