

Non-verbal agents of theatrical retranslation: Women's identity and the Spanish classics

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ABSTRACT

Despite the burgeoning interest in literary retranslation, there is still a need to investigate how linguistic, contextual, and personal factors influence the translation of a previously translated (and performed) play into a given target language and culture. This article aims to illuminate the extralinguistic agents (personal, social, performative, paratextual) that specifically intervene in the English retranslation and reception of the Spanish classical play *La vida es sueño* (Calderón de la Barca, 1636). The focus will be on women's identity in the source text and how it is transmuted in the target plays, particularly emphasising the empowerment and identity granted to female characters. This is most noticeable in the case of Rosaura, who valiantly seeks revenge on Astolfo to restore her honour. To illustrate this, three performance-oriented retranslations staged in the UK and US between 1983 and 2010 will be scrutinised: John Barton and Adrian Mitchell's *Life's a dream* (1983) José Rivera's *Sueño* (1998) and Helen Edmundson's *Life is a dream* (2009). Together they demonstrate the relevance of non-verbal agency in the process of retranslating women's identity. Conclusions will highlight the potential of (Spanish) theatre classics as catalysts for gendered retranslations on the Anglophone stage.

KEYWORDS

Theatre retranslation, non-verbal agency, women's identity, classical drama, *Life is a dream*.

1. Introduction: Active agency in theatre retranslation

The notion of retranslation has garnered substantial attention in recent scholarship (Zaro Vera, 2007; Deane-Cox, 2014; Cadera & Walsh, 2017; van Poucke, 2017; Zhang & Huijuan, 2018; van Poucke & Sanz Gallego, 2019; Berk Albachten & Tahir Gürçaglar, 2019, 2020; Veselica Majhut, 2020; Peeters & van Poucke, 2023), with numerous publications exploring the reasons behind it, mostly in relation to literature. A great deal of interest has focused on ageing (van Poucke, 2017), either as a result of changes in the cultural or translation norms (Aaltonen, 2003) or because the original language is considered outdated (Aaltonen, 2003; Venuti, 2004, p. 25; Ortiz Gozalo, 2007, p. 35), leading inevitably to versions that exhibit semantic, syntactic or stylistic changes.

Surprisingly, the theoretical discussion regarding literary retranslation has largely neglected drama, and existing analyses are few and far between (Zaro Vera & Ruiz, 2007; van Poucke, 2017) and limited to particular case studies that do not take into account "the actions to which the translation texts are linked, and the institutional relations of the production and use of theatrical repertoires for cultural goals" (Zurbach, 2009, p. 280). This oversight is particularly striking considering that theatrical texts are highly sensitive to ageing, often requiring constant rewrites and modernisation (van Poucke, 2017, p. 97). Apart from the unique traits of the performing arts, such as actability and speakability, which are crucial for successful stage translations, an inclusive study must also consider the social agents involved in this practice. These agents can range from anyone between the translation and its user, or to an entity (an institution, for instance) that has the ability to exert power (sociocultural or

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professional) in the process of exchange (Buzelin, 2011, p. 6), recognising the theatre as a multi-agency medium.

The initial selection and acceptance of a translated text involve mediation and marketing practices until it is chosen for performance by a specific institutional body, wherein literary considerations play a pivotal role. Critical interpretations catering to different audiences or new artistic concerns of the source text also contribute to the impetus for retranslation (Venuti, 2004, p. 25; Bellos, 2011, p. 295). The socioeconomic motivation behind a particular production project is also pertinent, since retranslation is “nearly always a strictly commercial affair” (Bellos, 2011, p. 295) as it tends to be cheaper than opting for brand new translations (Gambier, 1994, p. 414; Venuti, 2004, p. 23). Theatre companies, apprehensive about staging new or unstaged work (Fournari, 2007, pp. 233–242), are also a significant factor in determining what is translated, reflecting the policies of artistic directors and other key decision-makers responsible for season programmes.

The translator (both direct translators and those in charge of providing an initial, literal rendering of the source) emerges as a capital figure in this sense: although theatre translators may simply be drawn by the challenge of the work (Pym, 1998), it is not uncommon for a famous actor or director to translate a play or to review an existing one (Stock, 2020), and producers may have a particular actor in mind for a new venue that demands texts *ad hoc*. This inevitably raises questions about translators’ visibility and who translates, which invariably impacts the commercial and critical success of a production (Brodie, 2018, p. 2).

Additionally, following the acceptance of the initial translation, numerous revisions can occur before, during, and after rehearsals, as well as during the play’s run and until its publication¹. These “intermedial practices” (Crossley, 2019) involve various human agents, such as playwrights, dramatic advisors, producers, adaptors, stage directors, and even actors (Marinetti, 2021), all of whom may contribute to different degrees depending on the commissioning theatre’s policy. Textual and scenic changes may result from ideological and political considerations, with ideology acting as a manipulative tool (Bollaert, 2019, pp. 45–72) that shapes diverse readings of a retranslated play. Indeed, they can reimagine the canon to make “*comedia* both increasingly relevant and newly appealing to modern audiences” (Fuchs, 2024, p. 375). For instance, gender readings emphasised the character of Laurencia in April de Angelis’s English adaptation of *The village* (2018) after Lope de Vega’s *Fuenteovejuna*, and Tanya Ronder similarly highlighted Casilda in her translation of Lope’s *Peribanez* (2003). In classical Spanish plays, women are often portrayed in stereotypical or constrained roles. Translating these portrayals into different languages poses challenges, as translators must navigate linguistic, cultural and historical nuances to accurately represent women’s identities. Some translators adopt a gender-sensitive approach, scrutinising and challenging gender stereotypes embedded in the original text; others use translation as “a labyrinth of distorting mirrors” (Martín Ruano & Vidal, 2013, p. 87) to amplify women’s voices, bringing them to new audiences and enhancing the recognition and visibility of women’s identities. Moreover, these identities intersect with other aspects such as ethnicity or class, necessitating theatre translation to reflect the diversity of perspectives. Lastly, retranslation may be prompted by prevailing conditions in the target theatrical culture and specific audience expectations. Epitexts, including press reviews, interviews,

posters, playbills, flyers, and programmes, provide valuable insights into the specific reception of a translated text, and play a significant role in disseminating the final version (Braga Riera, 2018).

In what follows, I will explore these elements in the context of three English retranslations of Calderón de la Barca's widely acclaimed Spanish play, *La vida es sueño* (1636). The primary focus will be on how women's identity in the source text is portrayed in the target plays, with a particular emphasis on the character of Rosaura, who courageously seeks revenge on her former suitor Astolfo to restore her honour but eventually submitting to marriage. The analysis will examine the extent to which this character is reimagined to embody more diverse and empowered identities, considering the intersecting factors that shape her life while advocating for the acknowledgement of difference.

2. Women's identity in *La vida es sueño*

Historically, Spanish classical theatre has faced challenges in gaining widespread reception in the English language. The intricate polymetry, extensive monologues, and the central role of honour in driving the plot have not found broad appeal among translators, directors, and producers in the UK and the US. This "difficult universality" (Johnston, 1996, p. 92) is closely tied to the hesitancy of publishing houses in the Anglophone world toward translation, particularly in the realm of theatre. As a result, it is often academics and university professors who undertake this task, motivated perhaps by a desire to establish their reputation (van Poucke, 2017, p. 96). Additionally, they may be drawn by the challenge of enhancing previous translations, either in terms of formality (such as rhyme and versification) or, spurred by theatre companies and producers, to provide fresh perspectives for the stage.

The end of Franco's dictatorship in 1975 prompted increased interest in Spain and its *comedias* among UK and US audiences. This shift led to the creation of translations imbued with a new "set of values" (Venuti, 2004, p. 29), intended to serve as a wake-up call for spectators. This is evident in the three performance-oriented retranslations under analysis: Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño*, as staged between 1983 and 2010: Adrian Mitchell and John Barton's *Life's a dream*, José Rivera's *Sueño*, and Helen Edmundson's *Life is a dream*. The selection is justified not only by the play's canonical status but also by its distinction as the most frequently translated Spanish play of the twentieth century (Fischer 2000a, 169) and the one with the highest number of productions in the English-speaking world (Thacker, 2013, p. 46).

The three-act drama *La vida es sueño* revolves around the duality between illusion and reality. The narrative unfolds in Poland, commencing with King Basilio's decision to imprison his son Segismundo at birth, driven by a prophecy foreseeing the young prince growing up to become a tyrant. Segismundo's only company during his isolation is that of his guard Clotaldo. Meanwhile, Clotaldo's daughter Rosaura, disguised as a man, arrives at the court accompanied by her servant Clarín. Rosaura, seeking to restore her tarnished reputation, aims to locate her seducer Astolfo, who dishonoured her. Encouraged by his courtiers, the King decides to release Segismundo and offers him the chance to rule the kingdom. Segismundo awakens dressed in opulent attire and is treated as a prince. However, his unexpectedly violent actions, including an attempt to assault Rosaura, lead to his swift return to prison, with the revelation that

everything was merely a dream. By the play's conclusion, Segismundo undergoes a transformation into a noble being who forgives his father, choosing to act morally regardless of whether his existence is real or a mere dream. Rosaura is betrothed to Astolfo, as dictated by the code of honour, while Segismundo marries Estrella, Astolfo's former fiancée. Calderón delves into the philosophical inquiry of the extent to which free will and determinism shape our destiny, with the subplot focusing on the recurring theme of honour.

In Spanish Golden Age theatre, women are typically depicted as integral components of a patriarchal system that severely constrains their behaviour. Central to this portrayal are themes of marriage and virginity, with a brother or father assuming the role of preserving their honour intact. According to Allatson (1996, p. 261), there are three Golden Age canonical plays where this relationship between male dominance and female subjugation is disrupted: *La vida es sueño*, *El burlador de Sevilla* (Tirso de Molina's *The Trickster of Seville*) and *Fuenteovejuna*. What sets *La vida es sueño* apart is the presence of a woman, Rosaura, who not only explains the rapidity of Segismundo's transformation (Whitby, 1960, p. 16) but also endeavours to restore honour independently, without relying on her father Clotaldo, using her own resources against restrictive gender norms². Uncommonly, not only does she seek retribution against the man who wronged her but also her father, placing her on an equal footing with Segismundo (Ruano de la Haza, 1994, p. 59). It is paradoxical, though, that despite her thirst for revenge and determination, she experiences compassion for Segismundo and is prepared to bow to societal expectations accepting her role as Astolfo's wife.

In the play, some pivotal moments highlight the substantial role of Rosaura. One such moment occurs in the opening lines (Act I, vv. 1–80): Rosaura's entrance on stage in men's clothing, uttering her famous opening lines, and the subsequent discovery of an imprisoned Segismundo. The second of these moments unfolds in Act II, when she does not reveal her true identity but still appears in female attire, this time as servant Astrea (adding two names and two feminine identities to the nameless masculine one in Act I). Later in the same act, in a dress, she beseeches Segismundo to help her, but he threatens to dishonour her ("*arrojaré tu honor por la ventana*", v. 1645). A third significant moment occurs in Act III when Rosaura confides in her father, revealing her intentions to kill Astolfo (vv. 2632–2655). Although she eventually confronts Astolfo, she does not follow through with her revenge, as her aim to marry him is eventually satisfied (vv. 3255–3265). Still, her ultimate fate is marginalised compared to that of Segismundo, as he ascends to the position of King of Poland while she subordinates herself to the power of men to attain social acceptance.

In the ensuing comparative analysis, three aspects will be scrutinised: (1), how translators (or other human agents such as directors) handle the character of Rosaura, the emphasis placed on her in the translations-performances, and the portrayal of her attitude towards honour; (2), the significance of adopting a contemporary idiom in empowering Rosaura, highlighting the importance of language ageing as a crucial factor in retranslation; and (3), the way paratexts (reviews, videos, and other supplementary elements) shape the interpretation of women's actions in the resulting performances. The outcomes also aim to demonstrate how the socio-historical background and theatrical circumstances at the time of retranslation contribute to explaining the motivations of those involved in the production of translated plays.

3. Seeking amusement through women’s empowerment: Adrian Mitchell and John Barton’s *Life’s a dream* (1983)

In 1983, a version of *La vida es sueño* for the Royal Shakespeare Company was being prepared by Professor John Barton for performance in Stratford. During this period, playwright and poet Adrian Mitchell was commissioned for *Life is a dream* for the National Theatre. Although the project was not finally accepted, as the RSC was already preparing this play at the time, Barton agreed to a joint version with Mitchell, with each contributing approximately half of the work (Mitchell, 1996, p. 245). Since they knew no Spanish, they had to resort to the work of their respective literal versionists, Lucy Woolley and Gwenda Pandolfi. While these literal translators are acknowledged in the initial pages of the printed edition, there is no proof that they either consulted previous translations or indeed reacted against the most immediate previous retranslations. Rather, their work indicates the scant attention that the drama of the *Siglo de Oro* was receiving in the UK during that decade, attention which would impact the development of the *comedia* in the country over the following years.

Mitchell and Barton retained part of the original verse, updated the idiom, and eliminated obscure passages and allusions (such as references to the monarchy), while incorporating songs by Clarín and Rosaura that added a more playful air. This comedic approach, limited in the original to the servant, permeates the target play on both textual and stage levels: while Rosaura opens Scene I mounting a hobby horse, which she “rides gently”, linguistically humour is achieved through the use of colloquialisms (*bully, base*) and rhyme, as exemplified when Clarion informs Clotaldo that Rosaura has chosen to put on a dress — a decision that a chauvinistic Clotaldo approves of:

CLARÍN: Hay, señor, que tu gran clemencia, dispuesta a vengar agravios de Rosaura, la aconseja que tome su propio traje.	CLARION: My mistress Rosaura Has come to her senses. You’ve done so much To relieve her distress That she’s even put on A beautiful dress.
CLOTALDO: Y es bien, por que no parezca liviandad.	CLOTALDO: I’m glad. Those clothes Put her sex to shame.
<i>La vida es sueño</i> , pp. 183–184 (Ruano de la Haza, 1994, pp. 183–184).	<i>Life’s a dream</i> , p. 42 (Mitchell & Barton, 1986, p. 42).

Example 1.

The rhyme in “distress-dress” serves to downplay the symbolic importance of Rosaura’s change in clothes, while the use of a colloquial register minimises the significance of the act.

Rosaura expresses herself vehemently when discussing the purpose of her arrival and her feelings for Astolfo, using an idiom that is atypical for a *dama*: “I locked my rage within but it will out. /Damn his fine phrases, damn his gentle smiling. / Damn his sweet kisses, his fumbings and his fondlings. / I’ll cut his lying throat. How dare he leave me?” (pp. 34-35). In this instance, which lacks an equivalent in Spanish, her assertions and anger are not devoid of humour, as evidenced by the use of the jocular terms *fumbings* and *fondlings*. Another case in which Rosaura’s bravery is mocked is

evident at the end of Act III when, on horseback, Rosaura declares, “My name is Death”, to which Astolfo replies: “Lo, here’s another furore” (p. 105). In fact, Astolfo is prepared to downplay her actions, stating, “You’re good at talking but less good at doing” and “I like you best when silent” (p. 105).

Indeed, one striking aspect is the interpolation of new scenes mainly aimed at accentuating female characters and clarifying the sub-plot, above all the conflict between love and revenge (Wilks, 2001, p. 61). In this context, it is worth mentioning the song composed for Rosaura’s soliloquy (Bechtel, 2000, p. 406), and the lines uttered by Estrella in Act III Scene 2, which have no parallel in the original. However, while honour serves as the driving force behind Rosaura’s actions (she declares from the outset that she is in Poland to win back her honour, p. 10; and “revenge on a man”, p. 18), this concept is frequently satirised, especially by the servant Clarion, who blatantly sings, “As I walked through the fairground / my heart was struck by fear / I heard a giant shouting / “Come and buy your honour here” (pp. 10-11).

The versionists also use stage directions to render more explicit the scenes involving women. For example, the direction used after describing Segimundo’s advances on Rosaura leaves no doubt about the Prince’s intentions:

SEGISMUNDO: Y así, por ver si puedo, cosa es llana que arrojare tu honor por la ventana.	SEGISMUND: Now I’ll throw Your chastity out of the window after. <i>(He throws her on the bed and starts to tear her clothes off).</i>
<i>La vida es sueño</i> , p. 217 (Ruano de la Haza, 1994, p. 217).	<i>Life’s a dream</i> , p. 58 (Mitchell & Barton, 1986, p. 58).

Example 2.

Rosaura’s confrontation with Astolfo also demonstrates a more resolute determination, as indicated again by a stage direction:

ROSAURA: ¡Vive Dios, que no ha de verse en manos de otra mujer! ASTOLFO: Terrible estás. ROSAURA: Y tú aleve. ASTOLFO: Ya basta, Rosaura mía. ROSAURA: ¿Yo tuya, villano? ¡Mientes!	ROSAURA: I will not let it fall Into another woman’s hands. [...] ASTOLFO: You’re angry. ROSAURA: You’re base. ASTOLFO: That’s enough. You’re mine. ROSAURA: I am not, you lie. You bully, you liar. <i>(She grabs the picture again).</i>
<i>La vida es sueño</i> , pp. 236–237 (Ruano de la Haza, 1994, pp. 236–237).	<i>Life is a dream</i> , p. 68 (Mitchell & Barton, 1986, p. 68).

Example 3.

Clotaldo is astonished by the courage displayed by Rosaura, particularly considering her gender, to the extent that she admits she “would spit” on him (p. 97).

Even though the presence on stage of a real horse at the end of the play attracted the critics’ attention (Fischer, 2000b, p. 106), the production did not seem to have endured in the public memory: commenting on John (now Jo) Clifford’s version of the play for the International Festival of Edinburgh in 1999, critic Charles Spencer (in Fischer,

2000a, p. 169) referred to the Spanish classic as “neglected in the country”. In fact, despite being a sell-out hit, Mitchell and Barton’s text was rarely staged in the UK in the following years, though it was welcomed more in the US.

In autumn 1999, the intimate Court Theatre in Chicago opened its season with this translation, directed by feminist JoAnne Akalaitis, who felt attracted by its radical concept and added scenes. In fact, she reinforced her feminist ideas in the play by focusing on Rosaura’s conflict and outlining the animal-like nature of Segismundo, converting him into a sort of brute beast (Wilks, 2001, p. 69). The director’s intervention led to several modifications, for instance in the attempted rape scene: despite Mitchell and Barton’s explicitness (“He throws her on the bed and starts to tear her clothes off”), Akalaitis imposed a change at the moment Segismundo is justifying his actions to Clotaldo:

SEGISMUNDO: De todos era señor y de todos me vengaba. Sólo a una mujer amaba.	SIGISMUND: I thought I saw my father And hated him. For I was all men’s master And wanted my revenge upon them all, Except one woman whom I know I loved.
<i>La vida es sueño</i> , p. 249 (Ruano de la Haza, 1994, p. 249).	<i>Life’s a dream</i> , p. 78 (Mitchell & Barton, 1986, p. 78).

Example 4.

A personal concept of love made her alter the last line changing “loved” to “wanted”, since in her view “Rape is not love. Rape is never love” (Wilks, 2001, p. 72).

Performatively, Akalaitis sought to maintain the foreign flavour by using Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* for costume inspiration, although contemporary designs were used for the *gracioso* and other characters (which, together with fan dances and music, were designed to entertain). Indeed, the production’s entertainment value is emphasised in American newspaper reviews, with readings which partially depart from the mainstream interpretation; but although the father-son conflict at times prevails with pictures showing masculine characters, it is Rosaura that gets the attention in the photo on the theatre’s web page. Curiously, Chicago also hosted the play in February 2007 at the Theatre School at DePaul University. On this occasion, the adaptation (directed by Barry Brunetti) stressed the abuses committed by Clotaldo and his soldiers (wearing Nazi-style uniforms), hence establishing a comparison between Segismundo’s suffering and that in Hitler’s Germany (Abril Sánchez, 2008, p. 220). Other alterations were the insertion of vulgar language and gestures that contributed to the deconstruction of the original — again, without sacrificing humour³.

Life’s a dream (1983) owes this re-birth to two literal translators, but also to two celebrated practitioners whose names inevitably drew UK audiences to the theatres. Mitchell and Barton’s work does not seem to be a reaction against previous renderings of the classic, but rather a natural outcome of the British sociocultural context at the time, a period marked by a resurgence of interest in Spanish theatre within the Anglophone world. Although women’s roles are accentuated (albeit to the detriment of Calderonian resonances and philosophical insights), their actions are often minimised, using verbal and stage humour for this purpose. Despite its success, the text did not prompt further productions in the country. However, it fostered new performances in the United States, where feminist and political views led to fresh readings. The

directors' intervention in these cases is particularly conspicuous, as seen in the strong feminist stance introduced by Akalaitis in her version — a perspective, reinforced by the presence of epitexts. Thus, the socio-cultural context, the translators' reputation, and the directors' theatrical intervention are active agents influencing women's roles in retranslation.

4. Retranslation as (post-colonial) ideology: *Sueño* by José Rivera (1998)

Sueño, a three-act drama by the award-winning Puerto Rican José Rivera, was first produced by Hartford Stage Company in Hartford, Connecticut, on 20 February 1998 under the direction of Lisa Peterson. The theatre, which prides itself on being “renowned for producing innovative revivals of classics, as well as provocative new plays and musicals” (Hartford Stage, 2018), advertised the play as a new translation and adaptation of Calderón intended to attract the Latino audience.

This Latino approach was probably the reason why Mark Lamos, artistic director of the company, commissioned José Rivera for the translation (Rivera, 1999, p. 5). At the time, Rivera was enjoying wide recognition following the success of his play *Marisol* and the screenplay of the Oscar-nominated *The motorcycle diaries*. Rivera, admittedly unfamiliar with the original work, consulted six earlier English translations — among them Mitchell and Barton's (which he had seen in a production at the Berkshire Theatre Festival two months before, see note 5) before creating his own literal rendering and further adaptation. His verse-free rendition is constructed on two pillars: his personal approach towards issues of religion and history, and the intention to please contemporary American audiences by updating the language (with broad farce and startling linguistic invention [Quintero, 2009, p. 130]), motifs and characterisation, giving Rosaura an outstanding role and enhancing the comicality of the whole play.

Rivera's historical viewpoint surfaces in comments added to Rosaura's lines in Act I (marked in bold in the excerpt) as she overhears the moans of the imprisoned Segismundo:

<p>ROSAURA: ¿No es breve luz aquella caduca exhalación, pálida estrella, que, en trémulos desmayos, pulsando ardores y latiendo rayos, hace más tenebrosa la obscura habitación con luz dudosa? Sí, pues a sus reflejos puedo determinar —aunque de lejos— una prisión obscura, que es de un vivo cadáver sepultura. Y, porque más me asombre, Con el traje de fiera yace un hombre.</p>	<p>ROSAURA: A brief, doubtful light... shows me a Dark habitat... and Clarín! —the ghost of a poor Man— no, more a reflection than ghost, a walking Mirage, born dead, dressed in animal skins... a slave, maybe, stolen from the oppressed Indies, or a refugee of a defeated warrior-state where nightmares are rulers and Aztec monsters walk the streets.</p>
<p><i>La vida es sueño</i>, pp. 106–107 (Ruano de la Haza, 1994, pp. 106–107).</p>	<p><i>Sueño</i>, pp. 15–16 (Rivera, 1999, pp. 15–16).</p>

Example 5.

Moreover, Rosaura explicitly underscores her presence in Spain (as opposed to Poland), highlighting an unwelcoming stance towards immigrants: “Hey, Spain! Is this

how you stamp the passport of every new immigrant to your country—in blood? (p. 14). What’s more, she also describes Segismundo as “a refugee of a defeated warrior-state” (p. 15). Besides incorporating lines through Rosaura’s character that evoke a post-colonial sensibility, an emphasis on her role is observed in both text and production, positioning her personal narrative on equal terms with that of Segismundo.

Crucially, in a departure from her male counterpart, she is described in a stage direction as “robust, clever, loud” (p. 13). Her loudness becomes apparent from the outset, exemplified by her vocal presence when she falls off her horse in the opening lines:

ROSAURA: Hipógrifo violento, que corriste parejas con el viento, ¿dónde, rayo sin llama, pájaro sin matiz, pez sin escama, y bruto sin instinto natural, al confuso laberinto de esas desnudas peñas, te desbocas, te arrastras y despeñas?	ROSAURA: Violent, mixed-up horse! Unnaturally stupid mammal! Instinct- challenged freak! [...] You’re a fart without smell! A religion without God! A dreamer without sleep!
<i>La vida es sueño</i> , pp. 94–95 (Ruano de la Haza, 1994, pp. 94–95).	<i>Sueño</i> , p. 13 (Rivera, 1999, p. 13).

Example 6.

This focus on the role of women is further evident in the explicit language Rosaura employs, confronting Astolfo with a “Damn you! I spit in your father’s sperm!” (p. 53) and “Rapist!” (p. 72). Such emphasis is also notable in other minor characters like Estrella, who assumes a clear feminist stance: For instance, she rebuffs Astolfo’s verbal advances with the retort “Cool, off, Duke! It’s bullshit” (p. 24), and asserts that his claim to governance “rests on the accidental fact that [he was] born with a penis” (p. 25).

While Rosaura, as in the original, articulates the necessity of seeking “deadly revenge” to clean her honour, her actions are portrayed with greater explicitness. This is evident, for instance, when she is about to reveal her own identity to her father, a moment which is reinforced by the daring remark made by the clown:

ROSAURA: Si dijera, más no sé con qué respeto te miro, con qué afecto te venero, con qué estimación te asisto, que no me atrevo a decirte que es este exterior vestido enigma, pues no es de quien parece.	ROSAURA: Look in my eyes, sir. Run your hand along the soft curves of my face. Listen to the strange pitch of my voice. Though I possess the swords and daggers of a man... I lack his “ultimate weapon”. CLARÍN (<i>grabbing his own crotch</i>): Get it?
<i>La vida es sueño</i> , p. 168 (Ruano de la Haza, 1994, p. 168).	<i>Sueño</i> , p. 31 (Rivera, 1999, p. 31).

Example 7.

Or at the moment when Segismundo, disregarding the expected “convention”, attempts to abuse her:

<p>ROSAURA: [...] Mas, ¿qué ha de hacer un hombre que de humano no tiene más que el nombre, atrevido, inhumano, crüel, soberbio, bárbaro y tirano, nacido entre las fieras?</p> <p>SEGISMUNDO: [...] ¡Hola, dejadnos solos, y esa puerta se cierre y no entre nadie!</p> <p>ROSAURA: (Yo soy muerta) [Aparte.] ¡Advierte!</p>	<p>ROSAURA: Even if fury overcomes you, it can't destroy the respect and honor convention demands you have for me.</p> <p>SEGISMUNDO: Convention! [...] (<i>SEGISMUNDO</i> <i>grabs ROSAURA</i>).</p> <p>ROSAURA (<i>to CLARÍN</i>): Bring someone, fool!</p>
<p><i>La vida es sueño</i>, pp. 258–259 (Ruano de la Haza, 1994, pp. 258–259).</p>	<p><i>Sueño</i>, p. 46 (Rivera, 1999, p. 46).</p>

Example 8.

However, Rosaura finds herself unable to prevent Segismundo from initiating the act of tearing her clothes, and ultimately, it is a man, Clotaldo, who intervenes and halts the prince's actions. Despite her evident fury, particularly directed towards Astolfo, who denies her in the presence of Estrella — leading her to attempts to “lunge at Astolfo to tear him apart with her bare hands” (p. 49) — in a surprising turn of events Rosaura takes matters into her own hands and, defying the customary rules of honour, kisses Segismundo, and later marries him. Both characters, in a nod to colonial sensitivities, decide to embark on a new life together in the New World.

The special status provided for women in *Sueño* is patent in further productions, such as that under José Carrasquillo's direction at Theatre Olney (Washington, D.C.) in summer 2000. Rosaura is presented as a masculine woman, far removed from the traditional notion of beauty, because, in the director's words, her beauty “comes from the inside” (Mujica, 2003, p. 336, my translation). Carrasquillo also deviates from the Spanish genre conventions by putting Segismundo's mother on stage and portraying the sex scenes with a powerful impact, using mimics and acrobatics to depict the attempted rape.

The multiple feminist possibilities of *Sueño* might help explain why Karen Berman, Co-Artistic Director at Washington Women in Theatre, staged it at Georgia College State University, making it the centrepiece of their 2009–2010 season themed “Dreaming Global Justice”. Attracted by the boldness and irreverence of Rivera's text (Mujica, 2010, p. 201), she particularly praised the “liberating” final wedding decision to marry Rosaura to Segismundo, which challenges the convention of a woman chasing a man so as to restore her reputation through marriage⁴.

Ideology stands at the core of this new retranslation, spearheaded by a company with an innovative character that aimed to attract a Latino audience. Its artistic director strategically aimed to secure a positive reception by relying on a well-known author, Jose Rivera, who was not familiar with Calderón's play and infused the text with a postcolonial standpoint that capitalised on feminist issues. Subsequent productions, notably those led by directors Carrasquillo and Berman, abandoned the anti-imperialist stance in favour of gender matters. This shift underscores the role of ideologically driven artistic directors as active agents favouring their own personal views⁵.

5. Celebrity retranslation: *Life is a dream* by Helen Edmundson (2009)

The most recent professional production of *Life is a dream* in the UK was premiered at London’s Donmar Warehouse (18-28 November, 2009), a not-for-profit modern space with a reputation as one of the UK’s leading theatres that stages British contemporary writing and classics as well as revisions of foreign plays. Helen Edmundson was commissioned, and provided with a literal prose rendering that she eventually turned into verse. No reference to the person responsible for that initial text is made in the book or in the publicity material, thus underscoring Edmundson’s reputation as a versionist who had successfully adapted other classic works in the past. Jonathan Munby both suggested the idea and directed a play with theatrical possibilities in the father-son conflict, since in his opinion none of the previous “indigestible” translations “had done it justice” (Ortiz Lottman, 2011, p. 202). He was also responsible for choosing Edmundson, despite her inexperience in verse writing and the fact she did not know the original language⁶ (Larson, 2015, p. 5).

Edmundson adheres to the original plotline, respecting — unlike Rivera — the ending. However, she injects additional lines complemented by “telling gestures and poses for all the characters” (Ortiz Lottman, 2010, p. 303); for instance, she provides slightly more detail about Rosaura (who is described as “dishevelled” at the start of Act I), and there are also humorous insertions that encompass not only Clarín, but also Segismundo and Rosaura. This is evident in Act II when Segismundo humorously elucidates his choice to throw a man off a balcony rather than a window, then satirising the gravity of the action:

BASILIO: ¿Qué ha sido esto? SEGISMUNDO: Nada ha sido. A un hombre que me ha cansado de ese balcón he arrojado.	BASILIO: What has been happening here? SEGISMUNDO: Nothing. There was a man who kept annoying me, So I threw him off the balcony. He wouldn’t fit through the window.
<i>La vida es sueño</i> , pp. 204–205 (Ruano de la Haza, 1994, pp. 204– 205).	<i>Life is a dream</i> , p. 49 (Edmundson, 2009, p. 49).

Example 9.

Rosaura exhibits a humorous flair when she adopts the guise of a servant to Estrella, employing a register incongruent with her social standing. This humour is further evident in her tenacious efforts to retrieve her portrait from Astolfo (addressing him as “my Liege”, p. 64), as per Estrella’s directive. Additionally, her audacious “Ha!” before Clotaldo on page 90, indicative of her disbelief that he is her actual father, reflects her spirited demeanour⁷.

The conflict around honour remains unaltered, albeit with a nuanced difference in Rosaura’s linguistic emphasis. Initially, she articulates to Clotaldo that she has come “here to avenge my name / against a grievous wrong” (p. 18). Notably, the term “(dis)honor” is sparingly employed, with Rosaura opting for expressions such as “to wrong”, “do wrong”, or “be wronged”. Additionally, during Segismundo’s assault, her portrayal lacks the same degree of courage as seen in Rivera’s rendition. Furthermore, there is an absence of supplementary text or stage directions that would intensify the explicit nature of the violence:

<p>ROSAURA: Mas, ¿qué ha de hacer un hombre que de humano no tiene más que el nombre, atrevido, inhumano, crüel, soberbio, bárbaro y tirano, nacido entre las fieras?</p> <p>SEGISMUNDO: [...] ¡Hola, dejadnos solos, y esa puerta se cierre y no entre nadie!</p> <p>ROSAURA: (Yo soy muerta) [<i>Aparte.</i>] ¡Advierte!</p>	<p>ROSAURA: It's true, then, what they say of you that you are shameless, base and cruel, and should you ever rule this land, 'twould be a wild and godless place. Prove them right. Why shouldn't you? You are a man by name alone, a savage, a brute, an animal.</p> <p>SEGISMUNDO: [...] (<i>To CLARION</i>). Leave us! See the door is shut and barred!</p> <p>ROSAURA: I'm lost. Listen...</p>
<p><i>La vida es sueño</i>, pp. 258–259 (Ruano de la Haza, 1994, pp. 258–259).</p>	<p><i>Life is a dream</i>, p. 56 (Edmundson, 2009, p. 56).</p>

Example 10.

In her confrontation with Astolfo and her aforementioned attempt to reclaim her portrait, Rosaura manifests a heightened sense of audacity. Nevertheless, her expression lacks contemporary vivacity, contributing to a depiction that is perceived as less overtly bold.

<p>ASTOLFO: Pues, ¿cómo, si no he de darle, lo has de llevar?</p> <p>ROSAURA: Desta suerte. ¡Suéltale, ingrato!</p> <p>ASTOLFO: Es en vano.</p> <p>ROSAURA: ¡Vive Dios, que no ha de verse en manos de otra mujer!</p> <p>ASTOLFO: Terrible estás.</p> <p>ROSAURA: Y tú aleve.</p> <p>ASTOLFO: Ya basta, Rosaura mía.</p> <p>ROSAURA: ¿Yo tuya, villano? ¡Mientes!</p>	<p>ASTOLFO: But what if I will not oblige? How do you think to get it then?</p> <p>ROSAURA: Like this (<i>She tries to snatch it</i>). Let go, you selfish wretch!</p> <p>ASTOLFO: It's no use. You'll never get it.</p> <p>ROSAURA: As God lives, this will not fall into another woman's hands!</p> <p>ASTOLFO: Control yourself. Have you no shame?</p> <p>ROSAURA: I am beyond shame. You traitor!</p> <p>ASTOLFO: Be calm now, my Rosaura.</p> <p>ROSAURA: Don't call me yours. You liar, you villain!</p>
<p><i>La vida es sueño</i>, pp. 236–237 (Ruano de la Haza, 1994, pp. 236–237).</p>	<p><i>Life is a dream</i>, p. 66 (Edmundson, 2009, p. 66).</p>

Example 11.

The close approach to Calderón's original contrasts with the domesticating style of the resulting epitexts. This is evident in the behind-the-scenes guide offered by Donmar Warehouse (which includes interviews and rehearsal diaries, with contents focusing on the cast) and the rave reviews for both the production and the acting. These basically concentrate on the leading actor, Dominic West, popular at the time thanks to his role in the US TV series *The wire*. The strong media attention West attracted seems to have been enough to lure audiences into the theatre. This approach is underlined by the scant mention of the theme of honour in the reviews, despite

allusions to the philosophical interpretations of the original and the preservations of Rosaura's role and manners. Instead, the imposing photos of West dominate.

Director Jonathan Munby neglected previous retranslations and opted for a brand-new text that highlighted the theatrical possibilities of a family conflict. By omitting the names of those responsible for the first literal rendering, Munby effectively conferred on Edmundson the status of author, while the presence of West ensured a full house and wide media coverage. Press epitexts centred on the actor, but also offered explanatory reviews about the source play, plot and author, minimising the prominence of Rosaura. In this manner, the standards and expectations of a theatre company, coupled with the artistic director's viewpoint, are evident agents driving this retranslation, which also counted on a well-known actor aimed at ensuring the profitability of the production but eclipsing the potential feminist interpretations inherent in Rosaura's character⁸.

6. Conclusions

This article has attempted to provide new insights into the active agency played by different participants in theatre retranslation, as exemplified in three English versions (and successive productions) of *La vida es sueño*. More specifically, it has aimed to prove the relevance of non-verbal agents as elements that trigger retranslation, including the socio-historical background as well as the motivation of those bringing these texts to the stage, particularly focusing on women's identity and agency.

The theatres that produced Calderón's play actively programmed it and sought fresh, stage-oriented translations. They were given as commissions to practitioners with a reputation in the field (but not necessarily linguistic knowledge), who made use of literal translations (although Rivera created his own literal script). The three translators modernised the language, getting rid of outdated vocabulary and complex metre in favour of stageability, which led to inevitable stylistic modifications. The trigger for the new translations is hard to define: there is no evidence that previous productions inspired the new texts (with the possible exception, again, of Rivera), and it is unclear whether translators and directors had read all or any of the many existing translations (which they discarded), and if so, which ones. The use of new target texts avoided copyright issues and allowed commissioning theatres to present their plays as "original", favouring media attention.

Ideology appears to have been a pivotal motivator behind the three retranslations, although not necessarily driven by the presence of an independent, strong Rosaura. The progressive nature of the female character may have inspired the initiators of the translations, but the translators did not approach Rosaura's journey with identical emphasis. Mitchell and Barton prioritised humour and introduced new scenes and lines for women that accentuated their nature, albeit subdued to entertainment. Rivera's text overtly combines comedy and feminism, yet it also adopts a Latino, postcolonial perspective that somewhat overshadows the feminist aspect. In Edmundson's version humour is also present, but Rosaura's actions and speech appear more restrained. In this instance, the choice of play may have been influenced by additional factors, including the director's interest in a father-and-son conflict and the benefit of having actor Dominic West in the lead role. What is more, further directors altered the original intent of the translation/performance in subsequent



productions based on Mitchell and Barton's and Rivera's texts, clearly working from their own perspectives, which ranged from political (Brunetti, Carrasquillo) to feminist (Akalaitis, Berman, Carrasquillo). In any case, the exemplification highlights the creative approaches taken by practitioners in navigating the complexities of retranslations, particularly in addressing cultural norms and (not) perpetuating stereotypes. It underscores the importance of adapting the source material to resonate with the target audience while also being mindful of potential cultural sensitivities. Translators, directors, actors or even audiences play key roles in shaping the representation of gender and identity. Sensitivity to these issues is essential for ensuring that retranslations are relevant and well-received by the recipient culture.

In all instances — to a somewhat lesser extent in Edmundson's case — the incorporation of a contemporary idiom serves to empower the female protagonist, making her more relatable to contemporary audiences. This underscores the relevance of language ageing as a significant factor in theatre retranslation. The paratexts also contribute to shaping the emphasis placed on Rosaura and the interpretation of her actions. While productions of *Life's a dream* and *Sueño* feature images and clear allusions to women, reviews and promotional materials around Edmundson's play predominantly spotlight Dominic West, thus placing the focus on the male lead role. Although commercial considerations appear to dominate here, the historical circumstances at the time of translation are also noteworthy in all cases: a flourishing interest in Spanish theatre in the UK during the 1980s in the case of Mitchell and Barton, and a focus on Latino perspectives in *Sueño*.

This study acknowledges its limitations, notably the reduced size of the corpus that restricts the ability to draw extensive conclusions. Access to performance recordings may have illuminated women's representation further, and space constraints compelled a primary focus on Rosaura, with partial mention of the intriguing character Estrella. It remains to be seen whether the three retranslated texts will continue to inspire performances in the UK and America, thereby contributing to the dissemination of *La vida es sueño*, or whether the evolving social context and the ongoing fight for women's rights will stimulate new interpretations of the Spanish classic, presenting more present-day and vibrant women's identities in the post-Me Too Anglophone stage scene.

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Data availability statement

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article (and/or its supplementary materials).

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Notes

¹ The different intermediaries involving plays translated for publication (editors, designers, etc.) are not discussed in this article.

² This also applies to plays ‘inspired’ by Calderón: for example, the strength attributed to Rosaura has found resonance in works like *Rosaura*, a two-woman piece that premiered in London in July 2016 as part of the festival *Women and War* (Billington, 2016).

³ Again, in the United States, the Journeymen Theater Ensemble produced the play for The Keegan Theatre (2008). Berkshire Theatre had done the same ten years earlier, probably inspiring a retranslation by José Rivera, who was in the audience.

⁴ Further minor productions led to staged retranslations using modern vocabulary and imagery, such as the 2006 staging at Milwaukee Repertory Theater or that at Atheneum Theatre (Chicago) one year later, which accentuated the romantic side of the story, as proved by pictures that portray Segismundo and Rosaura together as a couple.

⁵ The primal, post-colonial lens might explain why *Sueño* never found it way across the Atlantic.

⁶ The 47-page study guide the Donmar Warehouse offers (Donmar Warehouse, 2009) includes both Calderón de la Barca and Helen Edmundson among the creative team as “authors”, thus conferring the translator a status similar to that of the Spanish playwright. The allusion to the translator in the theatre poster is also revealing, as her name appears in a similar font size to that of Calderón.

⁷ Performatively, the director plays up the role of women, especially Estrella whom, unlike in Calderón, is dressed like a man toward the end.

⁸ Edmundson’s adaptation spurred other short-range productions in the United States. In 2011, the Vitalist Theatre (Williams, 2011) presented it in Chicago (Stage 773) and was acclaimed for its comic approach. Similarly, a production at Heartwood Theatre, Maine (2019) was applauded for its use of language.

