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POETRY IN TRANSLATION

Five Unknown English Translations of Poems by George Buchanan, c.1670

Stuart Gillespie

Bodleian MS Eng. poet. f. 17 is a leather-bound notebook containing a copy of 'A Collection of some poems and translations | Plac'd as they were done by J.F.' This collection extends to 89 numbered items over 174 numbered pages, few of which are original poems: there are some 50 psalm paraphrases, and there are sophisticated translations, some of well over 100 lines in length, from (or from works attributed in the seventeenth century to) the following ancient and medieval authors: Ausonius, Catullus, Horace, Lactantius, Lucilius, Seneca, Sedulius, Simonides, Tertullian, Theocritus, Tibullus, and two or three others more obscure. A generous selection of these versions, all of which appear uniquely in this manuscript, will be printed for the first time in my forthcoming edition of *Newly Recovered English Classical Translations, 1600–1800* (Oxford UP, 2018).

This manuscript also contains English translations of ten neo-Latin poems, five of which are by the Scottish humanist George Buchanan. Buchanan, now most familiar as the author of the political treatise *De Jure Regni apud Scotosi* (1579), was in his own time best known as a Latin poet, dramatist, and translator. His Latin poems were popular enough to be regularly translated into English, both formally and informally, down to the eighteenth century and beyond. At least 100 different translations of individual poems are recorded by 1800 in printed or manuscript form, not counting the full translation of

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Buchanan's epigrams by Robert Monteith.¹ Among these, J.F.'s stand out. As in the rest of his translations, the lexis and very latinate syntax (reminiscent, perhaps, of Milton's contemporary English version of Horace's 'Pyrrha' ode) make some demands, but the poems repay the effort, and these compositions undoubtedly deserve at least some sort of readership even at this late date.

Another of the items in the ms volume is a much greater rarity: a translation of the Scots humanist Florentius Volusenus' once famous dialogue poem *De Animi Tranquillitate*, 1543. This had been reprinted in the well-known collection *Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum* (Amsterdam, 1637), J.F.'s likely source. In the Bodleian manuscript the version of Florentius is headed 'Translated in Edimborough 1662', while another item is translated from a text first printed in 1675, giving a minimum date range for J.F.'s work.

Although the distinctive hand of the manuscript is too cramped to be a professional one, a number of transcription errors unlikely to be made by an author, as well as the impersonal phrasing and tense of the title page (quoted above), imply it is not J.F.'s own. The texts below are nevertheless diplomatic transcriptions except where noted, adjustments being made only to correct obvious mistakes or to help with serious difficulties of comprehension. The titles given are as found in the manuscript. These translations appear on pp. 59–61, 8–9, 90–2, 81–2, and 51–3.

The manuscript's recent fortunes are a reminder of the vagaries of literary history. In its front endpapers the notebook carries a pasted-in letter from T. F. Higham to the bookseller in whose catalogue it appeared in 1936, and from whom the Bodleian Library eventually acquired it. Higham had evidently been allowed to inspect the manuscript with a view to collecting anything suitable for the *Oxford Book of Greek Verse in English* which he was then compiling with Maurice Bowra. He writes that although he is interested in one item, a version of one of Theocritus' idylls, he doubts whether he will include anything, and so it proved. This is hardly surprising, because whereas J.F. is a keen translator of Latin verse, the Theocritus idyll is almost the sole Greek original he chooses (and even this is a poem no longer attributed to Theocritus today). Had the manuscript fallen into other hands, parts of it might far more likely have been published, bringing it to wider attention. Higham's letter to the bookseller, together with the 1936 sales catalogue entry which is also pasted in, also implies, by

¹ *The Very Learned Scotsman, Mr. George Buchanan's Fratres Fraterrimi, Three Books of Epigrams, and Book of Miscellanies in English Verse*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1708).

the absence of interest in the author's identity, that any trail leading to further light on who J.F. was had already gone cold, and nothing further seems to be known about the manuscript's history.

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Buchanan's Epitaph on Calvin

This 'epitaph' is the dirge, or as he called it *epicedium*, which Buchanan wrote on the death of Calvin in 1564. Such a poem is demanding enough to require a more than casual commitment from a translator, and no translation other than J.F.'s is on record until Robert Monteith's in every respect inferior attempt in his three-volume Buchanan compilation of 1708 (n. 1).

If any be who thinke no Ghosts survive
The Grave, or if he thinke they doe, doth live
As one expecting Hell and endlesse paine
Beneath black Styx, such justly may complaine
Of his hard Fate, alive deplore his Death,
And to his loving Friends his greife bequeath.
But thee blest Calvin, though before thy day
From thy sad Freinds thou ravish'd wert away,
And thy great Aimes Death envi'd, thee to mourne,
And with vaine pompe and plaints to load thy Urne, 10
Wee judge a crime. Now free from Care and farre
From heavy Earth, thou dwell'st above the Starres,
Enjoy'st God nearer whom in Spirit thou
Adored'st, in pure Light beholdest now
Pure Light, and liv'st, filled with a draught of God,
A Life that knowes nor Doubt nor Period,
Life nor deject with Sorrow, nor elate
With fond-joy-drunken Hope, exanimate
With Feare, nor clog'd with Body which casts on
The Soule the Maladies contagion. 20
That Day which of thy piercing Cares did thee
Exempt, thy Birth-day justly term'd may be,
In which thou rapt to Skies, return'st unto
Thy Countrey, and thy tedious Exile now
Finish'd, thy Sp'rit o'th' Second Death secure,
Greater then Fortunes Empire, doth a sure
Long lasting Life commence. As when the Soule

Into a Body slides, and straight the whole
Dull Masse enlivens, moves, into all parts
An active Vigour powres; when this departs, 30
That doth a dead unmoved Carkasse stay,
Nought but a putrid Frame of heavy clay:
So God is the Soule's Soule, whom wanting, 'tis
Wrapt in black'st night, and with vaine Phantasies
Blinded, hugs lying Shades of Truth and Good:
But soone as it doth taste the living Flood
Of Divine Light, then forthwith flie away
Dark Shadowes, fond illusive Shapes decay,
And God his Countenance naked doth expose
To be' in true Light beheld, on which a(t) close 40
Of Twilight no intrusive Night shall bring.
Thy Spirit thus (Heaven joying in the thing)
Receiv'd into the Port, although thou rest,
Of most untroubled Peace, and Blisse possesst,
Yet of all Calvin could not envious Death
Deprive the Earth, whilst any there draws breath,
The monuments of thy Genius's lofty flight
Shall last; and when the flame of partiall Spight
Shall cool by litle, wheresoe're shall pure
Religion shine, thy Fame shall thither, sure, 50
It self dilate. As false-nam'd Clemens Thee,
Thee two Paules Twinnes in fraud and Villany,
Did feare, as furius Julius, Pius fam'd
By' his impious Brother, quak'd when thou wert nam'd,
So shall thy Names sole Shadow, thy Wit's bare
Visour, now thou art dead, for ever feare
Vaine Superstition. That fierce Tyranne too
Who shall sway Rome in after times, and who
Raging so terribly, with steel and flame,
Shall all the functions of th' Infernall Realme 60
Unto himself transferre; in Empire be
A Pluto, Harpy in foule Robbery,
A Fury in his Fire, In taking tolls
A Cheron for the passage of all Soules,
Cerberus in's Triple Crowne: his owly flight
Blinded and damp't with Truths arising light,
Dejected quite with Thunder of thy tounge,
Shall all the Torments that to Hell belong,

Such as wee sung whilst Sion's Palaces
 Stood with a grace
Envi'd of all about. Must Babel's pride
 Our hymnes deride? 20
Or shall wee in a land unhallowed raise
 Our sacred layes?
Jerusalem! the Temples lovely courts,
 The deare resorts
Of each true Israelite! shall any hower
 E're have the power
To blot you from my mind? Then may I still
 My musik's skill
Forget, and my righthand benumm'd so much
 As not to touch 30
My ecchoing harpe, may my toung faultered, leave
 To speake, and cleave
To my mouths parched roof, if that to blaze
 Thy justest praise
Be not its cheifest task, if not from thence
 My truest sense
And source of Joy arise. Lord Idom's hate
 Doe not forget,
Mind their curst spight that on our overthrow
 Insulted so: 40
Pull downe (they cri'd) that City, all confound,
 And to the ground
Equall its roofes. And thou proud Babell too
 Shalt not eschew
Due smart, but prove that the sur'st things wee see
 Unstable be.
Happie who shall our ruines once revenge
 With just exchange,
The cruelties thou didst on us inflict
 Repay with like, 50
Happy who with thy childrens tender braines
Snacht from their mothers armes, the stones distaines.

The I Chorus of Buchanan's *Baptistes*

A translation of Buchanan's Latin drama *Baptistes* (wr. 1540s) appeared in 1643 under the title *Trannical-Government Anatomized*. There is no evidence that the translation was, as is sometimes argued, the work of Milton, but the ascription helped ensure reprints from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. J.F.'s translation is limited to one chorus, and his interest, contrastingly, seems not to extend to the politics of Buchanan's play. Instead it is a broadly moral interest, and the close of the translation is practically a version of the famous second chorus on the public/private life in Seneca's *Thyestes*, 'Stet quicumque volet'.

O how deep a night Mens Souls
In a searchlesse shade inrolls
In what darknesse we th' unslackt
Race of headlong Life transact!
Mark of Shame the Shamelesse veils,
Th' Impious Piety's shade conceales,
Restlesse Hatred beares a friend's
Countenance, Falshood Truth pretends.
Loe whose Face was so severe,
Rare exemple of austere 10
Temperate Life, now Fury-wise
Rages, in Wrathes Furnace fries.
Such the flame with rapid whorle
Stones from Ætna's hearth doth hurle,
Such Vesuvius bowells burns,
And to parched cinders turnes;
As the blind Revenges fury
Which this Pharisee doth hurry
To subvert the Divine youth,
Guilty make his simple Truth. 20
Thou O Pride-swell'd Lust of Fame,
This so mighty Mischeifes dame,
And thou Praise whose outside doth
Glitter with the guild of Truth,
Th' Soule, soone as you sway her state,
Your charm'd Poysons fascinate,
And rejecting Reasons curb
The Breasts palace quite disturb,
Shame your presence, Piety
Faith and Truth and She doth fly, 30

Who (guest of the better Age)
Last left Earth's infamous stage.
O could any Artist drive
Off the Faces cloud and give
Prospect of the naked Cares
The breast hides, the dark affaires
Canvast there, wide open set
The Soules close-lockt Cabinet,
Thou shouldst see of Monsters then,
Stabled in no spacious Den 40
Sorts and figures wondrous strange,
More than ever Nile or Gange,
Africk could, or Caucasus
In its gloomy dennes produce,
There nor Tygers rage should be
Missing, Lions ferity
Nor the ever thirsty gulfe
Of the Blood-insatiate Wolfe,
Basilisks breath implunging deep,
Asp that tulls in wakeless sleepe, 50
Scorpions hooke that Deaths sting beares,
Croc'dile shedding treach'rous teares.
Foxes wiles not be away,
Nor th' Hyena's cruell play.
Piety's counterfet belies
Cruell'st Tyrannes, in disguise
Of the Church-mans gowne doe lurke
Busie hearts in mischeifes worke:
Wrapt in coarse and simple weeds
Reall Virtue only speeds 60
Under a cheape Countrey-roof
Boasts no titles for her proof,
Scorns the Sessions frantick noise,
And the Peoples plausible voice,
Doth no humble Client waite
'Fore the haughty Patrones gate,
In a remote Farme alone
To her self alonely knowne,
Full of silence, void of strife,
Spends a nothing-wanting Life. 70

Buchanan's Morning Hymne to Christ

Buchanan's 'Hymnus Matutinus ad Christum' is in in four-line iambic dimeter strophes (the form developed by Ambrose of Milan for his hymns). J.F.'s translation makes it look easy to encompass the poem in the same number of short lines in English.

Issue of best Father thou,
Equall to the Greatest too,
True light from the true light beam'd,
True God from the true God stream'd,
Night is loe evanish'd, bright
Shines Aurora's previous light,
Purples heaven and Earth, projecting
Beames all darkened things detecting:
Ignorance's shadows yet
Our benighted Breasts beset, 10
Still enwrapt with Errour's gloomes
Our damp't Spirit neare succumbes.
Purest Sunne arise, display
To the World the truer Day,
By immision of thy Light,
Dissipate our Errours night,
O dissolve the horrid Cold,
And our Breast's stiff fallow mold
Of the moisture purge that harm'th,
By thy Lamps Celestiall Warmth, 20
'Stead of this the Ground imbue
With thy Nectar's blissefull Deaw,
That with hundreth-fold of Use
Heavenly Seed it may produce.

From Simonides of Women, interpreted by Buchannan

The Buchanan poem translated here was a version of the archaic Greek satirical poem by Semonides or Simonides sometimes called 'Types of Women'. The premise of this somewhat tedious work is that Zeus created ten types of women based on different animals, and sharing their qualities (e.g. fox – sly and malicious). The last 36 lines of J.F.'s 118-line translation are given here. A later translation appeared in the

Spectator in 1711, but even at this comparatively early date, an apology for 'this Author's Want of Delicacy' was felt to be required.

The Husband of the Bee-bred Wife is best,
Free only of the Faults of all the rest
She makes her Mate's Life Long and fresh, and either
One to the other deare, grow old together.
Mother of a renown'd and lovely Race,
Mong all her sex excells, such divine grace
Environs her; she likes not sitting at
Meetings of Women for Venemous chat. 90
Wise Jove to Mortalls grants Wifes nature'd thus,
When he to them will be propitious.

Yet by Jove's Plot, the other Sorts beside
Bee too, and among Men alas! abide,
For he of Ills hath This most miserable
Ordain'd, that Women, though they profitable
Sometimes appeare, their Owner's greatest crosse
Yet prove: for never can the man engrosse
One whole Dayes mirth, who with Life's punishment(,) 100
A wife(,) resides. Nor shall he ere prevent
Domestic want and Famine, whilst that he
Fosters this Family-foe, Gods enemy.
Yea when a Man's most Joviall, whether he
Contemplates Gods or mens gratuity,
Then is the Wife, first finding what to blame,
Arm'd to the fight. For where's a haughty Dame,
None ever fairely shall receive his Guest.
Againe, the Woman that appeares the best
Oft's worst in proof, whilst her dull Husband yawnes; 110
His Nighbours seeing him by Errour drawne,
Laughing the while: for none failes to commend
His owne, Another's Wife to reprehend,
Nor will we' Acknowledge equall Lot; for Jove
Man's greatest Ill hath made this doting Love,
And it with knot indissoluble ti'd,
Since first for Wives Men fighting fondly di'd.

But to conclude, no better thing ere had
Man than a Good Wife, none worse than a Bad.