

Los Problemas de Villalobos. Medical Humanism, Translation and Early Modern Prose Fiction

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The Spanish doctor Francisco López de Villalobos (1473-1549) shared an interest in translation with fellow humanist physicians like Andrés Laguna or François Rabelais. His Spanish rendering of Plautus's *Amphitryon*, first published in Alcalá de Henares by Brocar in 1517, was printed again as part of *Los problemas de Villalobos: que tracta de cuerpos naturales y morales, y dos dialogos de medicina: y el tratado de las tres grandes y una cancion y la comedia de Amphitryon* (Zamora, 1543). As its unwieldy title reveals, this new volume included a large variety of texts. Next to Plautus's comedy the reader could find moral and political treatises, essays on natural philosophy, dialogues peppered with comic stories, and passages that verged on the picaresque. Villalobos's abundant comments to his translation of *Amphitryon* moralized the plot, provided contextual information, and glossed the medical import implicit in some of its passages. This colourful array of texts is interspersed with autobiographical episodes which displayed his disenchantment with life at the Castilian court where he served, and also hinted at the harassment that Villalobos arguably suffered because of his Jewish converso background. Its tragicomic *satura* of serious and humorous matter, its combination of poetry, dialogue, narrative episodes and essayistic prose turns *Los problemas* into a fascinating text that defies categorization. This paper aims to explore how this peculiar admixture responded to a growing demand from an increasing readership that sought to be both enlightened and amused, and how it also coincided with a crucial moment in the early modern canon that pointed to the development of prose fiction as an essentially protean and heterogeneous genre.

Born to a Jewish family around 1473, Francisco López de Villalobos studied at the University of Salamanca, where he also published his first book, the *Sumario de la medicina* (1498). This was a *summa* in verse of Avicenna's medical works which also included, as an appendix, a pioneering treatise on syphilis—the *Tratado sobre las pestíferas buvas*. His professional expertise soon took him to court: in 1507 he entered the service of Don Fadrique Álvarez de Toledo, the Duke of Alba, and two years later we find him as one of King Ferdinand's physicians. In 1509 he wrote a lively letter to the Bishop of Plasencia that reported news, his impressions of life at court, and plenty of gossip.

Villalobos has left a substantial corpus of Castilian and Latin correspondence: besides information about politics and other events at court, his letters provide a record of his intellectual pursuits and of the mischievous wit of his prose. He comes through as a sort of news reporter, political commentator, gossip columnist, humorous raconteur, and confidant—all of it woven into one fascinating textual corpus that straddles a large variety of subjects, genres and styles.

Villalobos was not one to restrain his penchant for self-deprecating irony and the sarcastic quip about others. Indeed, his letters suggest that this peculiar sense of humour must have got him into trouble more than once—and the life of a Jewish convert was never easy in sixteenth-century Spain, anyway. His first brush with the religious authorities came about soon after his appointment as royal physician in 1509. He was charged with sorcery and sentenced by the Inquisition in Cordoba to a period of imprisonment of about 80 days. Although he was released honourably after being found not guilty, this incident led him to contemplate abandoning the court—a purpose that was short-lived, but which would frequently recur during the rest of his life. This unpleasant affair, however, did not deter him from making fun, in one of his letters, of the inquisitor who had persecuted him.

Villalobos's reputation as a diligent reporter and witty storyteller must have made him very popular within the highest spheres at court. The fact that throughout his life he continued to enjoy the favour of the monarchy, and many other powerful correspondents and patients demonstrates that his professional standing among them must have been considerable too.

After the death of King Ferdinand in 1516, and an uncertain period of unemployment, he was reappointed as royal physician in 1518. He would remain at the service of Emperor Charles V and other magnates during the rest of his professional career. He retired from court in 1542, and two years later published his *Problemas*, of which more below.

Today I would like to provide a necessarily brief survey of Villalobos's literary endeavours, his aristocratic patrons, and his intellectual affinities. They provide an illuminating backdrop not only for Villalobos's texts, but also for the new types of prose that were emerging in this period. His colourful and varied prose illustrates a stage in early modern prose during which different disciplines and discursive varieties appear intermixed with each other before more strict divisions crystalized within the canon.

I will first approach Villalobos's interest in Pliny's *Natural History*, and then I will examine the intersection of science and medicine with moral philosophy in his heterogeneous prose. This combination resulted in texts like his translation of Platus's *Amphytrion*, the volume titled *Los Problemas de Villalobos*, or his correspondence.

In 1524 Villalobos published his *Glossa litteralis (in Primum et Secundum Naturalis Historie Libros)*, a commentary on the first two books of Pliny's *Natural History*. He dedicated it to Alonso de Fonseca, Archbishop of Toledo and one of Erasmus's most prominent patrons in Spain. This was also the first commentary on the *Natural History* published in Spain.

Villalobos's interest for Pliny predated the publication of his *Glossa* by at least 23 years. In 1501 he exchanged letters with another physician, Dr. Gonzalo de Moros, on certain controversial passages where Pliny questions the immortality of the soul. In this letter Villalobos examines Pliny's text with his wonted irony and wit. If Pliny's eyes could have seen, says Villalobos:

... the wonderful miracles performed in their days by the disciples of Christ, he would have been persuaded by those putrid and repulsive corpses brought back to life, of the indestructibility of the soul and the resurrection of the flesh... And although he was a man of great learning, and a shrewd observer of nature, Pliny deserves execration for following in the steps of those philosophers who

wrote so much nonsense about nature and persistently proclaimed a multitude of errors which are contrary to common sense. Those philosophers are not to be held as wise men, and if they lived in our time, the mercy of our not little-learned contemporaries would throw them in prison, so they would be cured of their madness.

As opposed to other Spanish commentators, Villalobos was more ambiguous and less critical with respect to the otherwise controversial Epicureanism of Pliny. When he deals with the section (chp.7, book II) that denies the immortality of the soul—Villalobos merely paraphrases the text. He neither provides a critical analysis nor refutes its contents.

The rhetorician Hernán Núñez published in 1544 his own philological commentaries to Pliny, whose doctrines he describes as *depraved*. In the 1560s the astronomer and Hebraist Jerónimo Muñoz produced a manuscript commentary that vigorously refuted Pliny's heterodox opinions. Francisco Hernández, the first Spanish translator of Pliny's *Natural History*, manipulated the original into a manuscript version in line with Christian orthodoxy. And finally, Jerónimo de la Huerta, who produced the first printed translation (1st part 1599, 2nd part 1624), also castigated Pliny's suggestions about divine indifference for human affairs as an absolutely false doctrine.

In contrast, Villalobos's comments never explicitly refuted Pliny's materialism, his Epicureanism, or his scepticism about fortune or divine providence. At most, he concedes that when Pliny made all these controversial claims, the Roman encyclopedist did so hesitantly (*dicit dubitative, or pro modo dubitativum*)

His correspondence with Hernán Núñez reveals the authorities that Villalobos had consulted as he elaborated his commentaries—and whose protection he sought. Not only had he dedicated the book to the powerful Archbishop of Toledo. His consultants also included Adrian of Utrech, who had been General Inquisitor of Aragon and Castile before he became pope in 1522. One can hardly think of a more authoritative and safe consultant for a commentary on the most controversial books of the *Natural History*. But there were other relevant names in Villalobos's list, such as Peter Martyr, and the members of the Royal Council.

The Spanish scholar Consolación Baranda has recently provided a most interesting account of the presence of Pliny's rational materialism in early modern Spain. One of the most important witnesses to the impact of Epicureanism was *La Celestina*, whose author was the lawyer Fernando de Rojas, a contemporary of Villalobos, and fellow student of his at the University of Salamanca. Published towards the end of the fifteenth century, *La Celestina* is second only to Don Quijote within the Spanish canon. Many view it as a forerunner of the picaresque and the early modern novel. The Mexican scholar Gustavo Illades has traced the Epicurean affinities between Villalobos and Fernando de Rojas. And in turn these two share their scepticism with Fernán Pérez de Oliva's *Diálogo de la dignidad del hombre*. Composed in the late 1520s, one of the two interlocutors in this dialogue voices a pessimistic view of man that echoes the materialist doctrines of Pliny's Epicureanism. Pérez de Oliva was a polymath who composed treatises on magnetism, the nature of light, and practical handbooks on navigation techniques. Next to Rojas the lawyer and Oliva the scientist and moral philosopher, we find the heterogeneous production of Villalobos.

And there is no better testimony to Villalobos's heterogeneity than the full title of his *Problemas: Libro intitulado Los problemas de Villalobos: que tracta de cuerpos naturales y morales, y dos dialogos de medicina: y el tratado de las tres grandes y una cancion y la comedia de Amphitryon*. Here Villalobos combines poetry and prose with essays on medicine, natural and moral philosophy; recreational prose fiction, autobiographical episodes, and letters. It also contains his translation of Plautus's *Amphytrion*—with our physician's comments, most of which moralize the comedy, or provide contextual and background information. More relevant for my purposes today, there are other comments, such as his long gloss on the physiology and psychology of fear and cowardice, which explore the relations between clinical pathology and moral philosophy within a social and political context.

Los Problemas was published in 1544 and remained in print throughout the sixteenth century. It runs parallel with the heteroglossia of his fellow physician François Rabelais, or the satiric parodies of Francisco Delicado's *La Lozana Andaluza*—a novel whose language exhibits the poliglot atmosphere of Rome and the Mediterranean world in the early sixteenth century. *Los Problemas* and its combination of scholarly material with lighter contents must have reached a readership well beyond specialized audiences. It also represents Villalobos's transition from the courtly circles within which his letters and other manuscripts circulated, to the larger public sphere facilitated by print.

The opening pages of *Los Problemas* deal with the cosmos. Each of its sections is preceded by a short poem, where the main doctrine is encapsulated, followed by a gloss in prose. The second treatise, which has the same structure, descends from the cosmos to man: it deals with *las costumbres humanas*. Here Villalobos describes and analyzes a large variety of social types: from common soldiers to great lords—whose social parasitism he criticizes—as well as princes, ladies, knights, and the clergy.

In another section Villalobos recounts an autobiographical episode that exemplifies his combination of recreational prose with social critique within the framework of an essay on moral philosophy. He tells his readers about the tricks he had used to flee from the French in the midst of battle. He also describes the attitude of two gentlemen who behaved even more cowardly than he did on the same occasion, and suggests that these two gentlemen also approached him one night in a dark alley to interrogate Villalobos about his ancestors—an episode that clearly smacks of antisemitism. He refrains from giving any further details, and subtly leaves the interpretation of this episode, and the moral lesson to be drawn from it, to his readers: “... y esto baste para declaración del metro pasado”. This combination of innuendo, humour, irony and bitterness is typical of much of Villalobos’s prose. It also became an indispensable strategy in other varieties of prose fiction like the picaresque, which were frequently rather critical of social and political practices, and of clerical corruption.

In Metro XI and its gloss, Villalobos uses again indirection and confusion to cast a smokescreen on what can be read as an attack on empire, and the ancient aristocracy. Villalobos’s prose here constantly oscillates from praise to barely disguised satire. One encomiastic statement quickly undermines the expectation it has just created by coming up with a damning assertion, only to muster another period in which copious praise reemerges to neutralize the radical critique that has just been dropped. This is then immediately followed by another radical declaration, which is in turn denied.

Side by side with these moral treatises *Los problemas* also contains a humorous dialogue framed within an epistolary exchange between Villalobos and Alonso de Fonseca, who had requested from the doctor an account of a conversation he had with one of his patients. The device through which the narrator recounts his ‘caso’ in a letter at the request of his correspondent is identical to the narrative framework used by the anonymous author of *Lazarillo de Tormes*. The first Spanish picaresque novel appears as an autobiographical letter penned by the narrator and protagonist in response to a correspondent who wants to know about his *case* in detail. Villalobos’ dialogue is a display of his narrative panoply: it features practical jokes, the adventures of the Count of Benavente with an enema, half-scientific, half-Rabelaisian discussions on the different types of drinking vessels, for wine and for medicaments, and their effects as regards the production of bodily gases.

This dialogue is then followed by a most serious essay on ‘*Las tres grandes*’, i.e. the three great passions of loquacity, obstinacy and laughter (*la gran parlería, de la gran porfía, y de la gran risa*). Our physician admits the methodological challenge he must face: since these three great passions straddle the realms of clinical pathology (the body), psychology (the soul), and the social sphere (moral philosophy). All three combined, says Villalobos, produce mild amusement, but also grief. This essay concentrates Villalobos’s experience with the great and the powerful. It is an eloquent testimony of his skills as an observer of the pageant of human types and passions that can always be found in high places.

His description of false laughter is one of Villalobos’s most remarkable texts:

This sort of laughter is a passion proper of a wild animal called the court. This is a beast that laughs continually, without having a will to do so. It has two or three thousand mouths, all of them laughing immoderately. Some of them are toothless, like the mouths of masks, others have fangs like dogs; others laugh from ear to ear, as in a bare skull; some others frown just like buttonholes; some have beards, others are shaven; some are masculine, others feminine; some shout and some are voiceless; others growl, and others vomit; some laugh with a closed mouth; others are reprehensive; some are blond and some are dark. It is indeed worthy of contemplation not as a group of human beings, but as the many different members of one and the same animal.

He concludes this section with a typology of courtiers, who parade before the reader as characters classified according to the type of laughter they either display, or elicit.

Let me return now to the intellectual background that I mentioned in the first part of my paper today. For this common ground that Villalobos shared with other humanists also interconnects his correspondence, his commentaries on Pliny, his medical works, his peculiar *Problemas*, and his translation of Plautus's *Amphytrion*, with the topic of our colloquium today, the circulation of knowledge.

Villalobos shared with some of his fellow humanists their reprobation of the unintelligible prose of scholastics, and their defence of an polished and elegant, yet common and plain style. There could be no clear and proper knowledge in any discipline without a new type of prose cleansed of all the barbaric Latin and the conceptual jargon of the scholastics. In Metro XXXV of his *Problemas* Villalobos also criticized the *nominales*: their subtleties, he says, are so weak and vacuous that, like a spiderweb, their fabric is good for nothing.

This path had already been trodden by compatriots like Nebrija, or Juan Luis Vives himself, whose book, *In Pseudo-Dialecticos* (1519) decried the terministic logic that he knew so well: for Vives was educated in Paris at the Collège de Montaigu (ca. 1514), whose rector was the terminist Jean Mair. This college was also the butt of Rabelais's parody in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, where he attributed to Mair the authorship of a nonexistent treatise, *De modo faciendi boudinos*, or *On Making Sausages*. This parody appears in a catalogue of books that Pantagruel saw in the famous Library of Saint Victor. One of the volumes included in this mock-collection is titled *Whether a Chimera, Humming in the Void, Can Dine on Second Intentions, a Most Delicate Question Debated for Ten Weeks at the Council of Constance*.

Next to the sceptic strain found in Pliny and his Epicureanism, this antischolastic ethos is an important part of Villalobos's background. It constitutes the foundation of a profound epistemological reform of language that affected all sorts of disciplines, from natural to moral philosophy, from political discourse to theology. It also spread to the didactic prose that should promote these ideas in the new public sphere of print.

In very rough terms we can say that two types of prose fiction resulted from this background: one was the parodic and wildly inventive fiction of François Rabelais (or *La Lozana Andaluza*). Villalobos, as we have seen, produced samples of this type, in his description of false laughter, or in the constantly shifting prose of his critique of empire and aristocracy mentioned above.

The other type of prose was the realism that emerged as the verisimilar counterpart to the fantasies of chivalry and romance. Villalobos also produced some samples of this: one of them was his translation of Plautus. For the combination of epistolar rhetoric and the urban dialogues of middle and lower-class characters found in Plautus and Terence contributed to furnish a new idiom for the verisimilar dialogism of early modern prose fiction. This new style emerged within foundational works like Piccolomini's *Historia de duobus amantibus*, or with *La Celestina*—and then it evolved towards the critical realism of the picaresque. The verisimilar depiction of the social landscape that we find in many of these works appears in combination with a penchant for the essayistic digression, for the interpolation of micro-narratives, and for the *satural* combination of serious with light matter. If we add the first-person autobiographical narrator, we already have most, if not all, of the ingredients that led to the development of the picaresque: from the self-contained Erasmianism of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, to the exuberance of *Guzmán de Alfarache*, where the narrator regales his readers with humorous episodes alternated with digressive essays on a large variety of topics. Historians of the picaresque (e.g. Bjornson, 1977, pp. 145-46) have pointed out that some European translators of Spanish picaresque fiction exploited this format “as a means of stringing together expository pieces”. Which again points to the affinities between moral and natural philosophy, and the intermixing of essayistic prose with recreational prose fiction, of which Villalobos is an early example.

Another antecedent for this type of novel is the conversational letter (*carta-coloquio*). Lázaro Carreter uses Villalobos's correspondence to illustrate the sort of context, the seedbed, as it were, that facilitated the emergence of *Lazarillo de Tormes*. The corpus of Villalobos's correspondence is also an excellent example of how the manuscript circulation of letters which were meant for semi-private communication between individuals, or within a coterie of courtiers, broke into the public sphere of print, and was thus made available to a much wider, middle-class readership.

I will conclude by proposing that Villalobos can be read as a catalogue that displays the variety of prose in circulation at the time. He also illustrates the scientific and epistemological concerns that underlie the gradual emergence of the modern novel and its languages: in particular, that intersection of

natural and moral philosophy, of pathology and psychology, that furnished the studies of character and the description of social landscapes that inhabited the picaresque.