
The Schoolmaster and his Queen: lessons from Elizabeth I's translations for our time

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In *After Babel*, George Steiner's seminal and provocative book-length study of Translational Hermeneutics, he writes that "it was the Renaissance and Reformation translators, the line that stretches from Ficino's *Republic*, through Clause de Seyssel's *Thucydides* to Louis Le Roy, who principally made up the chronology, the landscape of reference in which Western literacy developed" (1998: 260). That Elizabeth I of England herself was part of that translation tradition has been known for quite some time, and it is not in itself surprising, since "translation figured prominently in England through the Middle Ages and Renaissance as a mode of royal self-definition and patronage" (Ellis, 2009: 157). In late 2019, however, the publication of a paper by John-Mark Philo put Her Majesty's translation endeavors back in the limelight. In his essay, Philo claims to have found, at Lambeth Palace Library, a manuscript translation of Tacitus's *Annales* undertaken by Elizabeth I. The particulars of the proof provided escape the scope of this exposition, but suffice to say that the stock, watermarks, handwriting and style all seem to confirm the queen's authorship. It is an outstanding discovery, but one that is also supported by Queen Elizabeth's known life-long scholarly prowess: her first translation was of a French poem by Margaret of Navarre entitled *The Mirror of Sinful Soul* at age 11 and her famous rebuke in Latin to a Polish ambassador's criticism was written when she was 63. The letter, particularly, not only demonstrates that the queen's intellectual vitality and competence were far from impaired in this later stage of her life (Green, 2000), but also illustrates "the created contemporaneity of ancient and modern and the unified diversity –coherent as are the facets of a crystal—of the European community as they derive from two hundred years of translation" (Steiner, 1998: 237).

The historian and poet John Clapham, a contemporary of the Queen, records in his *Observations on the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* that:

The Latin, French, and Italian she could speak very elegantly, and she was able in all those languages to answer ambassadors on the sudden. Her manner of writing was somewhat obscure and the style not vulgar, as being either learned by imitation of some author whom she delighted to read, or else affected for difference sake, that she might not write in such phrases as were commonly used. Of Greek tongue also she was not altogether ignorant. She took pleasure in reading of the best and wisest Histories, and some part of Tacitus' *Annals* she herself turned into English for her private exercise. She also translated Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, and a treatise of Plutarch, *De Curiositate*, with diverse others. (1951: 88-9)

All of the translations mentioned by Clapham were known to have been produced by Elizabeth in the late 1580s and early 1590s (Muller and Scodel, 2009: 7), except for Tacitus' *Annales*,

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for which Philo has now suggested the same period of production (2020: 73). A more significant piece of information for our topic in that preceding quote, however, is Clapham's appraisal of Elizabeth's style, which, inadvertently, leads back to a crucial figure in Elizabeth's intellectual development, her early Greek and Latin tutor, Roger Ascham.

Ascham was born in a small English village in either 1515 or 1516 and placed under the tutelage of Sir Humphrey Wingfield, a jurist who saw that his protégé learned Greek and Latin and also developed a lifelong fondness for archery, which became the subject of his first book, *Toxophilus* (1545). The drive behind this first work is both thematic and rhetorical. Samuel Jonson wrote that Ascham:

Designed not only to teach the art of shooting, but to give an example of diction more natural and more truly English than was used by the common writers of that age, whom he censures for mingling exotic terms with their native language, and of whom he complains, that they were made authors, not by skill or education, but by arrogance and temerity. (1840: 497)

By the time he graduated from Cambridge, Ascham was already instructing younger students in the fundamentals of Greek. He was to remain at the University for 14 more years. He received his master's degree in 1537 and eventually achieved the public oratorship in the classical tongues. He gained mild fame among the more educated spheres and declined positions as private tutor, for he wished to remain at Cambridge, where Greek scholarship was flourishing.

For better or worse, Institutional tensions stalled his professional progress at Cambridge in the 40s, so Ascham started looking for patronage elsewhere. Meanwhile, in 1548, the Princess and future Queen's private tutor, William Grindal, who was also Ascham's former pupil and closest friend, died as a result of the plague. The fifteen-year-old royal insisted upon having Ascham as a replacement and he most willingly accepted the position.

Ascham's and Elizabeth's relationship continued, albeit with long intermissions, until his death over twenty years later. The tutor never had anything but the kindest words for his new pupil:

Point forth six of the best given gentlemen of this court, and all they together show not so much good will, spend not so much time, bestow not so many hours daily, orderly, and constantly, for the increase of learning and Knowledge, as doth the Queen's Majesty herself. Yea I believe, that beside her perfect readiness in Latin, Italian, French, and Spanish, she readeth here now at Windsor more Greek every day, than some prebendary of this church doth read Latin in a whole week. And that which is most praise worthy of all, within the walls of her privy chamber, she hath obtained that excellency of learning to understand, speak, and write both wittily with head, and fair with hand, as scarce one or two rare wits in both the Universities have in many years reached unto. Amongst all the benefits that God hath blessed me withal, next the knowledge of Christ's true religion, I count this the greatest, that it pleased God to call me to be one poor minister in setting forward these excellent gifts of learning in this most excellent prince; whose only example, if the rest of our nobility would follow, then might England be for learning and wisdom in nobility, a spectacle to all the world beside. (1815: 234)

Because he found Elizabeth to be so devoted to her studies and receptive to his teachings, Ascham made use during her instruction of some of the techniques and methods for acquiring languages that he had been perfecting, and that he would later describe in his most influential work, *The Schoolmaster*.

A disagreeable situation of potential harassment between young Elizabeth and Thomas

Seymour led to the relocation of Elizabeth and her servants at Cheshunt and later, Hatfield. Seymour was eventually executed but Elizabeth was kept in Hatfield by her brother. Ascham had been instructing her for two years but, during the scandal, either left her without her consent or was quietly dismissed, and returned to the University. In his preface to Ascham's works Jonson says that "of this precipitation he long repented; and as those who are not accustomed to disrespect cannot easily forgive it, he probably felt the effects of his imprudence to his death" (1815: XX). In fact, Ascham made significant efforts to restore himself in the eyes of the Queen and was finally successful. In a letter of April 4, 1550 to his friend Johannes Sturm he writes:

[In learning] the brightest star is my illustrious Lady Elizabeth [...] She had me for her tutor in Greek and Latin two years; but now I am released from the Court and restored to my old literary leisure here, where by her beneficence I hold an honest place in this University [...] She has just passed her sixteenth birthday, and shows such dignity and gentleness as are wonderful at her age and in her rank. (1864: lxii-lxiii)

Ascham was soon appointed secretary to Sir Richard Morison, the new English ambassador to the Emperor Charles V, and later Latin secretary to the Catholic Queen Mary, despite being a Protestant. He also married in that time. There is record of his sporadic visits to the Queen, in which they would read Greek and Latin together.

Elizabeth succeeded her half-sister on the throne in 1558 and she too appointed Ascham her Latin secretary. He saw her often, despite her many official duties and his faltering health, and they continued their studies. Elizabeth came to embody Ascham's ideal of the sincere humanist.

Roger Ascham died on December 30, 1568, before he could finish and publish *The Schoolmaster*. The writing of the book had come about after Sir Richard Sackville, another courtier at Windsor Castle, urged him to write a pedagogic manual of sorts, seeing he had been "the scholar of the best master [Sir John Cheke], and also the schoolmaster of the best scholar" (Quoted in Ascham, 1815: 191). In 1570, his widow, Margaret Ascham, set forth the incomplete manuscript for publication. *The Schoolmaster* went through five editions within less than twenty years (Ryan, 1974: xii) and is probably "the most important textbook on the humanist education in the sixteenth century for today's cultural historians" (Perng, 2009: 217).

As interesting as the story of the relationship between Elizabeth and her tutor is, one might wonder as to its pertinence when it comes to the study of the Queen's translations. The key lies in the existing commentary on the Queen's style. Clapham refers to Elizabeth's way of expression in foreign tongues as obscure, mimetic, affected, and Philo's recent paper states that, as regards the Tacitus translation, "Elizabeth goes to some lengths to retain the density of Tacitus's prose and his celebrated brevity. So too she follows the contours of the Latin syntax with remarkable commitment, even at the risk of obscuring the sense in English" (2020: 2). When looking at her version of Cicero's *Pro Marcello*, Muller and Scodel, too, mention Elizabeth's heavy use of cognates and "frequently close modeling of phrasing on that of her Latin source" (2009:10). Haste, of course, may be a factor to consider when it comes to her terseness of style, and academics have accounted for it but, considering that this is a persistent characteristic, it is more likely the result of her commitment to Ascham's teachings and her assimilation of his method of double translation.

In *The Schoolmaster*, Ascham presents six techniques to master Latin: *translatio linguarum*, *paraphrasis*, *metaphrasis*, *epitome*, *imitatio* and *declamatio*. He especially highlights two of them: *translatio linguarum* (double translation), better for beginning students, and *imitatio* (emulating the style of fine classic writers in new texts) for more advanced students. The proposal itself is not altogether novel, some of the best teachers in England were already employing the techniques with

great effect, but Ascham was the first to present a detailed description of them in English. Double translation is practiced by translating into English a passage of a worthy Latin text (Cicero was a favorite) and, after a suitable time, translating the version back into Latin. As might be expected, Ascham guarantees the efficacy of the method in his book by appealing to the Queen's experience with it:

And a better and nearer example herein may be, our most noble queen Elizabeth, who never took yet Greek nor Latin grammar in her hand, after the first declining of a noun and a verb; but only by this double translating of Demosthenes and Isocrates daily, without missing every forenoon, and likewise some part of Tully every afternoon, for the space of a year or two, hath attained to such a perfect understanding in both the tongues, and to such a ready utterance of the Latin, and that with such a judgement, as they be few in number in both the universities, or elsewhere in England, that be in both tongues comparable with Her Majesty. (262)

Anyone who has practiced translation on some level understands that, in order to achieve a back translation that can be successfully compared to the original text, the first translation must preserve as much of the original syntax and vocabulary as possible. Deviations (expansions, modulations, abstractions or reorganizations) will make it impossible to produce a second text in the original language that closely resembles the text of departure. Elizabeth's first encounter with a theory-driven practice of translation was through the encouragement of a form of expression that mimicked her classical models as closely as possible in both syntax and idiom, partially for the sake of this implied third stage in the process and partially as a result of her tutor's conviction regarding the superiority of the classic modes of expression. According to Steven W. May, editor of *Queen Elizabeth I: Selected Works*, some of Elizabeth's original compositions, such as Poem 4, also show the "awkward convolutions and syncopations" that resulted from her years of study with Ascham (2005: xxxv).

Ascham's work was by no means the only devoted to the increase of eloquence in Tudor times, but should still be recognized as an influential critical treatise responsible for part of the literary craftsmanship among Tudor aristocrats. Much like at any other time in history, however, when it comes to translation, there was no single, authoritative theory under which all translations in the English Renaissance can be neatly analyzed. The definitions of translation that predate Dryden's preface to Ovid's *Epistles* (1680) are varied and casual (usually presented in passing in prefaces and dedicatory letters). In his study, Philo compares Elizabeth's translation to the much more explicative version of contemporary Richard Greenway, who he considers "kinder to the reader" (45), as he is writing with an eye to publication. These two opposing attitudes –Elizabeth's and Greenway's– and just about every other in between, have been ever-present both in the practice and study of translation.

Elizabeth's translations are not, therefore, an all-encompassing sample of translation in the Renaissance, but instead are a fascinating example of how the theoretical principles regarding translation inform its practice, and of the continuous relevance of an empirical, descriptive and explicative approach to translation studies, which accounts both for the internal factors involved in what Gideon Toury calls the "translation act" and the external circumstances of production in the "translation event" (Toury 2012: 249) while studying translations as textual products. Since the early 1970s, Descriptive Translations Studies have advocated this shift of paradigm, foregoing a-historical, prescriptive value judgments that gauge the quality of individual translations or uphold particular principles as to what constitutes a good translation, and instead describing translations in their historical context.

Elizabeth's translations are, in fact, obscure and challenging, full of cognates and calques, but only when read isolated from their intended context of reception, which presupposed the original

at the hand, or in the mind, of a versed student of the Classic tongues. Descriptive Studies also remind us that the translator is a sociohistorical agent, and that the shifts found in translated texts reveal the negotiation of constraints, motivations and potential function of said translated texts in the context of reception. Just like translations themselves, the study of translation provides the opportunity to “establish a logic of relation between past and present” (Steiner, 1998: 260). In order to make good use of that opportunity, we, as scholars and enthusiasts of translation, should keep in mind Theo Hermans words and “delve into translation as cultural and historical phenomena, to explore its context and its conditioning factors, to search for grounds that can explain why there is what there is” (Hermans, 2009: 5).

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