Translation analysis with TEI: Mapping semantic units in Robert Southey’s *Amadis of Gaul*

[SLIDE 1]

First, I would like to thank James St. Andre for inviting us to speak with you today and Catherine Hui for helping up set up this long-distance presentation. I’m here to talk about Amadis in Translation, a digital project that makes use of TEI encoding to uncover the inner workings of an early nineteenth-century translation. Our text of focus is Robert Southey’s 1803 *Amadis of Gaul*, an abridged English version of a medieval Spanish romance that had a long translation history before it reached Southey. Our project attempts to show how Southey articulates and puts into practice a translation theory that lets him peel back the layers previous French and English translations added to the Castilian text. One of the most interesting things about Southey’s take on *Amadis* is that he takes the unraveling of previous translators one step too far, imagining a medieval Portuguese original where none exists and, in the process, making some idiosyncratic changes to *Amadis*. In this presentation, we’re going to show you how Southey’s translation works by focusing on semantic units, the smallest measure of the text we’re able to compare between Southey’s translation and the sixteenth-century Castilian source from which he worked.

First, you might be wondering how Southey got the text’s origin wrong. Southey’s theories reflected the state of criticism on the work of his era and the longstanding confusion about the emergence of *Amadís.* Even in the sixteenth century, at the height of its popularity, the romance was particularly unmoored in terms of time, space, and authorship. Little is known about fifteenth-century editor-compiler Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, and still less is known about the medieval “primitive” *Amadís* on which Montalvo based his version of the romance. Yet *Amadís* became enormously popular on the early modern print market, and translations soon appeared in French, Italian, English, German, Dutch and Hebrew, all without crediting the Spanish author.[[1]](#footnote-1) Marian Rothstein estimates that there were 500,000 readers of the French *Amadis* alone*,* and Juan Manuel Cacho Blecua counts 527 editions of *Amadís* printed before 1694.[[2]](#footnote-2) Thanks to twentieth-century discoveries, we have traced the text’s origin to fourteenth-century Castile and learned its medieval ending, which concluded with the deaths of the illicit lovers. Montalvo’s early modern *Amadís* allows Amadís and Oriana to survive but shifts the narrative focus to their adolescent son in the final volume, preparing for a sequel. Southey, writing before these discoveries, imagined a lost original that ended with the marriage of Amadís and Oriana, which would have suited the literary sensibilities of his own era much better than those of medieval Spain.

Southey worked from a relatively early edition Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo’s text, yet because he viewed it as a translation from the Portuguese original, he felt no loyalty toward it. Southey removed much of Montalvo’s authorial commentary, but he also left in some episodes that have been judged to be early modern in origin and excised some material that would have belonged to the medieval text. Southey’s *Amadis* is a very readable, much shortened, and much altered version of the early modern Castilian text. It deviates from Montalvo’s text most significantly in Book IV, where Montalvo’s own authorial signposting was most evident.

That Southey happened to be wrong in much of his literary criticism on *Amadís* does not make him less interesting to us. Rather, the fact that he lays out a translation theory in his Preface to *Amadis* and then follows through on it makes him a very interesting case for cultural translation, which we define for this project as the changes to the framing, wording, and meaning of a text that allow it to become intelligible to new groups of readers. Juan Miguel Zarandona has characterized Southey’s approach to *Amadis* as “pragmatic” and “medievalizing.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Indeed, Southey hoped to make money with his translation, and that meant communicating with the English readers of the Romantic era. He also had to interpret and update Montalvo’s notoriously difficult syntax and diction, which had seemed archaic to Spanish readers even in the sixteenth century. In addition to simplifying the work for modern readers, Southey also had to reframe *Amadís*’s geopolitics for the Napoleonic era. The triumphant Amadís, a prince of Gaul, had usually been read as French in the sixteenth century, which made the text inconvenient for English readers in 1803.

[SLIDE 2]

It seems evident that Southey emphasizes the Portuguese thesis in his Preface because he finds it the best way to combat the French thesis. To Southey’s credit, there is some documentary evidence for a Portuguese origin for *Amadís*, while the French thesis is pure fantasy. Nicolas de Herberay, who translated *Amadis* into French in 1540, was the artillery master for François I and a veteran of wars with Spain. In the preface to his translation, he tells an apocryphal story of finding fragments of an *Amadis* manuscript in Picardie. The apocryphal manuscript is a common romance trope, and early modern readers do not seem to have been fooled by this story. Scholars of later centuries, including Sir Walter Scott, however, did lend some credence to Herberay’s anecdote. Southey, correctly perceiving Herberay’s apocryphal manuscript trope as an exercise in nationalism, wrote against both Herberay’s translation and two others that followed it, the 1590 English translation by Anthony Munday and Louis Élisabeth de la Vergne’s 1779 free translation. Southey’s footnotes to *Amadis* reference all of these translations, and his final text is a balancing act, faithfully rendering the Montalvo at some moments and at others reacting to the choices of three other translators.

This brings us to the question of what Southey’s translation actually looks like at the clause level. Southey’s Preface makes a bold statement of his technique: “To have translated a closely printed folio would have been absurd. I have reduced it to about half its length, by abridging the words, not the story […] There is no vanity in saying, that this has improved the book, for what long work may not be improved by compression?”[[4]](#footnote-4) In practical terms, this has meant that we have not been able to follow the model of other TEI translation projects and find word-for-word correspondences between the source text and the target text. Southey’s abridgements of the Montalvo are indeed extensive. Montalvo favors sentences with strings of dependent clauses that begin with gerunds frequent repetition of previous material, while Southey prefers uncluttered syntax and streamlined narrative. Only in volume four, where Montalvo laid the groundwork for a sequel Southey did not intend to translate, do Southey’s abridgements concern theme and character as well as language.

Though on the surface Southey appears to have done exactly what he said he would in the Preface, our code has revealed surprising detail. Rather than creating a free translation, as the Preface seems to suggest, Southey alternates between literal and free strategies on an ad hoc basis. Southey employs word-for-word translations when the Spanish syntax and diction is comparable to English and sense-for-sense translations when it is not. Southey’s omissions from the Montalvo are dramatic, but additions are minimal and tend to clarify ambiguities in the source. The resultant translation is a masterpiece of reading and interpretation, an *Amadís* that keeps much of what was good about the early modern text while eliminating the features that earned it a reputation for poor literary quality.

[SLIDE 3]

Southey was a prolific writer of letters, and thanks to his correspondence we know quite a bit about the conditions in which he translated *Amadis*. Southey had first planned to abridge from Anthony Munday’s English translation, but he abandoned that plan when he was able to borrow a 1547 edition of *Amadis* that belonged to his friend Richard Heber. Southey spoke French in addition to Spanish and Portuguese, and he consulted Herberay, Tressan, and Munday throughout the translation process. At times, he may have needed these translations to help him *Amadis*: as you can see from the slides, the 1547 edition represents a transitional period in the history of the book, caught between manuscript and print aesthetics. The gothic type, two-column format, folio size, and woodblock illustrations recall romances of chivalry in manuscript. The 1547 edition uses premodern textual division strategies meant to maximize the number of characters per page. Instead of white space, we see aggressive text blocks separated only by the calderón symbol for paragraphs. [SLIDE 4] The punctuation, meanwhile, follows no set hierarchy and functions like medieval breath marks for out-loud reading. As you can see on this slide, the period introduces dialogue after the word “dezía,” he said. [SLIDE 5] On this next slide, we show you two other typographical features of the 1547, the calderón, which looks like a thick capital “C” with an extra vertical line, and the tironian sign, which looks like a curvier “r.” These symbols save space on the page, and they represent a paragraph division and the coordinating conjunction “and” respectively. The 1547 also uses the tilde to mark the omission of the letter “n.” These features would have looked as unfamiliar to Southey as to us.

[SLIDE 6] To present *Amadis* for his English audience, Southey had to figure out not only how to read it, but also how to punctuate it, paragraph it, and interpret it for a very different set of cultural codes than those which operated in the 1547 printing. Southey’s Spanish is excellent, and his footnotes indicate that he used previous translations to resolve ambiguities. This was a successful strategy, and our team has found only a handful of mistranslations. This slide shows what Southey’s finished text looks like, and it corresponds to the passage I showed you to illustrate the 1547’s punctuation. The miracle of Southey’s translation is that it renders *Amadís* easy to read. The early modern Castilian text, meanwhile, was notorious for its ornate language and was, for good reason, the romance credited with driving Cervantes’s Don Quixote insane.

[SLIDE 7] This passage also happens to be about as close as Southey gets to word-for word translation. Here we’re looking at our xml text of the 1547 marked up in TEI, and I’m going to show you how I came to the conclusion that this is a faithfully translated passage. The unit of comparison we use for the Montalvo and the Southey is the clause-like unit, which we designate with <cl>. We measure clauses from punctuation mark to punctuation mark in the Montalvo. For example, clause 64 here is measured from a period to a colon. [SLIDE 8] Once we have our Montalvo text broken into its clauses and labeled by paragraph and clause number, we look at the Southey for correspondences. We are marking these correspondences with an <anchor> element and <corresp> attribute, a process we’ve been referring to on the project as “stitching.” Here we have a straightforward example, because Southey’s clause order matches Montalvo’s. [SLIDE 9] The visualization on our website of this passage shows off the simplicity. The two blocks in green represent Southey’s additions, which in this case provide a transition and clarify an antecedent. Everything else is a match, and no full clauses have been omitted.

[SLIDE 10]

Most of Southey’s work with the Montalvo, however, is not nearly this word-for-word. Here we have a location where Southey changed Montalvo’s clause order. What has happened is that an aside about the maid Darioleta shifted position to make the English sentence more readable, yielding a clause order of 94, 96, 95, 97. This is a typical pattern for Southey, and it doesn’t represent an unfaithful translation at all, just an accomodation of Spanish syntax. We expect to see syntax transformations in any Spanish to English translation, as Spanish is a subject-object-verb language, and English is a subject-verb-object language. Yet the syntax differences between Montalvo and Southey go beyond the basic pattern of the language. The early modern *Amadís* favored long strings of adjectival and gerund phrases, difficult to read in Spanish or English, and Southey reduces them as a matter of course. [SLIDE 11] What I’m showing you on this next slide, which concerns the sentence that follows the previous example, is a much more dramatic departure from the source text. What we’re looking at here is an abridgement of the Montalvo, a simplification of the diction of the original that keeps the sense intact. The first large omission here concerns emotion, and the second shortens dialogue. The top box presents Elisena’s “amoroso semblante,” the expression of love on her face, which I might take to be a smile or a blush. Southey habitually dampens the overwhelming emotional detail in the Montalvo, probably as a question of taste. The bottom box contains the end of Darioleta’s reply to her mistress, primarily the expressions of courtesy that mark out her respect for her superior. Southey, probably correctly, seems to judge that the early modern mistress/servant dynamic would not interest an audience from a vastly different time and place, and he opts for a brief formulation in indirect discourse to cover the same meaning.

What our digital project has enabled us to do is to separate and view each of Southey’s translation decisions at the clause level. The project has given me a great appreciation for Southey as a translator of language and culture, and it has also engaged our project team in some interesting work with TEI. I’m handing the presentation over to Elisa Beshero-Bondar now, our coding expert, to talk about the innovative ways we’re using TEI markup and how we think our work might assist other projects and researchers who want to understand the inner workings of translation.

Avalle-Arce, Juan Bautista. *El* Amadís *primitivo y el de Montalvo*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990.

Cacho Blecua, Juan Manuel. “Los cuatro libros de Amadís de Gaula y Las sergas de Esplandián: los textos de Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo.” *Edad de Oro* 21 (2002): 85–116.

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Rodríguez-Moñino, Antonio R. *El primer manuscrito del* Amadís de Gaula. Madrid: Silverio Aguirre Torre, 1957.

Southey, Robert. “Preface.” In *Amadis of Gaul*, by Vasco de Lobeira, i–xxxvi. translated by Robert Southey. London: Longman, 1803.

Zarandona, Juan Miguel. “*Amadis of Gaul* (1803) and *Chronicle of the Cid* (1808) by Robert Southey: The Medieval History of Spain Translated.” In *Charting the Future of Translation History*, edited by Georges L. Bastin and Paul L. Bandia, 309–32. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2006.

1. Cacho Blecua, “Los cuatro libros de Amadís,” 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cacho’s number includes sequels to the *Amadís* by other writers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Zarandona, “Amadis of Gaul,” 313, 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Preface,” xxi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)