

Retranslating Lorca's homoerotic poetry from taboo to totemic texts –an analysis of ten versions
of the 'Ode to Walt Whitman'

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Proposal

This paper proposes a diachronic analysis of the retranslations of Lorca's celebrated 'Ode to Walt Whitman', a poem which contains some of the most explicit references to the homosexuality that permeated his poetry and which was the great unmentionable taboo surrounding his work during his brief life and for decades after his murder at the start of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. The poem, which forms part of *Poet in New York* and was first published in Mexico in 1933, has been translated into English on numerous occasions since the first version by Stephen Spender and José Luis Gili in 1939 up to the latest version published in 2013. These versions have inevitably been bound to the social and historical context in which they were produced. Early versions of the poem were inevitably inhibited by contemporary sensitivities and more likely to be squeamish about raw allusions to homosexuality or the scabrous and scatological references found in the verses. Nevertheless, the linguistic prudishness of the earlier versions had given way to a frank recognition of the dysphemism present in Lorca's totemic poem about homosexuality in a world where his sexual orientation could be accepted, discussed and even celebrated. Since the first translation of the poem, attitudes towards sexual orientation changed dramatically and this process has been accompanied by a concomitant change in the language used to refer to these questions. As the English-speaking world has become much franker and more tolerant about homosexuality, the translation of Lorca's work has changed accordingly, and his reception has reflected his shifting status from the anti-Fascist poet martyr of the Spanish Civil War to the gay icon embraced by the burgeoning Queer Studies movement around the turn of the century. The first openly politicized translations Lorca's work in the aftermath of Spanish Civil war avoided clear allusions to the poet's homosexuality whereas later versions of his work were free to accurately reflect this without any need for self-censorship.