

1991

George Buchanan's Secular Latin Poetry and New Historicism

David H. Sabrio

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sabrio, David H. (1991) "George Buchanan's Secular Latin Poetry and New Historicism," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol26/iss1/27>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

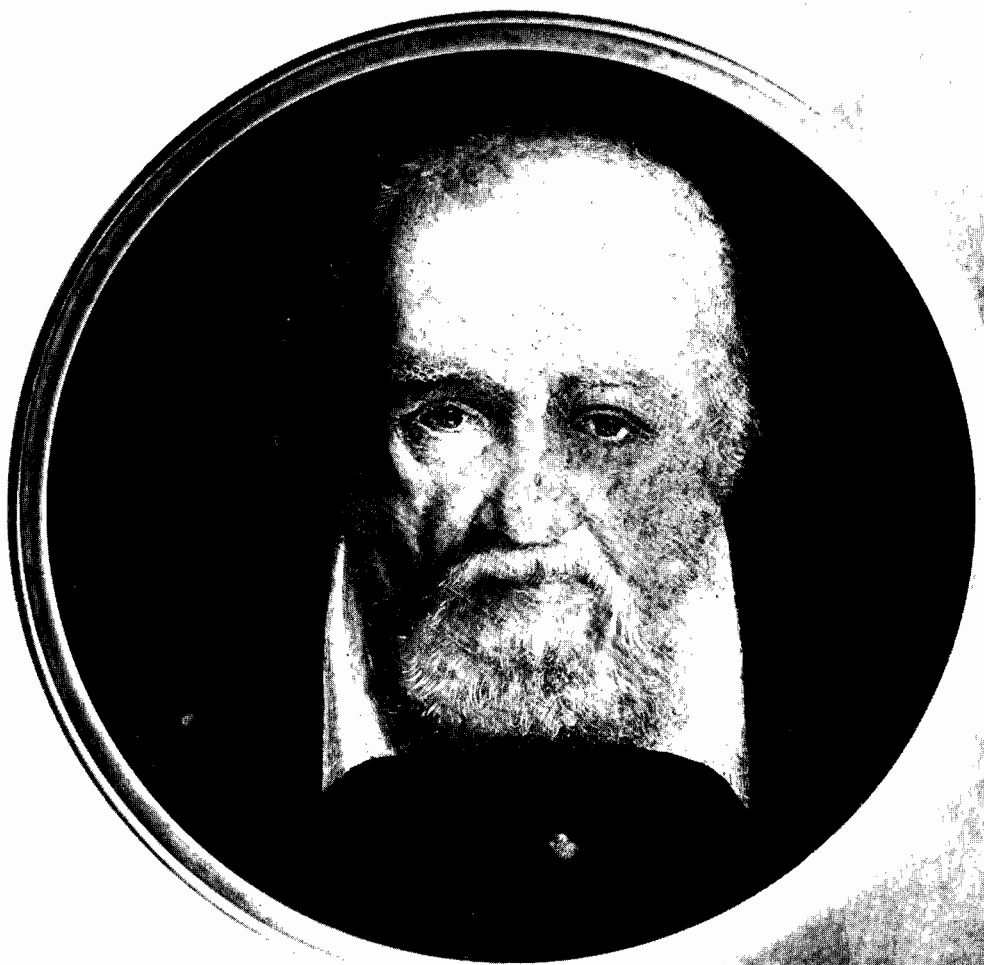
David H. Sabrio

George Buchanan's Secular Latin Poetry and New Historicism

The 1980s have been a productive decade for Buchanan studies. Spurred on partly by the four hundredth anniversary of his death in 1982, scholars have focused long-overdue attention on the Scottish humanist. Perhaps the two most notable works are I. D. McFarlane's monumental biography, published in 1981, and Philip Ford's book, published in 1982, which analyzes Buchanan's poetry and its relation to classical Latin poetry and to the French literary scene in the sixteenth century.¹ In fact, from 1980 to 1988, the Modern Language Association Bibliography lists no less than thirty-four studies of Buchanan. Compare this with just thirteen articles on Buchanan listed in the preceding twenty-three years from 1957 (the year in which the PMLA Annual Bibliography began regular publication of the Neo-Latin section) to 1979. I welcome the opportunity to participate in the effort to continue this renewed interest in George Buchanan, interest that he so richly deserves.

In the first part of my presentation I'd like to make some general comments about the desirability of studying Neo-Latin poetry, and especially that of George Buchanan. In the second part I will suggest some ways in which new historicist approaches may be used in relation to Buchanan's secular Latin poetry.

¹I. D. McFarlane, *Buchanan* (London, 1981); Philip J. Ford, *George Buchanan Prince of Poets*, and an edition (text, translation, and commentary) of the *Miscellaneorum Liber* by Philip J. Ford and W. S. Watt (Aberdeen, 1982).



George Buchanan
Courtesy National Galleries of Scotland

One generally held notion about Neo-Latin poetry is that it is cold and formal. Granted, any large body of poetry will contain poems of varying degrees of impersonality. However, many Neo-Latin poems display a very human voice. To illustrate, in *Elegy 4*, written in 1544, Buchanan tells two of his friends in straightforward, unflinching language about his illnesses. Buchanan makes his suffering very personal through lines such as these: "My burning insides are turning to little heaps of stones, and the sharp stones burn the hidden places of my kidneys"; "gradually the slow fluid, winding down into the lungs, shakes either side violently in such a way that it is racked with a cough"; "Squalid decay has beset the face, and the limbs show that the bones can be counted through the shriveled skin."² The sentiments expressed in this poem are hardly formal and impersonal.

Another often overlooked point in favor of studying his Neo-Latin poetry is the extent to which Buchanan was praised in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Robert Estienne, the French publisher of Buchanan's Latin psalm paraphrases, referred to the Scots writer in the mid-1560s as "easily the foremost of the poets of our time."³ Now the praise of one's publisher may be written off as advertisement for the publisher's book. Estienne, however, was not the only one who praised Buchanan's poetry. So did Roger Ascham, so did Gabriel Harvey, so did Sir Philip Sidney, so did Dr. Samuel Johnson.⁴ It is true that most of these literary figures praised Buchanan for his religious rather than secular poetry; but this emphasis is not surprising, coming from writers living in a religious age. Even the formidable Dr. Johnson, who liked nothing better than to ridicule the Scottish people, considered Buchanan a "very fine poet" and said of him, "He not

²David Sabrio, "George Buchanan's *Elegies and Silvae*. Translated, with Introduction and Commentary," diss., U. of South Carolina, 1980, pp. 69-71. Translations of the *Elegies* and *Silvae* are taken from this text and are given with page numbers in parentheses. The text for these translations is George Buchanan, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Thomas Ruddiman, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1715).

³*George Buchanan, Glasgow Quatercentenary Studies, 1906* (Glasgow, 1907) pp. 407, 431.

⁴Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster*, ed. Lawrence V. Ryan (Ithaca, NY, 1967), p. 139; Alexander B. Grossart, ed., *The Works of Gabriel Harvey*, 3 vols. (New York, 1966), I, 18; Albert Feuillerat, ed., *The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1962), III, 41; James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. George B. Hill, rev. by L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1950), I, 460; II, 96.

only had great knowledge of the Latin language, but he was a great poetical genius."⁵

Praise in his own time is not the foremost reason why Buchanan's secular Latin poetry is worth studying. Another important reason is that it is good verse. *Silva 2*, for example, demonstrates this quality. *Silva 2* is essentially a pastoral eclogue in which two shepherds lament the absence of Ptolemaeus Tastaeus, who was a very close friend of Buchanan while the Scot was teaching in Bordeaux. Tastaeus has left Bordeaux for Poitou, another region of France. Very skillfully, Buchanan uses in this poem a classical poetic form—the propempticon or send-off poem—but ironically reverses it to fit the present circumstances. Whereas the conventional propempticon asks that the gods make calm the powers of nature in order to provide a safe journey for a departing loved one, in this poem one of the shepherds wishes disasters upon the area of Poitou so that Tastaeus will be forced to return to Bordeaux. The shepherd finally reconsiders his harsh and selfish words, however, and wishes the best of luck to Tastaeus. This poem also contains several elements of the formal English pastoral elegy, such as the mourning of nature, expressions of grief by the speakers, and the consolation. Buchanan clearly shows his skill in *Silva 2*. He combines several conventional forms—the eclogue, the pastoral elegy, and the propempticon—into a unified poem of emotional depth.⁶

One final reason why knowledge of Neo-Latin poetry is important is that it probably has much more influence on vernacular literature than many scholars realize. As Fred Nichols states, ". . . the story of the development of vernacular poetry in the Renaissance is largely, though varying from country to country, the story of ways in which poetry in the various European languages absorbed and adopted the peculiar characteristics of Neo-Latin poetry."⁷ The following example illustrates how knowledge of Neo-Latin poetry may have helped scholars better understand English literature: Edmund Spenser, in Books 3 and 4 of *The Faerie Queene*, is usually cited as the first Renaissance poet to combine the concept of romantic love with the institution of marriage.⁸ A century earlier, however, Giovanni Pontano wrote *De Amore Coniugali (On Wedded Love)*, a poem which deals

⁵Quoted in Boswell, I, 460; II, 96.

⁶David Sabrio, "George Buchanan and Renaissance Latin Poetry," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*, 7 (1981), 41.

⁷Fred J. Nichols, ed., *An Anthology of Neo-Latin Poetry* (New Haven, 1979), p. 83.

⁸C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (London, 1967), ch. 7, especially p. 298.

maturely and skillfully with the topic of married love. Connections such as these may help alter some of our ideas about Renaissance English poetry—for instance, what kinds of ideas were original and who influenced whom.⁹

For the rest of my time I'd like to shift perspectives and make some suggestions about the relation of Buchanan's secular Latin poetry to two aspects of new historicism. I consider these suggestions as tentative and provisional, and I welcome your own perspectives on these ideas. In addition, it's important to keep in mind that new historicism, also called the poetics of culture, is really an umbrella term which embraces a wide variety of critical practices.

The first idea grows out of my reading the fascinating book by David Quint, entitled *Origin and Originality in Renaissance Literature*, published in 1983. Quint discusses the opposition in the Renaissance between two different—often directly opposed—ways of reading and interpreting literary texts. One method of reading, which grew out of the Middle Ages, emphasized "traditional modes of allegorical reading and writing" along with dependence "upon systems of revealed truth" and authority. The other method of reading sees a text as predominantly the "exclusive creation" of its writer at a particular historical moment.¹⁰ Quint maintains—plausibly, I think—that this second approach "helped to shape a new mentality." He concludes his book with an observation that is particularly new historicist in its orientation:

. . . intellectual historians have assigned the literary text a more or less passive role: literature reflects but does not embody, still less create, ideas. But the evidence suggests that the effort of the Renaissance literary text to reexamine the source of its authority, to define itself *as text*, is an event in intellectual history that intellectual history has not adequately understood or explained.

The Renaissance author emerged as original at the moment when a traditional and authoritative canon was historicized and relativized (pp. 219-20).

Related is the issue of the source of poetic inspiration. Is the source located outside the poet, universal, and revealed? Or is the source personal, specific to a particular time and place, even created by the poet? Quint argues that ideas about the source evolved from the former position to the latter during the course of the Renaissance.

How do these notions connect with Buchanan's secular Latin poetry? Consider a good cross-section of his verse—the *Elegies*, the *Silvae*, and the

⁹Sabrio, "George Buchanan and Renaissance Latin Poetry," p. 43.

¹⁰David Quint, *Origin and Originality in Renaissance Literature* (New Haven, 1983), p. x.

Miscellaneous Verse, a total of fifty-three poems. Of these fifty-three poems, fully thirty-one, or 58 percent, are written for or about specific historical occasions or persons. Granted, Buchanan may have been imitating certain classical poetic forms. Nevertheless, the content of each of these thirty-one poems is related to a particular time and place in history. These poems make no pretense about signifying some authorized, revealed, allegorical truth.

A representative example of a poem which relates to a specific historical context is *Silva 4*, the epithalamium celebrating the marriage in 1558 of Mary Queen of Scots and the Dauphin François, son of Henry II of France. Throughout the poem Buchanan demonstrates his control of the conventional form of the marriage poem, while at the same time providing individualizing touches. Not often present in formal, ceremonial verse such as this is a reference to the newly married couple's wedding night. To the bridegroom the poet says, "You shall pluck the expected fruits without worry. . . . soon it will be allowed to embrace, soon also to pair your kisses, soon also not only kisses" (p. 142). Perhaps the best known passage in the poem is Buchanan's description of the dowry which Mary brings to the marriage—the good people of Scotland. The poet enumerates their virtues: hardiness, fierceness in battle, loyalty to allies. They are praised for never having been conquered, not even by the mighty Romans, who resorted to building a wall to prevent the Scots from attacking their settlements. Martial prowess, however, is not the only skill of the Scottish people noted here. They are credited with having kept learning alive when the barbarian tribes were sacking the continent.¹¹ This poem, then, and many others by Buchanan support Quint's thesis about the movement of Renaissance poetry toward contextual specificity and "individual innovation" (p. 219). I might add that a well known Renaissance Latin poet is the subject of one of the chapters in Quint's book. In chapter 3 he discusses the opposition of epic authority and pastoral autonomy in the poetry of Jacopo Sannazaro.

The second aspect of new historicism I'd like to discuss is one developed by Louis Montrose in a series of essays about the nature of the English Renaissance pastoral form. Montrose's general point is that literary texts perform "far reaching acts of social mediation."¹² Specifically, Montrose argues that pastorals are "symbolic instruments for coping with the goddess Fortune, with the endemic anxieties and frustrations of life in an ambitious

¹¹Sabrio, "George Buchanan and Renaissance Latin Poetry," pp. 41-2.

¹²Quoted in Jean Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," *English Literary Renaissance*, 16 (1986), 32.

and competitive society. Pastorals that celebrate the ideal of content function to articulate-and thereby, perhaps, to assuage-discontent." ¹³

This idea of social mediation can be applied to nine of Buchanan's secular poems which refer to or discuss the importance of education in general and the humane letters in particular. Keep in mind also the centrality of education in Buchanan's own life. From about 1529 to the 1570s, he was mostly employed as either a college teacher or a tutor to a wealthy or noble household.

Before exploring the mediating nature of these poems, I would like to discuss them in some detail in order to give a sense of the importance which Buchanan placed on education and the study of humane letters. Five of his *Miscellaneous Poems* include references to education. In Miscellany 9, addressed to the youth of Bordeaux, he exhorts his readers to "nurse the learned Muses and their excellent arts"; the poem concludes, "Only the writings of the learned bards ignore the sway of harsh Destiny."¹⁴ In each of four other miscellaneous poems, Buchanan praises a person who has demonstrated dedication to learning: in Miscellany 12, Alexander Cockburn, a pupil of John Knox; in 14, Nicholas Bacon, Vice-Chancellor of England and father of the well known essayist; in 15, Henry VIII; and in 28, Camille de Morel, a young girl tutored by Buchanan's friend Charles Utenhove.¹⁵

Further evidence of the importance which Buchanan places on education appears in two of his *Silvae*. In *Silva* 4, the epithalamium which I've already mentioned, Buchanan praises Scotland for keeping learning alive during the dark ages: ". . . when barbarian Mars was shaking the Latin world, this land almost alone was hospitable to the exiled muses" (p. 148). And in *Silva* 7, the birthday poem of James VI of Scotland, the poet believes that the young boy should be taught more than mere statesmanship: ". . . meanwhile the sweet graces will put together his boyish babblings and struggling words, and they will give his uncultivated heart to the Muses for nourishing" (p. 167).

Perhaps the two clearest indications of Buchanan's commitment to education are found in his *Elegies*. In *Elegy* 5 he undertakes a task that we are all too familiar with: begging a government official for increased funding for his college in Bordeaux. Buchanan points out that if higher education is not funded in France, then the Muses will flee to other countries which will support them, such as Spain, Portugal, or England. Each of these coun-

¹³Louis Montrose, "'Eliza, Queene of Shepheardes,' and the Pastoral of Power," *English Literary Renaissance*, 10 (1980), p. 155.

¹⁴Ford, p. 151.

¹⁵Ford, pp. 153, 155, 157, 173, 191-3, 200.

tries was considered at that time to be far inferior to France in the field of higher education. The poem ends with a desperate plea for assistance: ". . . either console the wretched and needy with immediate aid, or at least take away quickly the hope of your aid" (p. 79).

Finally, in *Elegy 1*, which is one of his best known secular Latin poems, Buchanan writes about the working conditions for those teaching humane letters at the University of Paris, where Buchanan was a tutor from 1529 to 1531. This poem has a curiously contemporary ring to it. The speaker states that those who teach the humanities had better be prepared to drink only water, because there is no money to be made in teaching. Scholars grow old before their time. Even ditch diggers sleep at night, but not teachers. They must remain at their study late into the night, inhaling the soot of the lamp, scratching their heads and biting their nails. When the teacher finally does get to sleep, he is immediately awakened for class. Half-asleep, the scholar stumbles into class, calls the roll, and begins lecturing. The students, however, are not interested in his erudition. Some are asleep, one has bribed another to answer for him at roll call, one is writing a letter home. Even parents complain that their children are learning nothing and that tuition fees and books are too expensive. The result, of course, is that teachers are paid less. While the sentiments expressed in this poem appear to border on bitterness and despair, I believe the overall tone is one of disappointment and concern by someone who will continue to believe in the value of teaching the humanities.

What act of social mediation could Buchanan's poems on education have performed? Could these poems have interposed between those of the educational profession who were committed to the values of education and those of the general public and government who did not fully understand the social value of education? That is, Buchanan's poems on education gave voice to the many teachers who believed that their activities were useful. Such poems could help relieve or assuage the frustrations, tensions, and contradictions that all teachers face at one time or another between the value of their profession and the relatively low regard in which their profession is held by the public. In other words, some of the bitterness and loss of morale experienced by teachers could perhaps have been partially soothed by their knowledge that a fellow teacher—and a very well respected and well connected one at that—had the attention of influential people for his expression of the vital role which education plays in society.

How would an older historical perspective differ from a new historicist approach to Buchanan's poems on education? An old historical view would see these poems as unproblematically reflecting the culture's attitudes toward education. This approach, in one sense, trivializes or makes less important the role of literary texts in society, relegating them to mere reflections of

"real" history. From a new historicist perspective, however, literary texts become potentially much more significant in any given cultural context. That is, literary texts perform social work by influencing or helping to establish patterns of behavior or ways of thinking about ideas, issues, and values. As Jonathan Goldberg has pointed out, new historicism challenges the old assumption that events and things are real and words are not.¹⁶

From a new historicist perspective, then, Buchanan's poetry on the importance of education can be seen as a significant voice in the sixteenth-century debate about the place of education in people's lives. Furthermore, Buchanan was in a position to be more influential than most educators in matters of educational policy. During the 1560s he was essentially a scholar in residence at the court of Mary Queen of Scots as well as principal of St. Leonard's College in the University of St. Andrews, and in the 1570s he served as tutor to young King James of Scotland.¹⁷

One of the themes of this conference is the relevance of current interpretative theories to Scottish literature. The conference program lists presentations using feminism, deconstruction, the Bakhtinian notion of "carnival," and my investigative application of new historicism to Buchanan's secular Latin poetry. I also want to mention that Buchanan has recently been used by British Marxist critic Alan Sinfield to elaborate a political, oppositional reading of *Macbeth*.¹⁸ These widely varying perspectives, in conjunction with the more traditional approaches, can only help to reaffirm the vitality and importance of Medieval and Renaissance Scottish studies both in their own right and in their relationship with other literatures and cultures, and indeed with our own present-day society.

Texas A & I University

¹⁶Jonathan Goldberg, "The Politics of Renaissance Literature: A Review Essay," *ELH*, 49 (1982), 538.

¹⁷For more about Buchanan's influence on sixteenth-century education, see McFarlane, pp. 212, 218ff., 328, 441ff., 481, 485.

¹⁸Alan Sinfield, "Macbeth: History, Ideology and Intellectuals," *Critical Quarterly*, 28 (1986), 63-77.