

## 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

The teacher needs first to read the poem – or song – aloud, to have the students hear, in Spanish, the poem's rhythms, its rhyming, its 'voice' – that of a young woman whom 'they' (the family presumably) want to be married; she is dramatically reluctant to be persuaded.

Once the whole poem has been read aloud by the teacher, the class itself, working in groups, should themselves read it – the aim being to get in touch with the 'music' of the poem, even before it is understood. Each group could first take a section each, in chorus, then each individual in a group. The more familiar students become with the movement and cadences and sound-values of the poem, the better.

In other lessons, such as English, the teacher not familiar with Spanish who 'reads' the poem aloud, 'decoding' it, will still be able to give a clear impression of how it sounds. Such a decoding-reading, with the students' own attempts to read the poem aloud, will convey much of the poem's basic musical structure. It is crucial, of course, that opportunities for translation are not neglected through uncertainties about reading aloud. And students should know that much very successful translation takes place without the translators' knowing the original language.

*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.*

Students will quickly hear how much rhyming there is, and how the verse moves along. They may start to pick up the confidently rebellious voice of the young woman.

They will similarly need little prompting to note the line-lengths of seven or eight syllables, or three stresses; or that every line ends in an 'a' or an 'o' rhyme.

They could be guided at this point towards considering whether or not they will try to rhyme their translations. The relative frequency of rhymes in Spanish, as compared with rhymes in English, is something they should consider.

## 2

The next step is to introduce a rough, word-for-word translation, such as mine here:

*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

Students might now try some experimental translation in their group. A good place might be the first two lines, 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.*

Two possible versions of mine in English are offered to the students in their notes at this point, together with comments on them.

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

And, rhyming on her refusal:

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

Once they have decided – as a group, or a pair, or individually – on a version of these two lines (eight lines of the poem), they might ask themselves whether that is the only couplet that needs to rhyme.

As it happens, English does have a goodly supply of 'y' and 'ee' words, producing rhymes like 'marry/dreary' etc, so that rhyme might be an option – risky though it is, because of the possibility of unconvincing rhyming.

Students will need encouragement at this point to keep experimenting, keep trying out lines and reading them aloud. They also need to keep in mind that every writer or pair or group or working together will have different thoughts and ideas. Each one needs to feel free to go his or her or their own way, to write their own poem, and enjoy the fun, freedom and hard work of it.

**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)