



John Florio by William Hole, engraving, published 1611.

Shall I apologize translation?

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Why, but some hold (as for their freehold) that such conversion is the subversion of universities. God hold with them, and withhold them from impeach or impair. It were an ill turn, the turning of books should be the overturning of libraries.

Yea, but my old fellow Nolano told me, and taught publicly, that from translation all science had its offspring. Likely, since even philosophy, grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, and all the mathematics yet hold their name of the Greeks; and the Greeks drew their baptizing water from the conduit-pipes of the Egyptians, and they from the well-springs of the Hebrews or Chaldees. And can the well-springs be so sweet and deep, and will the well-drawn water be so sour and smell? And were their countries so ennobled, advantaged, and embellished by such deriving; and doth it drive our noblest colonies upon the rocks of ruin? And did they well? And proved they well? And must we prove ill that do so?

Why, but learning would not be made common.

Yea, but learning cannot be too common, and the commoner the better.

Why, but who is not jealous his mistress should be so prostitute?

Yea, but this mistress is like air, fire, water: the more breathed, the clearer; the more extended, the warmer; the more drawn, the sweeter. It were inhumanity to coop her up, and worthy forfeiture close to conceal her.

Why, but scholars should have some privilege of pre-eminence. So have they: they only are worthy translators.

Why, but the vulgar should not know all. No, they cannot for all this, nor even scholars for much more; I would both could and knew much more than either doth or can.

Why, but all would not be known of all. No, nor can: much more we know not than we know. All know something: none know all. Would all know all? They must break ere they be so big. God only: men far from God.

Why, but pearls should not be cast to swine. Yet are rings put in their noses; and a swine should know his sty, and will know his meat and his medicine, and as much beside, as any swine doth suppose it to be marjoram.

Why, but it is not well divinity should be a child's or old wives', a cobbler's or clothier's tale or table-talk. There is use, and abuse. Use none too much: abuse none too little.

Why, but let learning be wrapped in a learned mantle.

Yea, but to be unwrapped by a learned nurse.

Yea, to be lapped up again; yea, and unlapped again. Else, hold we ignorance the mother of devotion, praying and preaching in an unknown tongue: as sorry a mother, as a seely daughter; a good mind perhaps, but surely an ill manner. If the best be mete for us, why should the best be barred?

Why, but the best wrote best in a tongue more unknown. Nay, in a tongue more known to them that wrote, and not unknown of them to whom they wrote.

Why, but more honour to him that speaks more learned. Yea, such perhaps as Quintilian's orator: a learned man, I warrant him, for I understand him never a word.

Why, but let men write for the most honour of the writer. Nay, for most profit of the reader, and so haply, most honour. If to write obscurely be perplexedly offensive, as Augustus well judged, for our own not to write in our own but unintelligible is haply to fewer and more critical, but surely without honour, without profit, if he go not or send not an interpreter; who else, what is

he but a translator? Obscure be he that loves obscurity. And therefore willingly I take his word, though wittingly I do mistake it: *Translata proficit*.

Why, but who ever did well in it? Nay, who did ever well without it? If nothing can be now said but hath been said before—as he said well, if there be no new thing under the sun, what is that that hath been? That that shall be (as he said that was wisest)—what do the best then but glean after others’ harvest, borrow their colours, inherit their possessions? What do they but translate, perhaps usurp, at least collect? If with acknowledgment, it is well; if by stealth, it is too bad. In this, our conscience is our accuser, posterity our judge; in that, our study is our advocate, and you readers our jury.

Why, but whom can I name that bore a great name for it? Nay, who great else, but either in part—as Plato and Aristotle out of many; Tully, Plutarch, Pliny out of Plato, Aristotle and many—or of purpose, as all that since have made most know the Greek, and almost the Latin, even translated their whole treatises?

Why, Cardan maintaineth, neither Homer’s verse can be well expressed in Latin, nor Virgil’s in Greek, nor Petrarch’s in either. Suppose Homer took nothing out of any, for we hear of none good before him, and there must be a first; yet Homer by Virgil is often so translated as, Scaliger conceives, there is the armour of Hercules most puissant put on the back of Bacchus most delicate; and Petrarch, if well-tracked, would be found in their footsteps whose very garbage less poets are noted to have gathered.

Why, but that Scaliger thinks that Ficinus by his rustical simplicity translated Plato as if an owl should represent an eagle, or some tara-rag player should act the princely Telephus with a voice as ragged as his clothes, a grace as bad as his voice. If the famous Ficinus were so faulty, who may hope to ’scape scot-free? But for him and us all, let me confess, as he here censureth, and let confession make half amends, that every language hath its genius and inseparable form; without, Pythagoras his “metempsychosis” it cannot rightly be

translated. The Tuscan altiloquence, the Venus of the French, the sharp state of the Spanish, the strong significancy of the Dutch cannot from here be drawn to life. The sense may keep form; the sentence is disfigured, the fineness, fitness, featness diminished, as much as art's nature is short of nature's art, a picture of a body, a shadow of a substance.

Why, then, belike I have done by Montaigne as Terence by Menander, made of good French no good English. If I have done no worse, and it be no worse taken, it is well. As he, if no poet, yet am I no thief, since I say of whom I had it, rather to imitate his and his authors' negligence than any backbiter's obscure diligence. His horse I set before you, perhaps without his trappings, and his meat without sauce. Indeed in this specially find I fault with my master, that as Crassus and Antonius in Tully, the one seemed to contemn, the other not to know the Greeks; whereas the one so spoke Greek as he seemed to know no other tongue, the other in his travels to Athens and Rhodes had long conversed with the learned Grecians: so he, most writing of himself, and the worst rather than the best, disclaimeth all memory, authorities, or borrowing of the ancient or modern; whereas in course of his discourse he seems acquainted not only with all, but no other but authors, and could out of question like Cyrus or Caesar call any of his army by his name and condition. And I would for us all he had in this whole body done as much, as in most of that of other languages my peerless, dear-dearest and never-sufficiently-commended friend hath done for mine and your ease and intelligence.

Why then again, as Terence, I have had help. Yea, and thank them for it, and think you need not be displeased by them that may please you in a better matter.

Why, but essays are but men's school-themes pieced together. You might as well say, several texts. All is in the choice and handling.

Yea, marry, but Montaigne had he wit, it was but a French wit: ferdillant, legier, and extravagant. Now say you, English wits, by the staidest censure of as

learned a wit as is among you. The counsel of that judicious worthy counsellor (honourable Sir Edward Wotton) would not have embarked me to this discovery had not his wisdom known it worth my pains and your perusing. And should or would any dog-toothed critic or adder-tongued satirist scoff or find fault that in the course of his discourses, or web of his essays, or entitling of his chapters, he holdeth a disjointed, broken and gadding style; and that many times they answer not his titles, and have no coherence together: to such I will say little, for they deserve but little. But if they list, else let them choose, I send them to the ninth chapter of the third book (folio), where himself preventeth their carping, and foreseeing their criticism answereth them for me at full. Yet are there herein errors. If of matter, the author's; if of omission, the printer's. Him I would not amend, but send him to you as I found him; this I could not attend. But where I now find faults, let me pray and entreat you for your own sake to correct as you read, to amend as you list. But some errors are mine, and mine are by more than translation. Are they in grammar or orthography? As easy for you to right, as me to be wrong. Or in construction, as misattributing "him," "her," or "it" to things alive, or dead, or neuter? You may soon know my meaning, and eftsoons use your mending. Or are they in some uncouth terms, as "entrain," "conscientious," "endear," "tarnish," "comport," "efface," "facilitate," "amusing," "debauching," "regret," "effort," "emotion," and such like? If you like them not, take others most commonly set by them to expound them, since there they were set to make such likely French words familiar with our English, which well may bear them. If any be capital in sense mistaking, be I admonished, and they shall be recanted. Howsoever, the falseness of the French prints, the diversities of copies, editions and volumes—some whereof have more or less than others—and I in London having followed some, and in the country others—now those in folio, now those in octavo—yet in this last survey reconciled all: therefore, or blame not rashly, or condemn not fondly the multitude of them, set for your further ease in a table (at the end of the book),

which ere you begin to read, I entreat you to peruse. This printer's wanting a diligent corrector, my many employments, and the distance between me and my friends I should confer with may extenuate, if not excuse, even more errors. In sum, if any think he could do better, let him try; then will he better think of what is done. Seven or eight of great wit and worth have assayed, but found these essays no attempt for French apprentices or Littletonians. If this done it may please you, as I wish it may, and I hope it shall, I with you shall be pleased. Though not, yet still I am the same resolute John Florio.