

**George Buchanan and Arthur Johnston**  
**Two poetic paraphrases of Psalm 23**  
**(edited by Roger Green)**

For some two hundred years the paraphrasing of the Psalms in Latin verse attracted many poets to try their hand, including some of Europe's best. The object was not primarily devotional or pedagogical, and they were not, at least at first, set to music or used in churches; the impulse was literary and artistic, a response to the challenge of recasting the poetry of the ancient Hebrews, usually accessed in Latin translations, into classicizing verse.

The genre became especially popular in the years after 1530, when numerous versions were written, some in the elegiac metre and others in a variety of mainly lyrical metres. George Buchanan took the latter path, and was actually the first to produce a complete set, in which he used some thirty metres for the 150 psalms. He began work when in France, continued them in Portugal (helped in part by a period of confinement near Lisbon decreed by the Inquisition), and finished them in the early 1560s, soon after his return to Scotland.

**George Buchanan**

These Psalm-poems of Buchanan were popular throughout Europe; in Scotland a rival arose in Arthur Johnston, hence their pairing below. Buchanan was favoured by Samuel Johnson, Johnston perhaps by Sir Walter Scott; now a modern Scottish poet, Robert Crawford, has presented versions of poems of both (including a rendering of Buchanan's Psalm 23) under the title 'Apollos of the North' (Edinburgh, 2006). The readers of the present anthology may like to decide for themselves which of the Latin poets deserves the crown, and why.

In Buchanan's version of Psalm 23 points of especial interest are the pastoral and Horatian colouring, the influence of the *locus amoenus* theme, and the movement of the imagery between sheep and man and from pasture to symposium: see R. P. H. Green, 'Davidic Psalm and Horatian Ode', *Renaissance Studies* 14 (2000), 93-7.

It is now clear that Buchanan did not work from the original Hebrew but from various Latin versions. These included the Vulgate, but a paraphrase of the Hebrew first printed in 1532 by Joannes Campensis (Jan van den Kampen) and an anonymous (and quickly censored) translation of 1545, the work of Swiss scholars, which was equipped with exegetical notes, were particularly influential. The former work may be accessed in the useful *Liber Psalmorum cum translationibus quatuor et paraphrasibus duabus [...]* (Strasburg, 1545); the latter has a brief and deliberately uncommunicative title of *Biblia. Quid in hac editione praestitum sit, vide in ea quam operi praeposuimus, ad lectorem epistola* (Paris, 1545).

His set of poetic paraphrases saw some twenty editions in Buchanan's lifetime, and perhaps a hundred afterwards. The version below follows exactly that of the earliest edition of the whole set, under the title *Psalmorum Davidis paraphrasis poetica, nunc primum edita, Authore Georgio Buchanano, Scoto, poetarum nostri saeculi facile principe*. It was published by Henri Estienne and Robert Estienne with no indication of date or place; the date is in fact the winter of 1565/6, the place either Paris or Geneva, probably the latter. The printers' description of B. as 'easily the chief' (or 'prince') of poets' has been upheld by posterity: see in particular P. J. Ford, *George Buchanan, Prince of Poets* (Aberdeen 1982), and his paper 'Poeta sui saeculi facile princeps: George Buchanan's Poetic Achievement', in the forthcoming work edited by P. J. Ford and R. P. H. Green, *George Buchanan, Poet and Dramatist* (The

Classical Press of Wales), which aims to give a survey of Buchanan's vast and varied output of Latin verse.

The metre used by Buchanan for this Psalm is the one known to classicists as the Second Asclepiad, used a few times by Horace. The criterion for the choice of a particular metre was usually not the character of the individual Horatian ode thus recalled; rather he seeks to give an overall impression of the diversity of Horace's odes, indeed of the whole range of lyric metres used by Latin poets in antiquity. A particular ode may recall many other poems, and sometimes many different authors, and delight in this intertextuality was no doubt one reason for his great appeal. The skill with which he rethinks and remoulds the diction and syntax of the Psalms will also have been readily appreciated by readers, whatever the actual version with which they were familiar.

### **Psalm 23, by George Buchanan**

Quid frustra rabidi me petitis, canes?

Livor propositum cur premis improbum?

Sicut pastor ovem, me dominus regit;

Nil deerit penitus mihi.

Per campi viridis mitia pabula, 5

Quae veris teneri pingit amoenitas,

Nunc pascor placidè, nunc saturum latus

Fessus molliter explico.

Purae rivus aque leniter astrepens

Membris restituit robora languidis, 10

Et blando recreat fomite spiritus

Solis sub face torrida.

Saltus quum peteret mens vaga devios,

Errorem teneras illecebras sequens,

Retraxit miserans denuo me bonus 15

Pastor iustitiae in viam.

Necsi per trepidas luctifica manu

Intentet tenebras mors mihi vulnera,

Formidem duce te pergere: me pedo

Securum facies tuo. 20

Tu mensas epulis accumulas, merum

Tu plenis pateris sufficis, et caput

Vnguento exhilaras. Conficit aemulos,

Dum spectant, dolor anxius.

Me numquam bonitas destituet tua, 25

Profususque bonis perpetuo favor;

Et non sollicitae longa domi tuae

Vitae tempora transigam.

Why, in vain, do you attack me, mad dogs? Envy, why do you press your wicked purpose? As a shepherd guides his sheep, so the Lord guides me; nothing at all will be lacking to me. Through the gentle pastures of the green plain, embellished by the beauty of tender spring, now I feed quietly, now in weariness I softly stretch out my well-fed body. A stream of pure water, gently babbling, restores strength to my tired limbs, and with its pleasing encouragement the wind refreshes me beneath the sun's roasting heat. Whenever my errant mind sought the pathless glens, following the

tender inducements of error, the good shepherd, pitying me, brought me back at last to the way of justice. Not even if death, in the fearsome darkness, were to direct blows at me with its grievous hand, would I fear to go on with you as my leader; with your staff you will make me free from anxiety. You pile tables high with feasts, you provide wine in full bowls, and make my head radiant with perfume; painful resentment afflicts my enemies as they look on. Your goodness will never desert me, nor will the favour poured forth continually on good people; and I shall pass the long span of an unworried life in your house.

### Commentary

**Lines 1-2:** As here, B. often begins with added lines, that do not correspond to the original; this practice brought criticism later, but in fact while adding vigour to his opening words he seldom strays from ideas integral to the Psalms. The now familiar shepherd in the first verse of the Psalm is not found in all versions of the Bibles, though B. will have been aware of it.

**Line 2:** *Livor*: envy (cf. lines 23-4) is personified, perhaps following the classical notion of the tooth of envy and the phrase *livor edax* (Ovid, *Amores* 1. 18. 1, *Rem. Am.* 389).

**Line 3:** *me dominus regit*: this phrase closely follows the Vulgate; others use the verb *pasco*, and the 1545 translation has *pastor meus est*. In the next line he adds *penitus* for the sake of metre and emphasis to the Bibles' *nihil mihi deerit*. (This last word is scanned in the usual classical way, as two syllables).

**Line 8:** *latus... explico*: the phrase recalls a line in Calpurnius Siculus 1. 4-5 *molle sub hirsuta latus explicuere genista* ('They stretched out their tired flanks beneath a

leafy broom-tree'). B. may have read this author in an anthology or in a contemporary edition.

**Line 9:** *purae rivus aquae*: the words derive from Hor. *Odes* 3. 16. 29, one of Buchanan's favourites. Horace is also to be heard in *leniter astrepens* (cf. *Odes* 2. 19. 30 *leniter atterens*), and in that phrase there may also be an echo of Calpurnius again (cf. 4. 2 *astrepit umor*). The phrase of most of the Latin Bibles, *aquam refectionis* (others have the Christian technical term *refrigerii*) is avoided.

**Line 12:** *solis... face*: the word *fax* provides an unusual metaphor (literally, the sun's torch or flambeau), but one wholly in the classical style, as in Statius, *Thebaid* 3. 539 *face solis*.

**Lines 13-16:** Although close to the Bible, this functions as a transitional verse – these are common in Horace – and with suitably modulating imagery moves from sheep to person.

**Lines 17-20:** It is interesting to see here how B. negotiates the notion of 'walking in the valley of the shadow of death', not only avoiding such a metrically awkward word as *ambulavero* and the Hebrew metaphors but visualising death as an armed enemy – and a super-human one. The phrase *luctifica manu* was probably inspired by a line of a tragedy of Seneca, *Hercules* 102, describing the Fury Megaera.

**Lines 21-3:** B. lavishes more detail than the original Psalm did on the feast, avoiding the entirely unclassical word *impinguasti* ('you have anointed'), removing the mention of drunkenness which the Vulgate versions have, and taking care not to cast God in the role of a servant waiting at table. Perfume is mentioned in his main Biblical sources, but is also used by Horace in sympotic contexts: cf. *Odes* 2. 3. 13, 2. 7. 23, 3. 14. 17.

**Line 27:** *non sollicitae longa:* in these words it is possible to read a denial of Horatian themes that life is worrying and time is short (compare *Odes* 1. 4. 15, 1. 11. 7; *Serm.* 2. 6. 60-2), with pointed *Kontrastimitation*. Though an admirer of Horace, B. distances himself where appropriate from his philosophy and religious outlook.



## Arthur Johnston

Arthur Johnston (c. 1579-1641) was a native of Aberdeenshire, where he spent much of his life. Born shortly before Buchanan's death, he inherited a flourishing tradition of Latin verse composition at school and university level, and of courtly and satirical poetry. His own poetry is very diverse, including poems on the 'cities' of Scotland and on current people and events (for which see volumes 1 and 2 of *Musa Latina Aberdonensis* (Aberdeen, 1892 and 1895), and the modernised and poetic versions presented in 'Apollos of the North'). Though a great admirer of Buchanan's writing on the Psalms, there is evidence that as an Episcopalian (and doctor to James VI and I) he was in the politically turbulent 1630s encouraged for political reasons as a foil to Buchanan, the strong Presbyterian, credited by many with anti-Royalist and even heretical religious views.

Johnston's poetic Psalm paraphrases were first printed in 1637, and that version (*Paraphrasis poetica Psalmorum Davidis, Arturo Ionstono Scoto, Abredoniae*) is followed here. They are all written in the elegiac metre, which in the classical and neo-Latin worlds had long been put to a gamut of uses ranging from secular to scurrilous. With its succession of (usually) self-contained couplets this metre makes rather different demands from the lyric metres that Buchanan had mainly used, but was found no less suitable for the verses of the Psalms. The result is in some ways more austere, yet there is scope for descriptive adjectives, here used simply but effectively. So God is *blandus*, *providus*, *alme*, the worshipper *laetus*. The influence of Ovid is clear, and Johnston seems as familiar with and as expert in the classics as Buchanan.

Johnston's poetic paraphrases were read widely, especially in Scotland and Holland, in both devotional and pedagogical contexts. Attempts in the eighteenth



century to add them, as beginners' texts, to the school curriculum in both England and Scotland, and ensuing fears that Buchanan's place might be under attack, served to increase the fame of the poet and his poetry, and foster detailed comparative analysis of both writers. For a narrative of the controversies, see R. P. H. Green, 'Dry Bones of Contention? Picking apart Buchanan's Psalms', in the aforementioned *George Buchanan, Poet and Dramatist*.

### **Psalm 23, by Arthur Johnston**

Blandus ut upilio me pascit conditor orbis;

Ne mihi quid desit, providus ille cavet.

Dat satur ut recubem pratorum in gramine molli,

Ducit et ad rivos lene sonantis aquae.

Cor recreat, rectique viam mihi monstrat et aequi. 5

Illi ut laudes laetus in astra feram.

Non ego degeneri quaterer formidine lethi,

Ante oculos quamvis vallis opaca foret.

Tu, deus, es praesto, baculo vestigia firmans

Ne titubem, vires restituisque meas. 10

Hoste palam tu das plenis accumbere mensis,

Et mihi regales porrigis ipse dapes.

Tu caput irroras succo foelicis olivae,

Sufficis et larga pocula plena manu.

Me tua defendet bonitas, dum lumine vescar, 15

Per salebras gressus diriget illa meos.

Inque tuis adytis, rerum pater alme, morabor,

Hic ubi perpetuo gaudia laetus agam.

Like a kindly herdsman the world's creator feeds me; he providently takes care that nothing is lacking to me. He enables me to lie down satisfied in the soft grass of the meadows, and he leads me to the streams of gently sounding water. He revives my heart, and shows me the way of rightness and justice, so that I may with joy extol his praises to the stars. I would not be shaken by a weakling's dread of death, even if a dark vale were before my eyes. You God, are at hand, steadying my feet with your staff so that I do not totter, and you restore my strength. In the presence of the enemy you grant me to recline amid loaded tables and you yourself offer me right royal feasts. You besprinkle my head with the oil of the flourishing olive, and you hand me full goblets unstintingly. Your goodness will defend me, as long as I enjoy the light; it will direct my steps over life's rough roads. And in your shrines I will abide, kind father of all, just here, where I will for ever pursue my delights in joyfulness.

### **Commentary**

**Line 1:** *upilio* (also found in Latin as *opilio*) is a rather homely and humble word for 'shepherd', and is unusual in verse; Vergil had brought it into his Pastorals just once (*Ecl.* 10. 19). It stands in effective contrast with the formal phrase *conditor orbis* common in higher styles of classical and Christian verse.

**Line 4:** *ad rivos lene sonantis aquae*: not exactly the 'still waters' of the original, but derived from Ovidian descriptions (*Fasti* 2. 704 and *Amores* 3. 5. 6) of babbling brooks that were part and parcel of describing the *locus amoenus*. The word *ad* may have the meaning of 'beside', which would bring it closer to the original, rather than its usual one of 'to'.

**Line 5:** *rectique viam...et aequi*: essentially ‘justice’, which the Psalmist had to administer as king; but the point also has a message for the average Christian.

**Line 7:** *degeneri...formidine*: in this phrase the effect is felt of a famous passage of Vergil, (*Aen.* 4. 13) *degeneres animos timor arguit* (‘fear betrays ignoble minds’).

*lethi*: for *leti*; no doubt thoughts of the myth of Lethe contributed. (Compare modern English ‘lethal’, which attests to the common medieval and Renaissance spelling).

**Line 8:** *vallis opaca*: this relatively simple version of the Bible’s ‘valley of the shadow of death’ obviates problems in envisaging the exact situation, as does the imported phrase *ante oculos*.

**Line 10:** *hoste palam*: *palam*, literally ‘openly’, is used as a preposition following its noun, as occasionally happens in classical writers and early translations of the Bible.

**Line 12:** *regales... dapes*: ‘kingly’ luxury was a target of classical writers (just as kings themselves were), but David is a king, and such a feast legitimates and vindicates him.

**Line 13:** *caput irroras*: the same words are used by Ovid in *Fasti* 4. 315, where the context is one of solemn purification. An interesting tension (a surface tension, at least) is created in writing of this period by the Ovidian diction that was strongly favoured at the time along with the elegiac metre, but Christian writers had for a thousand years been happy to draw upon such treasure, often no doubt oblivious of any original overtones.

*succo foelicis olivae*: *succo* is today more often spelt *suco*, and *foelix* as *felix* – the latter word is literally ‘fruitful’, but adds to the notion of happiness as well as prosperity.

**Line 14:** *larga... manu:* literally, ‘with generous hand’. The cup is not allowed to flow over, as it does in the original.

**Line 16:** *salebras:* in today’s language, ruts and potholes. Buchanan had used the word of spiritual obstacles, with angels as roadmenders.

**Line 17:** *adytis:* as *hic* makes clear, this refers to the Jewish temple, where David, king as well as prophet, will rejoice, and not to the heavenly realms. (Neither Buchanan nor Johnston favours the anagogical mode of interpreting the Psalms, though it was very common). There would have been few reservations at this time about the transference of the word from pagan shrine to Jewish temple or Christian church, and in some sense the noun here used – originally a loan-word from the Greek – adds a certain aura of appropriate mystery.

