

Francisco J. BORGE, ed. 2023. *Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher. El necio (The Coxcomb)*. Oviedo: Luna de Abajo

Joan CURBET SOLER
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

This slim but endlessly interesting book tells us the story of a story. It tells the story of how, in its first iteration, the essential plot of *The Coxcomb*, by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher (1609, presented here in full Spanish translation) generated an enormous pleasure and fascination among its original audience. This tale provoked from the beginning a morbid interest: it told how an exemplary friendship between two men was destroyed by one friend's insistence on testing the loyalty of the other, while tempting him repeatedly with nothing less than his own wife. That initial audience, one who responded so enthusiastically to such a potentially troubling plot, had one very striking peculiarity: it was itself fictional, made up of imaginary listeners; they were the group assembled in the Castilian *venta* or inn in the memorable night in which Don Quixote (Chapter 35, first part of *Don Quixote*) fought loudly against his imaginary enemies, that were actually nothing other than simple wineskins, while wearing on his head a small bonnet that evoked a fool's cap. The kernel of that story-within-the-story, called *El curioso impertinente* (narrated between chapter 33 and 35 of *Don Quixote*, and only briefly interrupted by the chaotic episode of the wineskins) was preserved, adapted and successfully staged by the Englishmen Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher in their 1609 play, *The Coxcomb*. The story of how that tale of induced adultery was adapted, how it managed to preserve in a different genre its main motifs of jealousy, paranoia and betrayal, how it crossed over from an interpolated narrative in a novel into a full-fledged play (albeit with a significantly altered plot) on the English stage, is delightfully explained by Francisco J. Borge in this book, containing the translated text of the play into Spanish, as well as a richly suggestive introduction to it.

One of the great strengths of this edition is its firm grounding on a solid Cervantine soil: it has been published in the context of the Grupo de Estudios Cervantinos (Universidad de Oviedo), and is offered in the academic series "El Quijote y sus interpretaciones". Francisco J. Borge is a scholar steeped in the international reception of *Don Quijote*;

a researcher who is abundantly trained in the English reception of Cervantes's work and especially in Thomas Shelton's translation. This is not a version of *The Coxcomb* that considers the Cervantine influence as a possibility or as a passing influence; on the contrary, it considers the play a major step in the process of reception of *Don Quijote* in England. Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher appear here as readers of Cervantes (the first of the two being also the author of the Cervantine play *The Knight if the Burning Pestle*, from 1607) and as dramatists in correspondence to their audience, sensitive to its demands and its wishes and to the social world within which they work. And hence *The Coxcomb* is presented as a text that is as fully conscious of its role as an English urban comedy as it is of its indebtedness to Cervantes.

A large part of this process was determined by cultural change across countries and mentalities. It is here that Francisco Borge's introduction is especially brilliant and informative: he traces convincingly the transition between the Spanish origin and the English adaptation of the central plot, from what once was *El curioso impertinente* to what became *The Coxcomb*. Is it correct to assert that *The Coxcomb* should be read as a solid and effective adaptation of the plot offered in *El curioso*? The answer must be a clear yes, if we understand the ideological conditioning of both societies, Spanish and English, at that specific point of their historical evolution. As Borge puts it: "El escenario indeterminado de *El curioso*, al pasar por la pluma de Beaumont y de Fletcher, se transforma en una muy realista ciudad inglesa de la era jacobina temprana, con lujosas mansiones en que una afluente burguesía puede agasajar a sus invitados... Pero esta es también la Inglaterra de espacios alternativos como la aún bucólica zona rural, donde las dos tramas de la obra llegan a una solución de compromiso" (p. 37) [The indeterminate setting of *El curioso*, in Beaumont's and Fletcher's writing, is transformed into a very realist English city from the early Jacobean period, with opulent mansions in which an affluent bourgeoisie can regale its guests... But this is also the England of alternative spaces like the still bucolic countryside, where the two plots of the work reach a solution of compromise].¹ In other words: the transformation of the plot, of the characters and of their environment is a matter of cultural climate. The original story by Cervantes, told in a wonderfully balanced prose, with its graceful style and its inherited Italian accents, with its carefully poised tone between comedy and tragedy, close to being one of the "exemplary novels" itself,

¹ Translation by Ellison Moorehead.

is turned into a fully bourgeois comedy in the English play. A complete *translatio* has been achieved, in the original sense of the Latin term: the essence of the story has been removed from its original place and been re-located, finding new meanings and new connotations in the process. What emerges from this relocation is an urban comedy, *The Coxcomb*, perfectly brilliant and vital in its own terms, but one that has no time for the representation of tragedy or for the psychological depths that were suggested in the original.

One of the great strengths of this edition lies in the translation of Beaumont and Fletcher's text. Those of us who know *The Coxcomb* in the original will perhaps be tempted to pass it by, but that would be a mistake. It does not amount to an exact verse translation, nor does it give a perfect equivalent of the iambic pentameter that dominates the original text, but that option would be mere academicism, and would run in fact against the spirit of the play. The translation takes an alternative but more pleasant route: it offers an absolute proximity to the original, respecting the differentiation between verse and prose, the fluctuation between one and the other being determined by the dramatic rhythm of the action. Above all, it favors legibility: it is transparent, flexible, clear; it displays the truly Cervantine gift of naturality. The vocabulary is rich and precise, the verse is well-balanced and at specific moments (most notably, in its "Epílogo") it even evokes rhyme, making it present without forcing it. It makes for a fluid and pleasant reading experience, not unlike the one of the story of *El curioso impertinente* when it was first presented within the pages of *Don Quixote* in 1605. Beaumont and Fletcher, early readers and adapters of Cervantes's story — and, after this edition, there can be little remaining doubt about that, could not have wished for a more fitting Spanish text.

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Author's contact: joan.curbet@uab.cat

Postal address: Dept. de Filologia Anglesa / Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona