
An anonymous Morisco rag peddler from Toledo, so the story goes, spent “poco más de mes y medio” (Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quijote de la Mancha, ed. Francisco Rico. Madrid: Real Academia Española, 2004, 87) at the house of the fictional Miguel de Cervantes translating Cide Hamete Benengeli’s history of Don Quijote from Arabic into Castilian. The late Carroll Johnson (Transliterating a Culture: Cervantes and Moriscos. Newark, Del.: Juan de la Cuesta, 2010) points out that six weeks was probably not enough time for a Morisco, who around 1600 was not very likely to have a good command of Classical Arabic, to translate a book as long as Don Quijote from Arabic into Castilian: “It seems much more reasonable,” writes Johnson, “to assume that the job of transliteration, rather than translation, could have been completed within that time-frame” (212). Johnson admits that this may be “pure conjecture,” but the publication of El Corán de Toledo, edited by the eminent aljamiadista Consuelo López-Morillas and brought out by Ediciones Trea in a handsome hardcover edition, proves Johnson not only correct, but yet again, prescient.

In 1606, a Morisco made a complete copy of a Qur’an. Apparently our Morisco copyist had it on a short-term loan from its owner (sound familiar?), and to save time copied the original aljamiado text, written in Arabic characters, into Roman letters. He managed to copy the whole thing, a Castilian Qur’an, one year after Cervantes published the first part of Don Quijote. It would seem that our Morisco transl(ite)ator is more real than we might have imagined, more real than even Johnson suggests, and the coincidence of the Qur’an edited by López-Morillas and the ‘chronicle’ written by Benengeli is itself something Cervantes might have invented. I will leave it to the readers of Calíope to marvel over what this book might mean for our understanding of Cervantes’s morisco translator, and by extension, of literary culture in Spain in the early seventeenth century.

The volume’s editor, Consuelo López-Morillas (Emerita at Indiana University), has dedicated decades to the study of aljamiado literature, including a great deal of scholarship on aljamiado translations of the Qur’an. Here, she has produced a beautiful, rigorous, and meticulous edition of an indispensable Spanish classic that is at once accessible and respectful of the manuscript original. Her substantial introductory study covers the author, the manuscript, and the text. There is also linguistic analysis, textual notes indicating where the author included material from traditional commentaries (tafāṣir, sing. taṣfīr), and a glossary of non-normative Castilian words, Arabic loanwords, and proper nouns.

The value of this edition for aljamiado studies is considerable. El Corán de Toledo is a very late witness of Islamic textual practice in Spain. While it has been known for some time that Moriscos in Valencia practiced Islam, and were able to support some form of organized religious life up until their expulsion in 1609, the documentary record for Castile is much more scarce. The manuscript went unpublished until 2001 (Alcorán. Traducción castellana de un morisco anónimo al año 1606. Ed. Juan Vernet Ginés and Lluis Roqué Figuls. Barcelona: Reial Acadèmia de Bones Lletres-UNED, 2001). López-Morillas’s volume is the first rigorous critical edition of the text.


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The translation incorporates material from traditional commentaries of the Qur’an, distinguished from the Qur’anic verses in red ink, and later set off with brackets. These embedded paratexts add an interesting dimension to the traditional Qur’anic text and open a window onto Morisco religious practice. For example, the first sura of the Qur’an, the fatīha, recited five times daily by observant Muslims, ends as follows, with exegetical interpellations from traditional tafāsir italicized: “Guíanos a la Carrera dereçada, a la Carrera de aquellos que hiziste graçia sobrellos, no de los que te enojaste sobrellos que son los judíos, ni de los yerrados que son los cristianos.” In the Arabic, we are left wondering, ‘who are these ‘los que te enojaste sobrellos’, and these ‘yerrados’? But our aljamiado translator makes it clear: it’s the Jews and the Christians, weaving the traditional exegetical interpretation directly into his translation. While it is not particularly strange to hear an anti-Jewish or anti-Convexo statement voiced in this register of Castilian, the harsh critique of Christianity in the language of Cervantes is dissonant. It is novel. And that’s just the first paragraph.

For its novelty alone, the Corán de Toledo is worth a look by anyone interested in early modern Hispanic literature. Who knew that a Spanish Muslim copied a complete Qur’an one year after the publication of the first part of Don Quijote? It brings Cervantes’ Morisco transliterator out of the imagination and into historical fact. This alone makes López-Morillas’s edition a valuable contribution to early modern Hispanism. Moreover, the high quality of the critical edition and apparatus, as well as the fascinating, detailed introductory study place it among the most important works of aljamiado scholarship to date.

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