

THE MANY FACES OF TREASON

COMMONPLACES MAY COME AND GO, but one that has held forth over the years to the dismay and discouragement of translators is the Italian punning canard traduttore, traditore (translator, traitor), leading one to believe that the translator, worse than an unfortunate bungler, is a treacherous knave. Before copping a plea and offering a nolo contendere, let me see wherein this treason lies and against whom. Then we translators can withdraw once more into that limbo of silent servitors, for, as Prince Segismundo says at the end of Calderón's Life Is a Dream when he awards his liberator the tower where he had been imprisoned, "The treason done, the traitor is no longer needed."

Let us submit the practice of translation to a judicial enquiry into its various ways and means and in this display seek out the many varieties of betrayal which might be inherent to its art. I say art and not craft because you can teach a craft but you cannot teach an art. You can teach Picasso how to mix his paints but you cannot teach him how to paint his demoiselles. There are many spots where translation can be accused of treason, all inevitably interconnected in such diverse ways that an overall view is needed to reveal the many facets of the treason the Italians purport to see.

an unprincipled, untrustworthy or dishonest person

cannot teach an art

