
Verse drama in the twenty-first century?

Joan SELLENT ARÚS

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
jsellent@gmail.com

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Joan Sellent holds a bachelor's degree in Catalan Philology from the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) and a master's degree in Literary Translation (University of Manchester). He is a literary translator and was a professor at the Faculty of Translation and Interpretation at the UAB, where he worked from 1994 to 2013. During his career he has combined literary translation with translating scripts for feature films and television series, and for the past twenty years he has mostly worked on translating plays. The playwrights he has translated into Catalan include W. Shakespeare, T. Williams, H. Pinter, A. Miller, O. Wilde, G. B. Shaw, Tracy Letts, J. B. Priestley, David Hirson and Brian Friel.

English translation, Neil Charlton

Abstract

Based on his personal experience as a translator of plays, the author argues – with examples – for maintaining the verse form when translating an original text in verse for the stage, convinced that verse, far from a simple adornment, enhances the aesthetic enjoyment and effectiveness in the reception of the play, while the prose option is doomed from the outset to impoverish and weaken it.

He also reviews the versifying criteria that characterise Elizabethan English drama and Neoclassical French theatre, along with the strategies that have been used to transfer this drama to other languages, eras and cultures.

Keywords: translation, verse, prose, versifying tradition, decasyllable, alexandrine, Shakespeare, Molière, Wilbur, Oliver, Hirson

Joan SELLENT ARÚS

Verse drama in the twenty-first century?

It is well known that writing verse drama in the 21st century is rare, although it cannot yet be said that it is an entirely extinct activity. Seven years ago, at London's Unicorn Theatre (specifically aimed at young audiences), the English playwright Chris Thorpe premiered his play *Hannah*, a modern recreation of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, using highly contemporary language but with the particularity that the text was written entirely in verse, specifically in the mode of iambic pentameter, the predominant and almost unique model at the time of Marlowe, Shakespeare and all Elizabethan dramatists, and which we will henceforth call *decasyllable* to understand each other better.

The play was successful among the mostly young audience it was intended for, but there is another peculiarity related to this production that more than one critic noted, and which is still very significant: throughout the process of promoting and publicising the production, it was never mentioned anywhere or at any time that the text was in verse. It was clear that the producers of the play did not want to risk highlighting a feature of the play that, in their opinion, might have put off part of the potential young audience, and jeopardised box office takings. A very clear assumption can be made from this, reflecting a prejudice that can be perfectly extrapolated to all the theatre made in the Western world: "Today, verse drama does not sell."

The audience went to see Chris Thorpe's *Hannah* unaware that they were watching a play written in verse, and in the course of the performance I do not know whether many picked up on this feature of the text. But the fact is that, according to reports, most of them left the theatre excited.

And it is clear that, in the play's success and its good reception by the audience, the fact that it was in verse played more than a minor role. Even if the audience were not aware of it, their subconsciousness had been adjusting to a verbal flow and rhythmic cadences that made the reception of the text particularly pleasant and, automatically, more credible. The veteran English actor Ian McKellen, who throughout his life has done more than his fair share of performing Shakespeare and his contemporaries, confirms this

in a way that could not be any clearer. He says: “Because verse has a rhythm and a flow, it’s perhaps more attractive to listen to and helps the actor to keep the audience’s attention.”¹

But the fact is that in today’s theatre, as I have just said, the originals written in verse are exceptions that can be counted on the fingers of two hands, with some to spare. We could cite, as closer to us in time and space, a play by a writer as transgressive as Steven Berkoff, *Decadence*, written in verse – and rhymed –, which a few years ago was translated into Catalan, with impeccable craftsmanship and preserving the versification and rhyme, by Neus Bonilla and Carme Camacho. Or *La Bête*, by David Hirson, a play written in the 20th century entirely in rhyming verse, which I will talk a bit about shortly because a few years ago I was asked to translate it into Catalan.

In fact, for many years now, most verse drama has been written by translators. Or at least we are the ones who have the most opportunities to do so, especially thanks to the regular performance of the classics on our stages. I myself have been commissioned to translate twelve texts written entirely or mostly in verse: ten plays by Shakespeare, Ben Jonson’s *Volpone*, Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, and the one I just mentioned by David Hirson. In most of these commissions it was not specified whether the version should be in verse or prose, but in all cases I chose to respect the verse, sticking more or less to the metrical patterns of the original but never abandoning the verse. I sincerely believe that translating a text originally written in verse into prose – and especially if it is a version intended for the stage – is an option that leads to an impoverishment and reduction of its aesthetic and communicative potential, despite the translator’s efforts. I will try to defend this belief and illustrate it with some examples.

If today writing verse drama is an exception, in Shakespeare’s time it was the norm. One of the reasons why dramatists mostly used verse was pragmatic: the versified text makes it easier for the actors to memorise. This is an abundantly proven fact (and many actors have confirmed it for me personally), but it would be foolish to think that the presence of verse in plays ends here, in this purely mnemonic function: we only need to remember the words of the Shakespearean actor Ian McKellen I quoted earlier.

The degree of perceptibility of the verse, however, varies considerably from one play to another, according to the versification criteria used. To give just two examples that would occupy the two extremes in this respect: on the one hand, the theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, where the verse, mostly unrhymed, creates a rhythmic cadence that the audience perceive more in the substrate than on the surface; on the other, the French tradition of Neoclassical verse drama, which relies on a structure so regular and distinguishable – alexandrines rhymed in couplets – that the audience’s consciousness and hearing detect the artifice instantly; and they not only detect it but, once they have entered the game, they expect and demand it.

If we review the history of the translations of these plays, we see that there are all kinds of options: there is a very wide repertoire of translations

1. In John BARTON. *Playing Shakespeare*, p. 26.

of both English Elizabethan and French Neoclassical plays into all languages, in verse — with a whole range of diverse versifying patterns — and in prose. It never ceases to amaze me that a writer of the stature of André Gide had written, just after the Second World War, a French version of *Hamlet* in prose, and to the amazement was added a certain shaking of my legs upon reading that Gide had given up the verse because he felt incapable, and so he had chosen what he called “rhythmic prose”. And why the shaking legs? Well, because, when I discovered this, I was right in the middle of translating this play into verse, something that not even André Gide had dared to do. For a few moments I felt like an impostor afflicted with excessive arrogance.

But this was not about succumbing to impostor syndrome either. What I imagine — as much as this must remain in the realm of mere conjecture — is that, for André Gide, translating *Hamlet* into verse must have entailed the inescapable duty to do so strictly respecting the metrical pattern and verse limits of the original, which is undoubtedly a titanic, if not chimerical, undertaking. And that, of course, is not even remotely what I intended. A translator must keep his feet on the ground and be aware of his possibilities and limitations.

The versification criteria that I felt able to apply without failing miserably, and which I have in fact applied to all of Shakespeare’s plays I have translated, as well as to Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* and Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, were those that I have already described on more than one occasion and that basically match the criteria used by Salvador Oliva in his translations of Shakespeare’s complete works, a versifying pattern that Gabriel Ferrater had already started in his version of the first two acts of *Coriolanus*.

It is the combination of verses of different lengths, but with a predominance of the decasyllable and always with an even number of syllables. To illustrate this with a short example, I have chosen a fragment of a soliloquy by Edmund, one of the characters in *King Lear* (Act I, Scene 2). The original reads as follows:

..... Why brand they us
 With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
 Who, in the lusty stealth of nature take
 More composition and fierce quality
 Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
 Go to th’creating a whole tribe of fobs
 Got ‘tween asleep and wake?²

A very literal version could be more or less as follows:

..... Per què ens posen la marca
 De vils? De vilesa? De bastardia? Vils, vils?
 Si en la furtivitat luxuriosa de la natura adquirim
 una millor constitució i una qualitat més ferotge
 que els que, dins un llit monòton, ranci, cansat,

2. William SHAKESPEARE. *King Lear*, p. 72.

s'ocupen de crear tota una tribu de ximpls
obtinguts entre el son i la vetlla?

This is a version that scrupulously respects the limits of the verse of the original, but which in reality does not contain any line that can be considered verse in Catalan. There is a typographical illusion of verse but it is a prose translation. If we remove this visual illusion, the text will take this form:

..... Per què ens posen la marca de vils? De vilesa? De bastardia? Vils, vils? Si en la furtivitat luxuriosa de la natura adquirim una millor constitució i una qualitat més ferotge que els que, dins un llit monòton, ranci, cansat, s'ocupen de crear tota una tribu de ximpls obtinguts entre el son i la vetlla?

The fluency of the original's decasyllables is completely gone, and the speech is drawn and dragged out much more than the original. And one thing that this version undoubtedly highlights is one of the most dramatic problems of translating English verse into Catalan or any Romance language: the number of syllables skyrockets, very clumsy sentences emerge, and the rhythm falters everywhere. This option (which prioritises the maximum possible literalness and the conservation of the verse limits to the detriment of rhythm) can be seen in some translations intended for publication, especially in academic fields. However, when they are for the stage, I think it can be said that the slowness of the text masks their oral reception and aesthetic enjoyment, and such a version, in my opinion, can only be valid as a preliminary step to a more fluid metrical version on stage: once the meaning has been assimilated and without losing sight of it, you can move on to modify the lines to make them less cumbersome and achieve a Catalan verse rhythm. With these goals in mind, this is the result I achieved in this second phase:

..... Per què ens pengen
la marca de bastards, de vils, de miserables?
Per què, si la passió furtiva i natural
ens ha fet més enèrgics i atractius
que un llit monòton, fatigat i ranci,
que fabrica una tribu de cretins
entre el son i la vetlla?³

This version shifts further away from literalness but turns each line into a verse, by combining alexandrines and decasyllables.

It is clear that, for a text in verse to work satisfactorily in its oral transmission, it must be spoken with the appropriate elocution but also exactly as it is written, without adding or removing a single syllable and without using synonyms or making changes in the line order that can vary the syllable count and, consequently, distort the metrics. If, for example, in the fourth line of this fragment, instead of saying “ens ha fet més enèrgics i atractius”, the actor says “ens ha fet més enèrgics i més atractius,” “ens ha tornat més enèrgics

3. William SHAKESPEARE. *Versions a peu d'obra*, p. 288.

i atractius” or “ens ha fet més atractius i enèrgics”, any change will distort the decasyllabic verse, and the rhythmic cadence of the text will suffer.

By this I do not mean that, as a translator, I consider the text I have produced untouchable. Quite the contrary: I have always been open to any suggested changes in the first readings and before I have completely finalised the text, or even in the course of the rehearsals, but with the one condition that any changes do not have negative effects on the metrics. To this end, obviously (and if the director is sensitive enough to the importance of the verse, which happens very often but not always), there is no other way than to entrust these changes to the translator himself or subject them to his approval.

This requirement is, of course, even more inescapable when it comes to plays with rhyming verse, as is the case with the other category of verse drama I mentioned a little while ago: that of 17th-century French Neoclassical theatre, whose greatest exponents are Corneille, Racine and Molière. If, for example, in a performance of Molière’s *The Misanthrope*, the audience hears (Act I, Scene 1):

Et la plus glorieuse a des régals peu chers,⁴

they know that the next alexandrine must obligatorily end in *-ers*, and the short beat of waiting until the word chosen by the playwright arrives is a stimulus that, without doubt, activates their imagination and keeps their attention and interest in what is said.

Rigorously complying with the rules of the game, Molière then wrote:

Dès qu’on voit qu’on nous mêle avec tout l’univers.⁵

If, out of negligence or for some strange reason, the actor does not stick strictly to the text and says, for example,

Dès qu’on voit qu’on nous mêle avec tout le monde,

this infraction of the rules (and for a double whammy, because it also affects the metrics and makes the rhythm limp) would not only offend the audience’s ear, but, by frustrating their expectations of the formal resolution of the verse, would completely undermine the credibility of the message intended.

These two lines are from the first scene of the first act of Molière’s *The Misanthrope*. Joan Oliver, in his 1950s version — which strictly adhered to the structure of alexandrine couplets — recreated them as follows:

I fins la més honrosa us serà un trist regal
quan veureu que us barregen amb tots, en general.⁶

4. MOLIÈRE. *Le Tartuffe. Dom Juan. Le Misanthrope*, p. 239.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

6. Joan OLIVER. *Versions de teatre*, p. 67.

A faithfulness to form that, as can be seen at first glance, is not strictly literal; this is not an exception but the frequent result of the negotiation imposed by the translation of versified texts: the closer we want to stay to the formal structure, the more often we have to move away from the literal equivalents. But, if in translating poetry this option can be debatable, in verse drama (and especially in plays like the one we are dealing with, in which rhyme and metrical regularity are such decisive elements in the construction and transmission of the meaning) it is not only far less debatable but also highly recommended if you want to be faithful to the intention of the original. As is so often the case in literary translation, and especially in drama, faithfulness and literalness are not synonymous.

Let's examine another brief example from Molière, in this case from *Tartuffe* (Act I, Scene 1):

Allons, vous, vous revez, et bayez aux corneilles.
Jour de Dieu! Je saurai vous froter les oreilles.⁷

In the hands of Joan Oliver, these alexandrines become:

I tu què fas, badoca, guaitant les musaranyes?
Valga'm Déu, ja veuràs com et trec les lleganyes!⁸

If the actor, let's say, neglected something so seemingly minor as the opening conjunction of the first line and said "Tu què fas, badoca, guaitant les musaranyes?", the line would become distorted and would no longer be an alexandrine.

Around the same time that Oliver was translating *The Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe*, the American Richard Wilbur was translating these plays into English. In Wilbur's hands, however, the twelve syllables of both of the two alexandrines of *Tartuffe* that we have chosen as an example become ten:

Wake up, don't stand here gaping into space!
I'll slap some sense into that stupid face.⁹

Why did Richard Wilbur make this metrical change? Well, in short, because he takes into account the expectations of the potential audience and uses the usual metrical pattern in classical theatre in the English language, which is not the alexandrine but the decasyllable.

And this is precisely the model that David Hirson uses when, in the late 20th century, he wrote *La Bête*, the play in English verse that in 2012 I had the opportunity to translate into Catalan for the TNC. Let's look at an example.

At the end of the first act, one of the characters, Elomire (anagram of Molière) says when referring to his fierce antagonist, the histrionic and verbose Valere:

7. MOLIÈRE. *Le Tartuffe. Dom Juan. Le Misanthrope*, p. 46.

8. Joan OLIVER. *Versions de teatre*, p. 151.

9. MOLIÈRE. *Five Plays: The Misanthrope. Tartuffe. The School for Wives. The Miser. The Hypochondriac*, p. 123.

The very thought that we're not *worth* consulting
Should strike you as sufficiently insulting
To tell the Prince, as I will, face to face,
Exactly how we feel about this case.¹⁰

Four perfect decasyllables with a constant iambic rhythm.

If we count the number of syllables and accents, we will see the exact metrical coincidence with the two *Tartuffe* lines by Richard Wilbur that I quoted a moment ago.

La Bête is a parody/homage that an American playwright of the late 20th century wanted to write about to Molière's Neoclassical theatre, and therefore, when deciding to versify it, he did exactly the same as Wilbur: he chose the metrical pattern associated with this playwright as historically assimilated by the Anglophone tradition: that is, he discarded the alexandrine in favour of the decasyllable.

In my case, the opportunity to translate *La Bête* into Catalan was a unique experience for more than one reason: firstly because, when recreating the playwright's criteria for versification, pure logic demanded that I follow exactly the reverse process, that is to say, to use alexandrine verse, the metrical pattern of the French Neoclassical originals and also of the tradition established by their translations into Catalan, a language and culture where alexandrine verse is far more established than in the English language tradition. In other words: in a boomerang trajectory, I could afford the luxury of getting closer to the original form of the parodied writer (Molière) than to that of the American playwright who parodied him and who I translated (David Hirson). So, in my version, the four decasyllables of the English original that I have just quoted became:

Només la sola idea que no se'ns té per res
ja hauria d'ultratjar-te i de tenir prou pes
per plantar cara al príncep, com farà un servidor,
i dir-li el que pensem de la situació.¹¹

In other words, four alexandrine couplets like those of Molière and Joan Oliver.

The other peculiarity of this play by David Hirson is that the use of rhyming verse is not at all an optional ornament, but is the very *raison d'être* of the text. *La Bête* is a theatrical entertainment in rhyming verse, where this stylistic resource is radically put at the service of humour and at some moments takes on shades of authentic formal juggling (as in certain fragments where each of the ten syllables of a line is spoken by a different character). Therefore, here I think I may assert, without risk of being mistaken, that a prose version would have completely reduced the appeal of the play to negligible levels. Let's imagine for a moment someone producing a prose version of *La Rambla de les Floristes* or *L'Hostal de la Glòria* and we will have an idea.

10. David HIRSON. *La Bête and Wrong Mountain*, p. 65.

11. David HIRSON. *La Bête*, p. 81.

By analogy, I would dare to say the same about the translation of a play by Molière. It is clear, however, that not everyone thinks the same: not many years ago we saw firsthand the case of a French director who was invited to Catalonia to direct a *Misanthrope* in Catalan, and he insisted on the condition that the version must be in prose, I suppose because a part of the French-speaking cultural world seems to find the alexandrine quite boring. For obvious reasons, it would have been impossible or highly improbable for this director to carry out this experiment in France.

I know from personal experience the efforts that the Catalan translator had to make to overcome an obstacle course that, among other things, forced him to walk a tightrope to avoid the rhythm of the verse and the internal rhymes that came out on their own every five minutes. The translator's skill produced a highly dignified version, but that on stage (unavoidably I think) tended at times to be long and to make the speech excessively redundant. Why? Well, in my view, because, when a playwright decides to write a comedy in rhyming verse, he knows that this stylistic choice will allow him to delight in circumlocutions and redundancies, because the rhythm of the verse and rhyme will not only disguise them but will capitalise on this aesthetically, humorously and communicatively.

In *La Bête* by David Hirson, as soon as the character Valere appears on stage, he lets loose a monologue that might last about half an hour. I imagine for a moment this monologue spoken in prose, and I am sure that the speech would have been as unbearable to the audience as the character was to his antagonists on stage.

I have already said that the translation of plays into verse, especially if the verses are rhymed, often requires a departure from strict literalness if one wants to be faithful to the playwright's intentions.

I will try to illustrate this with a slightly longer fragment from *La Bête*, when Elomire, tired of Valere's verbal incontinence, can no longer take it and begins a diatribe, from which I reproduce the final part:

ELOMIRE:

[.....]

Whose only saving grace (if one there be)
Is in the unintended comedy
Arising from your weightiest pronouncements!
You seem to feel you have to make announcements
Instead of speaking in a normal tone;
But by your orotund and overblown
And hectoringly pompous presentation,
You simply magnify the desolation,
The vast aridity within your soul!
In short, I think you're just a gaping hole—
A talentless, obnoxious pile of goo!
I don't want anything to do with you!
I can't imagine anyone who would!
And if it makes me better understood

To summarise in thirty words or less,
I'd say you have the power to depress
With every single syllable you speak,
With every monologue that takes a week,
And every self-adoring witticism!...

VALERE:

Well, do you mean this as a *criticism*?¹²

I translated it as follows:

ELOMIRE:

[.....]

Els vostres exabruptes grollers i colossals
tenen només un mèrit (si és que així ho puc descriure),
i és que, sense voler-ho, al capdavant fan riure
de tan forassenyats i altisonants que són!
Amb la grotesca pompa d'un vell rinoceront
pontifiqueu a dojo i en to majestuós,
pro encara feu més obvi, palès i escandalós
el buit immens i estèril d'una ànima de suro!
I per anar acabant, Valere, us asseguro
que per mi no sou més que un ase putrefacte
i amb la vostra persona no hi vull tenir cap tracte,
ni se m'acut ningú que n'hi pugui tenir!
Pro, si us han quedat dubtes, us ho puc resumir
amb una frase més que us dono de propina:
teniu la potestat morbosa i assassina
de provocar les febres als més impertorbables
amb aquests soliloquis que es fan interminables
i aquestes graciètes d'una estultícia mítica!

VALERE

Això vindria a ser... diguéssim... una crítica?¹³

In the original of this fragment there is no *rinoceront*, no *ànima de suro*, no *ase putrefacte* and no *estultícia mítica*, which illustrates my previous point: that, in the service of rhyme and dramatic effectiveness (and, above all, if the rhyme is at the service of humour), the translator is often forced to invent things, precisely if he wants to be faithful to the playwright's intentions.

In terms of these semantic licences, I remember a roundtable on translation strategies in which I participated, and I used this excerpt from *La Bête* to illustrate my own strategies. During audience questions and comments, a prestigious poet strongly denounced the liberties we translators took, given that poetry is a sacred thing and if the poet has chosen certain words, no translator should change them. In short, what right do we have?

12. David HIRSON. *La Bête and Wrong Mountain*, pp. 47-48.

13. David HIRSON. *La Bête*, p. 61.

I had to remind him that we were not talking about poetry but something quite different, that it was a theatrical entertainment in verse, but I don't know if he was very convinced...

Finally, I hope that all these examples that I have given and discussed have served to defend and justify the main thesis of this article: my conviction that drama that has been written in verse loses its effectiveness if a translation does not maintain some kind of versification, even if the metrical criteria do not faithfully match those of the original.

And I would not want to end this article without comparing the experience of Chris Thorpe I cited at the start — the verse play *Hannah*, aimed at a young audience — with two or three productions of Shakespeare in recent years in an important public theatre in Barcelona, also supposedly intended to attract a young audience but with criteria diametrically opposed to Thorpe's. And if I say that they are diametrically opposed, it is because, as far as the text is concerned, the director of these productions (attributing to himself the additional role of translator) perpetrated versions that, apart from copying others that already existed, when it comes to covering up the plagiarism has distorted the lines and systematically impoverished the language, with the excuse of making it easy for a young audience. Frankly, I wholeheartedly support Chris Thorpe's criteria and still resist the idea that young and stupid are necessarily synonymous.¹⁴



Bibliographical references

- BARTON, John. *Playing Shakespeare*. London: Methuen Drama, 1984.
- HIRSON, David. *La Bête and Wrong Mountain*. New York: Grove Press, 2001.
- HIRSON, David. *La Bête* (trans. Joan Sellent). Barcelona: Edicions Proa (ebook), 2013.
- MOLIÈRE. *Le Tartuffe. Dom Juan. Le Misanthrope*. Paris: Gallimard, 1973.
- MOLIÈRE, *Five Plays: The Misanthrope. Tartuffe. The School for Wives. The Miser. The Hypochondriac* (trans. Richard Wilbur, Alan Drury). London: Methuen Drama, 2000.
- OLIVER, Joan. *Versions de teatre*. Barcelona: Edicions Proa, 1989.
- SHAKESPEARE, William. *King Lear*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.
- SHAKESPEARE, William. *Versions a peu d'obra* (trans. Joan Sellent). Barcelona: Biblioteca del Núvol, 2016.

14. I have named the sin but not the sinner. What I do want to make clear is that the criticism is not aimed at the company Parking Shakespeare, whose productions deserve every respect.