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THE RECENT BOOM IN TRANSLATIONS OF ANTÔNIO JOSÉ DA SILVA,  
*O JUDEU*  
Philip Krummrich

Department of International and Interdisciplinary Studies  
Morehead State University



One of the most neglected but potentially fascinating branches of scholarship is the history of translation, and in particular, of the trends in translation. Much can be learned from a study of which works are chosen for translation, the frequency with which a given author or national literature is translated, and the impact of the translations on the literature of the new language in which the work appears. My English version of *Anfitrião, ou Júpiter e Alcmena* by Antônio José da Silva will be coming out later this year (2010). Towards the end of the project, I became aware that my work was part of a sudden burst of translations of the plays of this unjustly neglected author. Why, after nearly three centuries, have five translators in twenty-two years devoted their efforts to a playwright almost unknown outside the Portuguese-speaking world? In the end, perhaps, no satisfactory or instructive explanation will emerge, but the problem seems sufficiently intriguing to warrant some exploration.

Antônio José da Silva, almost invariably tagged “O Judeu” (“The Jew”), was born in Brazil just over three hundred years ago, and forced to relocate to Portugal as a child when his parents were brought before the Inquisition. As seldom happened, they were released, and the family remained in Lisbon. Silva himself faced obscure charges some years later, but was freed after an extended imprisonment and torture. We know disappointingly little else about his life; he evidently studied law at the University of Coimbra, and earned some respect for his poetry. In 1733, he began a meteoric career in the marionette theater of Lisbon, authoring at least eight hugely successful comedies—generally called “óperas,” because they featured musical numbers—before ending up in the clutches of the Inquisition again, and being publicly executed in 1739.

Silva’s work was performed and published anonymously, although later scholarship has established his identity as the author beyond all reasonable doubt. He has never been quite forgotten in Brazil and Portugal; even in those countries, however, one cannot always find his works in print. Elsewhere, he has drawn the interest of a few scholars in the centuries since his death, but one could not call the bibliography extensive. Ferdinand Denis published extracts from Silva’s first ópera, *Vida do Grande Dom Quixote e do Gordo Sancho Pança*, with a French translation, in 1823. Ferdinand Wolf included a German version in his study of the author, *Dom Antonio José da Silva, der Verfasser der sogenannten “Opern des Juden” (Óperas do Judeu)* (Vienna, 1860). Neither ever became widely available, or could be said to have had much influence. I find no records of other translations of Silva in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries.

Beginning in 1988, however, Silva has been translated at least six times, into four different languages, by five translators who were working independently and, it appears, without awareness of the others. Dagmar Strejcková started this trend with a Czech translation of *Vida do Grande Dom Quixote e do Gordo Sancho Pança* (Prague, 1988). Pierre Légli-Costa published a French translation of *Anfitrião* in 2000. Juliet Perkins combined a masterful introduction—a book in its own right—with a dual-language Portuguese-English edition of the text of *Labirinto de Creta* in 2004. Jacobo Kaufmann brought out *Obras de teatro de Antonio José da Silva* in Spanish in 2006. A French translation by Marie-Hélène Piwnik, again of the *Vida do Grande Dom Quixote*, appeared in 2008. Finally, my English translation of *Anfitrião, ou Júpiter e Alcmena* is scheduled for publication late in 2010.

From my point of view, this plethora of translations is gratifying—it is good to know that there are other champions of a writer to whom I have devoted rather a lot of work—but also puzzling. We can rule out at once any common source. Indeed, the signs that any translator was even aware of the work of the others are scanty. Kaufmann does tell of his excitement when he learned that the Comédie Française was planning an innovative production, featuring a combination of marionettes and live actors. Having attended a performance, however, he dismisses it with sharp words regarding inaccuracies in the program notes, and this less than enthusiastic judgment:

To state that I considered this an acceptable production, despite its imaginative set, would be a gross exaggeration, because the acting quality at this company seems to have diminished considerably, and because of the many cuts and “adaptations.” (“Antonio José da Silva in Paris,” p. 1)

Unfortunately, Kaufmann says nothing whatever about the translation, either in its own right or by comparison with his own.

I became aware of Perkins’ *Cretan Labyrinth* only after I had nearly completed work on *Anfitrião*. I made frequent and grateful use of her scholarship in writing my introduction, but the existence of her translation of *Labirinto de Creta* had no influence on my decision to attempt *Anfitrião*. I found out that Légli-Costa had put *Anfitrião* into French around the same time. In short, it looks very much as though all five translators had the same idea in isolation.

In three cases, I can assert with some confidence why the translator was drawn to Silva. (I have not managed to make contact with the Czech or French translators, or even to see their work.) Kaufmann, beyond any reasonable doubt, sought out Silva as a Jewish dramatist and victim of persecution. Kaufmann himself was born in Argentina and emigrated to Israel in 1972; his formative years were spent in the post-Holocaust world, and he has also written a critique of a musical on Anne Frank. Thus it is not at all surprising that the story of Antônio José da Silva would fascinate him, nor that the quality of Silva’s work for the stage would motivate him to undertake a Spanish version.

The explanation is more straightforward, but quite different, in the other two cases. In her acknowledgements, Perkins thanks Luís de Sousa Rebelo “for his undergraduate classes on António José da Silva which kindled my interest in the first place” (Perkins, p. vii). For my part, I first read Silva many years ago, while working on my dissertation. Around the same time, I discovered Heinrich von Kleist’s wonderful *Amphitryon*, and resolved one day to return to the theme. In the end, a translation of Silva’s extraordinary play on the same subject seemed the most useful contribution I could make.

It may be easier to explain why Silva was seldom translated for so many years than to account for the recent boom. His language presents formidable difficulties. It is full of extended word-plays and obscure vocabulary. He often allows his characters to deliver outrageously overblown speeches; the effect is comic in the original, but can easily degenerate into mere pomposity in translation. We do not know exactly what he means by some of his stage directions. Worst of all, one ends up translating what was a rollicking stage piece into a text to be read only by literary scholars: if the Comédie Française cannot stage a Silva play successfully, as Kaufmann’s review suggests, perhaps it can no longer be done. If that is the case, then any modern attempt to put Silva into another language is doubly a translation: an effort to find roughly equivalent words, and also a conversion of the work from one genre—a stage play for marionettes—to another: a closet drama. All this makes the recent boom even more surprising.

As predicted at the beginning of these reflections, I have found no adequate explanation for the appearance of six translations of António José da Silva in the past twenty-two years. One simple explanation is that Silva is a wonderful writer, and we are belatedly realizing it; this possibility is expressed neatly in the introduction to Piwnik’s translation: “la richesse d’inspiration et la qualité de son théâtre font qu’il est considéré comme l’un des plus grands auteurs portugais de XVIIIe siècle” (Piwnik, p. 6). Perhaps Portuguese has finally begun to win its fair share of attention; we will know more about that when Patrícia Odber de Baubeta completes and publishes her bibliography of translations from Portuguese. It may also be that more translators are seeking to make neglected works available, instead of dedicating their energies to producing yet another *Quixote* or *Inferno*. Conceivably, after all, there is some subtle thread that had eluded me, and a reason that partly accounts for the choice in all six cases. It would be of great interest to examine comparable trends in translation to see if they shed light on this little problem. Ultimately, we may conclude that we have the good fortune to live in a golden age of translation, when more and better work in the field is being done than ever before. Perhaps everything is being translated more often, and not just the works of one eighteenth-century Portuguese Jewish comic playwright.

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