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Home's Douglas and Wully Shakespeare

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suggest that Douglas was unaware of the limitations of the vernacular. Like all medieval translators, he was only too acutely aware of this and his complaint is only one of many:

Sum tyme I follow the text as neir I may,
Sum tyme I am constreyned an other way.
Besyde Latyn our langage is imperfect
Quilk in sum part is the causa and the wyte
Quhy that of Virgillis vers is ornate bewte
Intill our tyme may nocht observye be; (Prol. I 357 ff.)

But as usual such complaints are not to be taken all that seriously: certainly not in face of the prologues Douglas added to the separate books of the Aeneid. There the energy of language which is released only now and then in the course of translation is unfettered. Has anyone else described a Scottish winter quite like this? —

Thik drumly scuggis dyrkayt so the hevyn,
Dym skies oft furth warpit feirfull hevyn,
Flaggis of fire, and mony felloon flaw,
Scharpe soppys of sleit and of the aypand snaw. (Prol. VII)

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Home’s Douglas and Wully Shakspeare

Home’s Douglas is now remembered chiefly for its coy periphrasis for pregnancy (I.i), “My name is Norval” etc. (II.i), and a remark from the audience at its first performance, which took place in Edinburgh on 14 December 1756. An example of the orthodox version of this last incident may be found in James C. Dibdin’s Annals of the Edinburgh Stage (Edinburgh, 1888, p. 87):

At the first performance of Douglas, when Young Norval was busily employed giving out one of hisRodomontading speeches, a canny Scot, who had been observed to grow more and more excited as the piece progressed, unable longer to contain his feelings, called out with evident pride, “Whaur’s yer Wully Shakspeare noo!”

It is difficult to establish when this story first came into being. David Hume’s dedication of his Four Dissertations (London, 1757, pp. v-vi) to Home refers in general to the play and ends with a reference to its enthusiastic reception in the theatre:

But the unfagged tears which flowed from every eye, in the numerous representations which were made of it on this theatre; the unparalleled com-

[128]
mand, which you appeared to have over every affection of the human breast: These are incontestable proofs, that you possess the true theatrical genius of Shakespeare and Otway, refined from the unhappy barbarism of the one, and the licentiousness of the other.

Burns's "Prologue spoken by Mr. Woods on his Benefit Night, Monday, 16th April, 1787" also invites the comparison with Shakespeare:

Here Douglas forms wild Shakespeare into plan,
And Harlequin robs all the God in man.

The earliest reference traced so far has been the following:

During the representation of Douglas, a young and sanguine North Briton, in the pit, exclaimed on a sudden, with an air of triumph, 'Weel, lads; what think you of Wully Shakespeare now?'

This comes from David Erskine Baker's Biographia Dramatica in its 1812 edition (vol. I, p. 360 n.), which had been expanded by Isaac Reed. It is not found in the 1782 edition of the book, and so it must be taken as Reed's addition. Henley and Henderson probably knew of this source, for their note on the Burns couplet quoted above refers to the Wully Shakespeare remark being made by a "pittite"; however, they give Dibdin's 1888 version of the actual words used.

Home had certainly done something himself to encourage the comparison with Shakespeare. When his first play, Agis, had been turned down by Garrick he consoled himself in verses that contain the following:

Image of Shakespeare! To this place I come,
To ease my bursting bosom at thy tomb.

That day and night revolving still thy page,
I hope like thee to shake the British stage.

After the success of Douglas Garrick, apparently taking the point thus offered, said that there were acts in Agis that were more like Shakespeare than any other author had written.\(^1\) Henry Mackenzie in his Account of the Life and Writings of John Home, Esq. (Edinburgh, 1822) was more cautious, feeling compelled (p. 75) to correct the impression Home's verses might have given a North British contemporary by the comment: "Shakespeare, of whose excellence he was an enthusiastic admirer, he did not think of imitating in manner or in style."

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