

# S K E N È

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“Well-Staged Syllables”:  
From Classical to Early Modern English Metres  
in Drama

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi

*Founded by Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

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## Contents

### “Well-Staged Syllables”: From Classical to Early Modern English Metres in Drama

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi

SILVIA BIGLIAZZI – <i>Introduction</i>	5
STEPHEN ORGEL – <i>True Order of Versifying: the Reform of Elizabethan Poetry</i>	21
GUIDO AVEZZÙ – “ <i>Secundum quasdam suas partes</i> ”: <i>Renaissance Readings of the Lyric Structures of Greek Tragedy</i>	35
MARCO DURANTI – “ <i>An unexplored sea</i> ”. <i>The Metres of Greek Drama in Early Modern England</i>	65
ANGELICA VEDELAGO – “ <i>Ex uariis metri generibus</i> ”: <i>Two ‘Metrical’ Neo-Latin Translators of Greek Tragedy across the English Channel</i>	81
FRANCESCO DAL’OLIO – <i>Two Worlds, One Language: Metrics for the Chorus in Buchanan’s Euripidean Translations</i>	117
SILVIA BIGLIAZZI – <i>Versifying the Senecan Chorus: Notes on Jasper Heywood’s Emulative Approach to Troas</i>	139
EMANUEL STELZER – <i>Confluences and Spillages: Enjambment in Elizabethan Tragedy and the Classics</i>	167
HANNAH JANE CRAWFORTH – ‘ <i>Doubtful Feet</i> ’ and ‘ <i>Healing Words</i> ’: <i>Greek Tragic Prosody in Samson Agonistes</i>	203
ROBERT STAGG – <i>Afterword</i>	221

### Miscellany

FABIO CIAMBELLA – <i>A Corpus Linguistic Analysis of Dance Lexis in Eight Early Modern Manuscripts: From the Inns of Court to Drama</i>	231
LEONARDO MANCINI – <i>The Shadow of the Myth. El Romancero de Edipo with Toni Cots Directed by Eugenio Barba (1984-1990)</i>	251
ELEONORA FOIS and DANIELA FRANCESCA VIRDIS – <i>Normal Non-Fluency and Verbatim Theatre: a Linguistic and Performative Analysis</i>	271

### Special Section

HANNIBAL HAMLIN – <i>Chanita Goodblatt, Jewish and Christian Voices in English Reformation Biblical Drama: Enacting Family and Monarchy</i> . London and New York: Routledge, 2018	301
EDOARDO GIOVANNI CARLOTTI – <i>Dick McCaw, Rethinking the Actor’s Body. Dialogues with Neuroscience</i> . London and New York: Methuen Drama, 2020	317
SILVIA SILVESTRI – “ <i>But he loves me . . . to death</i> ”. <i>An Interview with Director Tonio De Nitto and Translator-Adaptor Francesco Niccolini about their Staging of La Bisbetica Domata (The Taming of the Shrew) for Factory Compagnia Transadriatica</i>	327

MONICA CRISTINI – <i>WEATHER# Developing New Theatre Ecologies Through a Virtual Venue</i>	339
GHERARDO UGOLINI – <i>Orestes the Gunslinger and the Flying Bacchae. Ancient Theatre Festival - Syracuse 2021</i>	349
MARK BROWN – <i>The Edinburgh Festivals 2021: a Covid-Era Return</i>	361
PETRA BJELICA – <i>Shaping the Edges of a New Vision. The Verona Shakespeare Fringe Festival 2021</i>	373

FRANCESCO DALL'OLIO

## Two Worlds, One Language: Metrics for the Chorus in Buchanan's Euripidean Translations<sup>1</sup>

Abstract

This article offers the first attempt at a complete analysis of the metrics of the Choral odes in George Buchanan's Latin translations of Euripides' *Medea and Alcestis*. The different solutions adopted by the humanist to render the complex metrics of those pieces in Greek tragedies are evaluated against the background formed by the history of the reception and translation of Greek tragedy in Renaissance Europe, as well as Buchanan's own life and career. For *Medea*, it is shown how the adoption of a simplified metrical scheme connects the text to the context of its original scholastic performance at La Guyenne, while the more complex solution adopted in *Alcestis* is connected to the important changes occurring in the 1550s regarding the critical reading of Greek *stasima*, especially Adrien Turnèbe's edition of Sophocles (1553), where the division of the *stasima* in a strophic system was presented for the first time.

KEYWORDS: George Buchanan; *Medea*; *Alcestis*; Neo-Latin drama; translation studies; reception studies

Up until the first decade of the twenty-first century, studies regarding George Buchanan's tragic corpus focused almost exclusively on the two Biblical tragedies *Baptistes* and *Iephtes*; much less attention was devoted to his Latin translations of Euripides' *Medea* and *Alcestis*.<sup>2</sup> As a result, these text were

<sup>1</sup> This article is part of a research I carried out within the 2017 PRIN project Classical Receptions in Early Modern English Drama (Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Verona).

<sup>2</sup> The preference for Buchanan's original tragedies dates back to the Renaissance. Despite the praise the Euripidean translations received for the quality of their Latin and their faithfulness to the original, the Biblical tragedies (especially *Iephtes*) were not only almost immediately translated in French and German, but also staged in France and abroad. They thus exerted a more recognisable influence on the development of both Neo-Latin drama and French classical tragedy, as acknowledged by numerous studies. Scholarly research of the 20th century also focused on Buchanan's reprisal of structural features of Greek tragedies in these original works, the literary practice of 'borrowing' terms from classical Latin writers and the complex relationship with

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often underestimated, and their place in Buchanan's corpus was deemed of minor importance. It is telling that in Ian McFarlane's monumental biography of Buchanan *Alcestis* is only briefly mentioned and *Medea* is considered more for its relationship with the rest of the corpus than for its literary value (see McFarlane 1981, 117-21). The only major study of the translations in the last century was the edition of the whole tragic corpus by Peter Sharratt and Peter G. Walsh. The commentary they offer on the texts of the tragedies (Buchanan 1983, 295-312 and 313-31, respectively) represents the first serious attempt at considering their relationship both with the original Greek text and their place in Buchanan's life and career.

In the last decade, Buchanan's *Medea* and *Alcestis* have undergone a sort of critical resurgence, due to the combined influence of translation studies sparking a new interest in Renaissance Neo-Latin drama and the ongoing reconsideration of the influence and presence of Greek tragedy in Renaissance Europe.<sup>3</sup> The last six years in particular have seen the publication of some important studies offering a new perspective on both *Medea* and *Alcestis*. Zoé Schweitzer (2013; 2015) provided a more in-depth analysis of the reasons behind Buchanan's choice to translate these tragedies and perceived pedagogical value in Buchanan's decision to stay close to the original text. Jean-Frédéric Chevalier's analysis of *Medea* 271-356 highlighted how Buchanan's reprisal of terms from classical Latin authors expands and deepens the emotional resonance of the translation through allusions to specific passages of Latin poetry (2011). Last but certainly not least, Lucy Jackson (2020) offered the first complete study of the original performance of Buchanan's *Medea*, pointing out the relationship of the text with previous literary tradition and its scholastic context, with all that entailed regarding the translation's educational purpose. All these authors acknowledged that the translations are more complex and varied texts than was previously thought. Jackson in particular showed great awareness of the fact that a complete study of *Medea* and *Alcestis* would involve a combination of different critical approaches, such as translation studies, reception studies, performance studies and literary studies (cf. Jackson 2020, 47).

The aim of this article is to bring forward this line of research, by

Renaissance literary theory about tragedy. On those issues, see respectively McFarlane 1981, 201-5 and 390-2; Walsh 1986; Cardinali 2018.

<sup>3</sup> For the role of translation studies, especially the works of Lawrence Venuti, in developing a new interest towards Neo-Latin drama I refer to Jackson (2020, 46) and the volume of studies she refers to at n. 16. As for the new approaches to the presence and influence of Greek tragedy in Renaissance Europe, see the introduction written by Tania Demetriou and Tanya Pollard for a special issue of *Classical Reception Journal* devoted to this issue in early modern England (Demetriou-Pollard 2017); other texts are mentioned in Jackson 2020, 46n19.

focusing on the metrics of the choral odes in Buchanan's translations. More specifically, I intend to highlight how Buchanan's choice of metres for the *stasima* (the choral odes) helps us define the nature of these texts in relation to their context of composition and/or printing. This also means a more accurate placement of both texts inside Buchanan's literary and academic career. Moreover, it is my belief that the different solutions the Scottish humanist adopted for the translation of the metrics of Euripidean *stasima* show how he reacted to the changes in the way Renaissance literary culture viewed the formal structures of Greek tragedy, in particular those concerning perception of the *stasima*'s structure.<sup>4</sup>

To my knowledge, no such study has ever been undertaken. Schweitzer does not mention metrics at all, and the few remarks on this matter in both Chevalier and Jackson regard exclusively the iambic trimeter of the dialogues (cf. Chevalier 2011, 183-4; Jackson 2020, 50). The only other study considering the metrics of Buchanan's Choral odes I know of is Vedelago's article in the present issue, whose focus is on how Buchanan's use of metrical elements such as syllabic quantity aims to recreate the rhythm of ancient metrics. On the contrary, I have chosen to concentrate on the connection between Buchanan's choices of metres for his translations and the history of reception of Greek tragedy during the Renaissance. This also includes an insight on how Buchanan's choices echo Renaissance translation theory, how both texts are placed inside the humanist's career and their connection with their original scholastic performance at La Guyenne.

\*

I shall start with a necessarily brief, and far from complete, survey of the reception and translation history of Greek *stasima* before and during Buchanan's time. This will provide a background against which to evaluate Buchanan's own choices, while also giving us a glimpse of how complex the field of both scholarly research and poetical activity was, and how significantly it changed in the three decades of Buchanan's activity as a translator of Euripides.

The question of how to render the complex metrical structures of the *stasima* was one of the most difficult to answer for any Renaissance translator approaching Greek tragedy, aggravated as it was by substantial

<sup>4</sup> In that sense, my paper moves on a similar ground to Cardinali 2018. There, the scholar viewed an evolution between *Baptistes* and *Iepthes*, with the second tragedy being closer to the Renaissance definition of 'tragedy'; here, I propose an analogous evolution between *Medea* and *Alcestis* in relation to Renaissance critical reception of Greek tragedy.

ignorance. Up until the 1550s, Renaissance editors of Greek tragedies were unaware that the *stasima* were divided into strophes designed to respond to each other with an identical metrical structure. This was also due to the absence of a printed edition of the *scholia* of the tragedies posing another obstacle to the understanding of the metrical structure of these pieces.<sup>5</sup> As a result, Renaissance translators of Greek tragedy were left with texts which were highly complex in both style and content, seemingly for no discernible reason. Of course, this also made them quite difficult to translate, as Erasmus found out when he set out to produce the first complete translations of Greek tragedies in early modern Europe. In the dedicatory letter to the first, *Hecuba* (1507),<sup>6</sup> he lamented the effort he made in trying to understand these almost incomprehensible texts: “choros nescio quanam affectatione adeo obscuros, ut Oedipo quopiam aut Delio sit opus magis quam interprete” (“the choruses are so obscure, with I don’t know how much incomprehensible affectation, that one would need an Oedipus or an Apollo more than an interpreter”).<sup>7</sup> And in the dedicatory letter to his other translation, that of *Iphigenia in Aulis*, he not only repeated such queries, but even accused the ancient poets of having lost sight of the good norms of eloquence: “Nusquam enim mihi magis ineptisse videtur antiquitas quam in huiusmodi choris, ubi, dum nimium affectat nove loqui, vitavit eloquentiam, dumque verborum miracula venatur, in rerum iudicio cessavit” (“Nowhere else do the ancients seem to me to have been so senseless as in such written choruses, where, through too much affectation due to speaking bizarrely, they ended up making bad speeches: while chasing after the wonders of the word, they lost all perspective on the content”).

The way Erasmus resolved the issue of translating such complicated pieces of poetry changed deeply between the two translations. For *Hecuba*, Erasmus opted to respect with the utmost fidelity the difficult structure of the *stasima*, replicating it verse for verse. He himself affirms it so, in a preface to the reader specifically intended to present an exhaustive list of

<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the *scholia* about Aristophanes’ comedies were already printed (at least part of them) from the *editio princeps* edited by Aldus (Venice 1498, USTC 760251), allowing from the start a greater understanding of the metrical structures of the Choral odes in Greek comedy. It is then possible that the editors of the tragedy were, at some level, aware of the way the texts were supposed to be read.

<sup>6</sup> Erasmus’ translations were printed for the first time in Paris in 1506 by Joss Bade (USTC 143156), but the scholar was not satisfied with this edition, and contacted Aldus Manutius for a new one (Venice 1507, USTC 828497) to be prepared under his supervision. It is this text that I quote, in the version edited by Barberi Squarotti (Erasmus 2000; translation mine).

<sup>7</sup> Erasmus’ words echo those of Aldus himself, who expressed a similar opinion in the preface to his edition of Euripides’ corpus (cf. Barberi Squarotti in Erasmus 2000, 184).



the metres he employed in his translations. Here Erasmus remarked how the metres he used in the *stasima* of *Hecuba* are almost the same ones as in Euripides ("ferme iisdem"). This decision is in line with the nature of the text, presented by Erasmus as a preparatory exercise for his translation of the New Testament (see Rummel 1985, 30).<sup>8</sup> In that case, Erasmus' ability to faithfully replicate the formal structures of the tragedy served as confirmation that he would have been able to do the same with the sacred text. It should not go unnoticed that, for the time, this represented a break away from the Medieval practice of translating non-sacred texts *ad sensum*, adapting their content to the cultural horizon of the reader and the translator, without respecting the formal structures of the text (see Morini 2006, 11-13): a practice Erasmus openly rejects, branding it as an excuse others used to mask their ignorance. His own translation of *Hecuba* is one of the first examples outside Italy of what Massimiliano Morini called "rhetorical translation" (i.e. the new style of translation developed by Italian humanists, bent on reproducing the formal and stylistic features of the text translated as well as its content).<sup>9</sup>

The spirit in which Erasmus approaches *Iphigenia in Aulis* is quite different.<sup>10</sup> This time Erasmus admits to having translated the text "tum fusius tum copiosius" ("more freely and richly"), that is to say, having expanded every part of the text which could prove obscure. As part of this process, he also revises his initial decision to reproduce the original metrics, and opts to correct the "immodicam . . . carminum varietatem ac licentiam" ("unruly . . . diversity and freedom of verse") of the *stasima* by replacing the original metrical patterns with new ones of his own creation shaped after that of such Senecan tragedies as *Oedipus*, *Medea* and *Phaedra*.<sup>11</sup> Just as in those plays, we have one choral ode (in Erasmus' case, the *parodos*) composed in several differentiated metres and the other five in a simpler metrical scheme made up of just one or two metres. The metres themselves employed by Erasmus,

<sup>8</sup> To which it must be added Erasmus' personal convictions about the educational value of theatre, on which see Norland 1985 (specifically on Euripides, 551).

<sup>9</sup> We could also see it as one of the earliest examples of 'foreignizing' translation as defined by Lawrence Venuti (Venuti 2008, 19), one aimed at "creat[ing] new conditions of readability". As the first complete Latin translation of a Greek tragedy, and one advocating fidelity even to the most difficult aspects of Euripides' text, it was indeed an innovative work.

<sup>10</sup> I refer to Rummel 1985, 28-33 for a more in-depth examination of the context of Erasmus' translations and the different aims behind them, which also explain the different attitude the humanist held towards translation.

<sup>11</sup> Every reference to the metrics of Senecan tragedies in this article is based on the *conspectus metrorum* redacted by Otto Zwierlein in his Oxford edition of Seneca's theatre: see Seneca 1986, 464-6. Erasmus also showed great interest and respect for Seneca and proposed to Joss Bade an edition of his tragedies in 1512 (see Norland 1985, 550-1).

while not completely coinciding with those used by Seneca (Erasmus does use some metres absent in the works of the Latin tragedian), are mostly derived from his work. While this does not mean the complete renunciation of a 'rhetorical' translation,<sup>12</sup> still, from a metrical standpoint, such solution marks this second translation as a text closer to the cultural horizon of his readers. It is not fortuitous that, following Erasmus' examples, the practice of substituting the original Greek metrics with a new structure consisting of verses and/or poetical structures typical of the receiving language (usually employing them in already existing forms), would become an established tradition in subsequent translations of Greek tragedy.

Erasmus' translations also determined the place of Senecan metrical patterns as the model for Latin translations of Greek *stasima*. The choice was, in a way, predictable. Not only were Seneca's tragedies the only available example of Latin tragic theatre, but Seneca had been the recognised stylistic and formal inspiration for early modern tragedies since Albertino Mussato's *Ecerinis* (1315 ca). In addition, Seneca had also been enjoying a fair degree of theatrical fortune from the last decades of the 15th century onwards, starting with two almost contemporary performances of *Phaedra* in Rome and Leipzig around 1485.<sup>13</sup> With the growing importance of the staging of Greek and Latin plays in academic contexts as an exercise for students, the fortune of Seneca as a model for the translation of Greek tragedians only grew, sometimes leading to a proper 'rewriting' of Greek tragedies in a more 'Senecan' way.

In the almost forty years between Erasmus and Buchanan, a relatively high number of translations of Greek tragedies followed.<sup>14</sup> All of them

<sup>12</sup> Erasmus still respects the basic formal structures of the Greek tragedy, without modifying the order of the episodes nor deleting parts of it to make it more similar to what his time would have seen as 'tragedy'. In this sense, his translation can still be seen as the work of a Renaissance translator, not a Medieval one, according to Morini's definition of the different methods of translation.

<sup>13</sup> On both performances, see the respective entries on the APGRD. The performance in Leipzig (APGRD 4896) seems to be a recitation of the Senecan tragedy, while the one in Rome (APGRD 3658) is an actual performance organized by Pomponius Leto and his students, first in a public square and then in private form at Castel Sant'Angelo and the palace of Cardinal Riario: see Smith 1988, 99-102.

<sup>14</sup> In 1518 appeared Thomas Kirkmayer's Latin translation of all Sophocles' plays and, in 1541, around the time Buchanan translated *Medea*, the first complete Latin translation of Euripides' corpus by Rudolf Collinus (USTC 654885). As for Aeschylus, Jean de Saint-Ravy's Latin translation would appear only in 1555 in Basel (USTC 609466). Cf. Helou (2007, 9-13, and also 28-31) for the activity of the first two Italian translators of Greek plays in the 1520s, Alessandro Pazzi de' Medici and Luigi Alamanni. In France, the first Greek play to be translated into the vernacular by Lazare de Baïf was Sophocles' *Electra*, published in Paris in 1537 after its staging at Chateau Vallon (APGRD 5445;

adhered to Erasmus' example of devising a new metrical scheme for the Choral odes using verses and/or structures typical of the receiving language. For the Latin translations, this meant a perpetuation of Senecan metrics, either along the lines established by Erasmus or through different solutions. At the same time, the humanist theory of 'rhetorical translation' became predominant in Renaissance Europe. In 1540, four years before the printing of *Medea*, Etienne Dolet published *La manière de bien traduire d'une langue en autre*, the first 'official' presentation of such a theory in Renaissance France. In this text, the author established five important rules for translation, among which was the affirmation that it was not necessary to strive to translate word for word, verse for verse (third rule), but to rework the text so that it proves harmonious and fluent in the new language (fifth rule).<sup>15</sup> In this way, theoretical thinking sanctioned the practice of crafting a new metrical scheme out of already existing Latin ones (usually inspired by Seneca) for the Choral odes in Greek tragedy as the predominant method of rendering such pieces, thus allowing translators to pay no attention to the original metric structures, the knowledge of which was still incomplete.

Things slightly changed in the 1550s. In 1553, a new edition of the Greek text of Sophocles' corpus, edited by Adrien Turnèbe, was printed in Paris. Turnèbe's edition not only contained the *scholia* to the text, but also recognized, for the first time, that the metrical structure of the *stasima* was built upon a system of strophic responsiveness. Another twenty years would pass before Thomas Canter applied the same treatment to an edition of Euripides (Antwerp 1571, USTC 411593). In the meantime, Turnèbe's Sophocles exerted some influence upon the way translators looked at Greek tragedies, even more so because it was published in a decade which was not only full of translations but also witnessed an active interest in classic versification, whose most renowned example is the activity of the poets of the group of La Pléiade.

On that note, it should be pointed out that the activity of this highly influential group of intellectuals and poets trying to reform French poetry through imitation of the ancients also extended to tragic theatre. One of their members, Antoine La Baif,<sup>16</sup> produced the first French translation of four tragedies, two by Sophocles (*Trachiniae* and *Antigone*) and two by Euripides

USTC 73599); it was followed by a great number of other translations, on which see Stevens (1961, 121) and Leroux (2015, 244-5). Finally, we should not forget Gentian Hervet's Latin translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* (Lyon 1541, USTC 140114), whose author was a friend and colleague of Buchanan at La Guyenne (cf. McFarlane 1981, 80).

<sup>15</sup> I present Dolet's rules as they are paraphrased by Paul Chavy (Chavy 1981, 291-4). Both him and Morini point out that Dolet was rephrasing concepts already established by Italian humanists: see Morini 2006, 9-11, 13-15.

<sup>16</sup> The son of Lazare, the translator of Sophocles' *Electra* (see above, n. 14).

(*Helen* and *Medea*); unfortunately, only *Antigone* and the prologue to *Helen* were printed (see Stevens 1961, 121). More importantly, a second one, Jean de la Péruse, wrote the first 'classical' French tragedy, *Medée*, printed for the first time in 1547 (USTC 29814). His work enjoyed great success (the USTC archive records ten reprints, from 1547 to 1613) and was highly praised for many reasons, one of which was the way he managed to use French verses and metres to recreate and/or imitate ancient metrics. It is therefore telling that, since the first edition (la Péruse 1547), the five Choral odes of the tragedy are divided into strophes and composed in different metrical schemes, in a way reminiscent of the Greek *stasima*: an ulterior evidence of the changes occurring in the reading of those pieces during the Renaissance.

\*

“Medeam non in hoc scripseram, ut ederetur, sed cum Graecis literis absque magistro darem operam, ut verba singula inter scribendum diligentius expenderem: amicis importune flagitantibus edidi, cum Latinas literas Burdegalae docerem”<sup>17</sup> (“I did not write *Medea* for publication, but to practise the Greek language in the absence of a teacher, to learn how to use individual terms more precisely while writing. At the insistence of friends I published it, while I was teaching Latin in Bordeaux”). Thus writes Buchanan in a letter to Daniel Rogers in 1579,<sup>18</sup> describing the long creative process which preceded the publication of his first Euripidean translation as a pendant to a reprinting of Erasmus’ translations (Paris 1544, USTC 149176). Although we are unable, due to the lack of a manuscript tradition, to ascertain the differences between the texts, this initial status of the text as an autodidactic exercise may be part of the reason for the very simple, and almost mechanical, metrical pattern of *Medea*.<sup>19</sup>

The entire scheme is built on the opposition between two metres, iambic trimeter for the episodes and anapaestic dimeter for the *stasima*; the only

<sup>17</sup> I quote the text from Buchanan 1725, 755. The translation is mine.

<sup>18</sup> This seems to contradict a passage of his autobiography, where Buchanan said that he composed *Medea* after *Baptistes* when he was teaching at La Guyenne (see below). However, I agree with the solution proposed by Sharratt and Walsh (Buchanan 1983, 3-4), according to which *Baptistes* was the first tragedy to be written for staging by the students, while *Medea*, already translated by Buchanan, was proposed later.

<sup>19</sup> For both translations, I refer to the *conspectus metrorum* provided by Sharratt and Walsh in Buchanan 1983, 335-7. It is true that *Medea* has always been considered the less refined of the two translations; Sharratt and Walsh even found that “*Medea* contains more translation errors than *Alcestis*; these errors are not, however, numerous” (Buchanan 1983, 295).

exception is the second *stasimon*, in iambic dimeters.<sup>20</sup> This means that the original metrical variety is drastically reduced to the uniform use of just one metre, thus making the Choral odes basically as repetitive as the episodes: a fitting choice for a young and still inexperienced scholar, approaching the translation of a Greek tragedy for personal reasons. And while it is true that with such an exercise Buchanan was following Erasmus' steps, the absence of any emphasis on this connection in the dedicatory letter of the printed text suggests that we should not see this as a conscious attempt to emulate the illustrious predecessor. If he had wanted to, Buchanan could have easily pointed out that in translating a Greek tragedy (to learn the language) he was imitating Erasmus, even more so considering that his translation was printed together with *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia*: this should have meant that the editor was implicitly putting it on the same level. But this did not happen; indeed, were it not for the letter to Rogers, we would not know about this initial approach of Buchanan's to the text. The fact that Buchanan, in that same letter to Rogers, maintains that he published *Medea* at the insistence of friends (another piece of information absent in the dedicatory letter)<sup>21</sup> only heightens the suspicion that we are confronted with a work not destined for printing.

However, other factors tell a different story. First of all, the choice of anapaestic dimeter as the metre for the *stasima* suggests two different readings. On the one hand, as the main lyrical metre in Seneca's tragedies,<sup>22</sup> it would seem as the most obvious choice, even more so by taking into account the well-established practice of using a type of metrics inspired by Seneca for translating Greek *stasima*. However, the use of only one lyrical metre is a much more specific solution, one present in only two tragedies in Seneca's corpus, the late (and we know spurious) *Octavia* and *Hercules Oetaeus*. The similarity is particularly stronger with the first one, where both the entire part of the Chorus and the lamentations of the tragic heroine Octavia are written in anapaestic dimeters, with no other metre being used, in almost the same way as Buchanan's *Medea*. Such a close similarity can be seen as a conscious choice on Buchanan's part to use a metrical pattern not generically inspired by Seneca, but purposely modelled on one or two specific works.

<sup>20</sup> There are other metres used as a way to mark the end either of a speech or a part of it (see Buchanan 1983, 314). However, their recurrence is not regular enough for them to be considered.

<sup>21</sup> An absence even more significant, since such assertions of modesty were usual in texts of this kind.

<sup>22</sup> In addition to Zwierlien's *conspetus*, see Turrini 2010, 12. Seneca's influence on Buchanan's theatre has been a much discussed topic, but on the matter of metrics, Senecan influence has always been acknowledged: see Green 2014, 122.

But there is another possible reading. In Euripides' text the anapaestic dimeter is the metre of the Choral interventions inside the episodes (see Euripides 2004, 229-36). If we compare those passages (Eur. 96-130, Buch. 101-216; Eur. 357-63, Buch. 381-7; Eur. 759-63, Buch. 802-6; Eur. 1080-1115, Buch. 1130-1166), we see that they are the points of the text where the metrics of the original and that of the translation coincide almost entirely. I would suggest that the choice of anapaestic dimeter for the *stasima* on Buchanan's part is influenced by this aspect of Euripides' original text as well as by Seneca. It would be in agreement with the recent observations of Chevalier and Jackson about Buchanan's faithfulness to either Euripides himself, or to a more Greek than Latin prosody (cf. Chevalier 2011, 184; Jackson 2020, 50).

As for the iambic dimeter used in the second *stasimon*, it is also a metre present in Seneca's tragedies, but it is far less used than the anapaestic dimeter; in fact, there is only one lyrical piece in all the Senecan corpus where it is extensively used (Cassandra's prophecy in Sen. Ag. 759-74, on whom see Turrini 2010, 44-7). However, the iambic dimeter recurred frequently in late Latin poets such as Prudentius, whose influence on other poetic works of Buchanan is well documented,<sup>23</sup> and had also been, since the 4th century, the typical metre of Christian hymns (see Ceccarelli 1999, 44). It may not be a coincidence that Buchanan employs it in a *stasimon* where the Chorus invokes a divinity (Aphrodite) for protection. While I would not advocate that this was a way for Buchanan to somewhat maintain the original metrical variety of the Greek *stasima*, I do however insist that choices like this reveal the ability of a young – but certainly not inexperienced – poet to balance the respect of an established tradition with slight traces of a more personal touch.

But it is not just a matter of personal pride on Buchanan's part, nor of his need to differentiate himself from those who preceded him. It is acknowledged that Buchanan's tragic corpus, including the translations, was composed to be performed by the students of the college of La Guyenne, where Buchanan worked as a teacher around the time of the printing of *Medea*. The author himself asserted so in his autobiography, years later (1577):<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Green 1986, 51-2, and the list of the metres used by Buchanan for his paraphrases of the Psalms presented there, complete of references to the Latin authors serving as models. Prudentius is the one of the names most frequently quoted.

<sup>24</sup> I quote the text as presented in Appendix F of Ian McFarlane's biography (McFarlane 1981, 541-3); the translation is mine. The actual length of Buchanan's stay at La Guyenne is hard to establish. We know that he resided there continuously for three years (1539-42), but some evidence suggests he did not abandon the college after that date, but rather lived for some time between Paris and Bordeaux. See McFarlane 1981, 93-6, 103.

Ibi in scholis, quae tum sumptu publico erigebantur, triennium docuit: quo tempore scripsit quattuor tragoedias . . . Eas enim ut consuetudini scholae satisfaceret, quae per annos singulos singulas poscebat fabulas, conscripserat: ut earum actione iuventutem ab allegoriis, quibus tum Gallia vehementer se oblectabat, ad imitationem veterum qua posset retraheret.

[There he worked as a teacher for three years in the schools, which were at the time being founded at public expense, and wrote four tragedies . . . He wrote them to satisfy the school's custom requiring a play every year for staging, to divert young people from the allegories, which enjoyed great success in France back then, towards the imitation of the ancients as much as he could.]

Here Buchanan plays down his feats, presenting them as simply part of a scholastic habit, and he was not wrong: the staging of a Latin play (either a Senecan tragedy, or a translation from Sophocles or Euripides) had been part of the educative curricula of European universities since the beginning of the 16th century. However, recent studies pointed out that the performances of proper tragedies like those of Buchanan were a novelty for the college of La Guyenne, which throws new light on the matter.<sup>25</sup> Other than providing the students with an opportunity to prove their skills in both rhetoric and Latin, these events were a chance for the school to promote the birth of a new kind of theatre, detached from the previous theatrical tradition, with its strongly moralizing tone and openly confessional purpose, and more bent on rhetorical exercise and a more free (i.e. not strictly confessional) discussion of political and religious issues.<sup>26</sup> This meant two things. On the one hand, the tragedies had to meet the necessities of a performance: their metrics could not, therefore, be too complicated, in order to facilitate the students called to declaim the verse. On the other, the text had to declare its stance as an innovative text, different from what the readers and the audience were used to seeing at the time in the context of a scholastic performance. Lucy Jackson maintains this is why Buchanan chose iambic trimeters for the dialogues

<sup>25</sup> According to Giacomo Cardinali (Cardinali 2018, 245-6) before Buchanan's *Baptistes* the texts most frequently performed at the college were either *dialogi* (moral discussions between two characters, inspired by Erasmus' *colloquia*) or *comédies* (allegorical compositions).

<sup>26</sup> All Buchanan's tragedies are understood to be involved with the discussion of political and religious issues of the time. The connection of both *Iephtes* and *Alcestis* to contemporary discussion about the values of vows has always been recognised, and the political undertones of *Baptistes* involving good kingship and tyranny had often been considered. As for *Medea*, see Jackson 2020, 52-4, on the play as a reflection on rhetoric, its successes and its failings.

instead of the Latin iambic *senarii*<sup>27</sup> (see Jackson 2020, 50), and I think this can also be applied to the choice of anapaestic dimeter for the Chorus. Seen in this light, the adoption of this metre for the part of the Chorus works as another way of declaring the stance of the play as a new kind of theatre, inspired by the examples of the ancients (both Seneca and Euripides).

At the same time, the simplification of the metrical patterns seemingly lends itself well to the context of scholastic performance; the text even ends with a conclusive statement reciting that the play “acta fuit Burdegalae an. MDXLIII” (“was played in Bordeaux, year 1543”).<sup>28</sup> This may not be a conclusive proof that the text we have is the one performed at La Guyenne, since, in the letter to Rogers, Buchanan admitted to have revised passages here and there when preparing the text for printing: “in ea cum multa negligentius elapsa essent, post aliquot annos recontravi eam, et quaedam in ea vulnera ita sanavi” (“since there were many things in that text that were so negligently not exact, after a few years I corrected them, and healed some wounds in it”). Once again, the lack of a manuscript tradition prevents us from asserting how extensive those revisions were. However, I think it likely for the printed text to be very close to the one performed, not just because of the chronological vicinity between the performance and the printing, but because the metres chosen by Buchanan for his translations are ones the students would have found familiar. We know that iambic trimeter was one of the most frequently studied Greek metres in Humanist schools, and as for anapaestic and iambic dimeters, we must take into account that, in the educational curriculum of La Guyenne, Seneca was taught only in the later classes, to the eldest pupils, together with many other Latin authors (see McFarlane 1981, 81-2; Jackson 2020, 52). Since it is probable that these pupils would also be the ones reciting the play,<sup>29</sup> this would mean that they should

<sup>27</sup> Sharratt and Walsh identified the dialogues as written in iambic *senarii*, the metre of ancient Latin comic authors as Plautus and Terence (Buchanan 1983, 335-7). Such a choice would not have been impossible, given Terence’s pre-eminence in Humanist educative curricula and the theatrical fortune his comedies enjoyed from the second half of the 15th century. Recent studies on Buchanan’s translations, such as Chevalier 2011 and Jackson 2020, prefer instead to identify the metre of the dialogues as iambic trimeter. While I do not contest this choice, I should point out that iambic trimeter had been identified as the metre for tragic dialogues from a century-old tradition, represented by Horace’s *Ars Poetica* 194-5 and Seneca (see Zimmermann 2016). I am therefore not sure we should treat it as the innovative choice Jackson seems to consider it.

<sup>28</sup> Every quotation from the text of the translations, including the dedicatory letters, comes from the text edited by Sharratt and Walsh (Buchanan 1983, 167); the translation is mine.

<sup>29</sup> We do not have any certain data on this; however, given how difficult and complex the reciting of a play would have been, and that Seneca was read only in the upper classes, it seems to be the most logical conclusion.



have no difficulty in reciting such a simple metrical scheme.

To sum up, the metrics of *Medea* – in spite of its apparent inelegance – reveals a very careful construction. On a literary level, it shows the hand of an already capable poet, handling a metrical model inspired by Seneca while, at the same time, revealing a personal hand. On a more general one, the metrics is consonant with the original nature of the text as a scholastic exercise, to which it is explicitly connected by the conclusive statement of his first edition; it might even be that it was the success of the performance that convinced Buchanan to publish the text.<sup>30</sup> It is certain, though, that as a first outing of Buchanan as a translator *Medea* proved to be a success,<sup>31</sup> enough to encourage him to undertake another one.

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Buchanan's second translation of Euripides would see the light of day in a very different period of the author's life. During the 1550s, a series of important works established Buchanan's prestige as a poet, to the point of deserving from his friend and printer Henri Estienne the appellation of "prince of his times" (see McFarlane 1981, 171). *Alcestis* is one of these works, with its printing (Paris 1556, USTC 204922) following *Iephtes* by two years and being contemporary to the first edition of the paraphrases of the Psalms. As the other two works, *Alcestis* was a text Buchanan composed in the previous decade (once again as a text to be performed at La Guyenne), and like the other two it enjoyed an immediate success, being reprinted immediately only one year later (Paris 1557, USTC 154348), then together with *Iephtes* in 1567 in Strasbourg (USTC 654884), and on its own in 1581 in Wittenberg (USTC 610652) and 1604 (see McFarlane 1981, 498). It was also included in Henri Estienne's anthology of Greek tragedies translated in Latin, Geneva 1567, USTC 450564). This was the beginning of a great critical fortune that would last until the 20th century: scholars have traditionally considered it far superior to *Medea* as a translation.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> After all, he 'did' say in his autobiography that he composed *Iephtes* and translated *Alcestis* because his first outings as a tragedian were successful beyond his expectations ("id cum ei prope ultra spem successisset, reliquas *Jepthen* et *Alcestin* paulo diligentius . . . elaboravit"; "since he succeeded almost beyond hope, he composed with a little more care the other two, *Jephtes* and *Alcestis*").

<sup>31</sup> After the initial printing, *Medea* would be reprinted as a single text only once, in Strasbourg in 1598 (USTC 675431), but in 1567 it was included by Henri Estienne in his successful anthology of Greek tragedies in Latin translations (see below). See McFarlane 1981, 498-9.

<sup>32</sup> Such an opinion is evident in both McFarlane's biography (1981, 183) and Sharratt and Walsh's edition (Buchanan 1983, 313: "B.'s careful revision and greater experience .

In this context, it is not surprising to see that Buchanan adopts a very different solution for the metrics of the *stasima*. Whereas in *Medea* he used only a few metres, in *Alcestis* the *stasima* are made out of a dozen different verses, disposed every time in a different metrical scheme. Almost every one of them is already present in Seneca,<sup>33</sup> and can also be found in the almost contemporary *Iephtes* (see Buchanan 1983, 334). This is clearly the work of a more competent poet, more confident in his ability and autonomous in his choices. It is also a too complicated scheme for a scholastic performance, and I think both McFarlane and Sharratt and Walsh were right in suggesting that the printed text is the result of a careful revision (cf. McFarlane 1981, 183; Buchanan 1983, 313).<sup>34</sup> This time there is no conclusive statement, as there is in *Medea*, declaring that the text has been performed, nor do we have information of any performance after the printing.<sup>35</sup>

The only reference to a performance may perhaps be found in the dedicatory letter of the translation, where Buchanan exalts the greater effect *actio* has over mere reading for education:

Coniugalis amoris, pietatis, humanitatis et aliorum officiorum adeo plena sunt omnia ut non verear hanc fabulam comparare cum libris . . . philosophorum . . . ac nescio an etiam preferre debeam. actio enim rerum sermone et spiritu paene animata acrius quam nuda praecepta sensus impellit, et facilius in animos influit et illabitur; atque qui illapsa fuerit, firmiter haeret et quasi radices agit.

[All its parts are so full of conjugal love, compassion, humanity, and all the other recommended virtues, that I am not afraid to compare this play to the books of . . . philosophers . . . and perhaps I should prefer it to them. Action, almost entirely animated by speeches and interpretation, is more effective instruction than bare precepts, and more easily enters the souls and sticks into them; and once descended, it remains more attached in the memory and acts almost as a root.]

It is possible that here Buchanan is referring to a performance of the play, given that in classical rhetoric the term he used indicates the performance of oratorical discourse. However, it could just as well be a general statement

. . . makes [it] . . . technically superior”). The closeness of the Latin text to the original Greek has also been noted by Zoé Schweitzer (2015, 121-3).

<sup>33</sup> The only exception being the few anacreontics and the trochaic dimeter cataleptic.

<sup>34</sup> The revision may have requested some time, since the *privilège* for the printing is dated 1553 (cf. McFarlane 1981, 183).

<sup>35</sup> The one at Elizabeth's court identified by McFarlane (1981, 236) has later been revealed as the result of a misreading of the source text: see Buchanan 1983, 313.

about the educative power of theatre, even more so because Buchanan is not recalling here any particular staging. In my opinion, it would be safer to conclude that the text printed in 1556 is not the one staged about fifteen years earlier at La Guyenne, and that it is likely it was never staged elsewhere.

This is not the only element inviting us to read the translation as a more literary work than its predecessor. The person to whom Buchanan dedicated *Alcestis*, Princess Marguerite of Navarre, was the patroness of the poets of La Pléiade (see McFarlane 1981, 183), among which Buchanan had both pupils and admirers (see McFarlane 1981, 163-8). Jean de la Péruse in particular had been his pupil at the Collège de Boncourt, and it has been recognized that Buchanan's translation of *Medea* influenced the composition of La Péruse's own tragedy on the same subject (see McFarlane 1981, 165; Stone 1984, 218; Busca 2015). The dedication to the princess could thus be seen as a way for Buchanan to connect himself to the most highly regarded literary movement of the time, which also means that the metrical patterns he chose for the translation of the *stasima* have to be seen as something more than just an excuse to show his ability as a poet. We should also remember that the 1550s saw important developments in the comprehension and critical reading of such pieces. Buchanan was in contact with the men responsible for promoting such changes, such as Adrien Turnèbe, who had been his friend since his first period at La Guyenne (see McFarlane 1981, 97) so it would then be no surprise that he purposely decided to handle his Latin metres in order to create metrical patterns echoing both the most recent discoveries in that field and the poetical feats of the younger generation of poets.<sup>36</sup>

The metrics of *Alcestis* confirms such a hypothesis: the fact that every single intervention of the Chorus presents a different metrical pattern, does indeed produce a text which seemingly imitates the metrical variety of the Greek metrics. Some of them, such as Eumelus' monody during the second episode (409-27) and the Chorus' intervention at 780-6, are still in simple anapaestic dimeters, as in *Medea*. The second *stasimon* (449-94) is divided in two sections in two different metres (iambic trimeter hypercatalectic and anapaestic dimeter) as some Senecan odes; the same thing can be said for the fourth, in interwoven glyconics and pherecrateans (a solution absent in Senecan tragedies, though).<sup>37</sup> Then, we have three odes where different

<sup>36</sup> Zoé Schweitzer also saw an educational and ethical purpose in such a choice of translation, deeply bound to the great morality Buchanan saw in this tragedy: "translate as Buchanan does, by designating the Greek world as the origin of morality . . . is akin to a profession of humanist faith" (2015, 123). In this light, rendering as closely as possible the formal structures of Greek tragedy is a way to better render its moral content.

<sup>37</sup> According to Zwierlein's *conspectus*, there is only one pherecratean in the entire Senecan tragic corpus (*Phaedra* 1131), and only one Choral ode composed entirely of

metres are interwoven and alternated in a way which is distinctly un-Senecan and instead recalls the typical pattern of Greek *stasima*. It is also a metrical pattern absent in the other tragedies of Buchanan, which enables us to see it as an attempt to present it as a rendition as close as possible of the metrics of a typical Greek *stasimon*.

And on that note, I think I would suggest something which has escaped notice until now. In the first part of the article, I mentioned how in 1553 Turnèbe's edition of Sophocles introduced for the first time a division of the *stasima* into a strophic system. If we divide the texts of those three odes into sections based on the alternation between anapaestic dimeters and other metres, what comes out is a possible division of the metric patterns in what looks like a strophic system, in some cases complete with the repetition of some metrical patterns between 'strophes' and 'antistrophes':<sup>38</sup>

*PARODOS*

- 1) 80-86 Anapaestic dimeters.  
87 Anacreontean (= catalectic iambic dimeter).  
88-9 Iambic trimeters.
- 2) 90-98 Anapaestic dimeters.  
99-102 Iambic dimeters.
- 3) 103-7 Anapaestic dimeters.  
108 Anapaestic monometer.  
109 Anapaestic dimeter.
- 4) 110-32 Lesser sapphics with *adonii*.

FIRST *STASIMON* AND *ALCESTIS'* MONODY

- 1) 212-15 Anapaestic dimeter.  
216 Trochaic dimeter.  
217 Trochaic catalectic dimeter.  
218 Trochaic dimeter.  
219 Trochaic catalectic dimeter.

glyconics, the fourth one of *Oedipus*. Roger Green suggested that the use of glyconics and pherecrateans for the choral odes in *Iephtes* may be inspired by a passage of *Alcestis* (Green 2014, 122); however, in *Iephtes* we have one ode in glyconics and another in pherecrateans, not one with the two metres interwoven as in the passage from Euripides he refers to.

<sup>38</sup> I take the metres from Sharratt and Walsh's *conspectus metrorum* (I only substitute the iambic *senarii* with iambic trimetes, see n4 above), where they are disposed in order of presence in the single odes. The new disposition in strophes is my own. Such a division does not correspond to the one in Euripides' text and should be understood as an original creation by Buchanan.

- 220 Trochaic dimeter.
- 221 Trochaic catalectic dimeter.
- 222 Trochaic dimeter.
- 223-7 Catalectic trochaic dimeter.
- 228-30 Iambic trimeter.
  
- 2) 231-4 Anapestic dimeter.
- 235-7 Trochaic catalectic dimeter.
- 238-9 Iambic trimeter.
  
- 3) 240-9 Anapestic dimeter.
- 250-2 Anapestic trimeter.
- 253-4 Iambic trimeter.
  
- 4) 255-6 Anapestic dimeter.
- 257-8 Iambic trimeter.
  
- 5) 259-64 Anapestic dimeter.
- 265-6 Iambic trimeter.
  
- 6) 267-71 Anapestic dimeter.
- 272-3 Iambic trimeter.
  
- 7) 274-8 Anapestic dimeter.
- 279 Iambic trimeter.
- 280-6 Anapestic dimeter.

ADMETUS' RETURN AND KOMMOS

- 1) 908-9 Anapaestic dimeters.
- 910 Anapaestic trimeter
  
- 2) 911-18 Anapaestic dimeters.
- 3) 919-21 Anacreontean.
- 922-4 Trochaic catalectic dimeters.
  
- 4) 925-38 Anapestic dimeters.
  
- 5) 939-54 Iambic dimeters.
- 955 Adonius.
  
- 6) 955-70 Anapaestic dimeters.
  
- 7) 971-82 Trochaic catalectic dimeters.
- 983-9 Anapaestic dimeters.

There was a precedent for such an operation: Erasmus had already disposed three *stasima* of his *Iphigenia* according to a "stanzaic form" (Green 2014, 122). However, not only are some of the metres different between the two authors, but in Erasmus, the division in strophes does not always seem to correspond to a change in the metres used, nor does it establish a system

of metrical responsiveness between the different strophes. Those traits are patent to Buchanan's translation, and I would not think it too far-fetched to submit that they reveal the influence of both the recent work done by Adrien Turnèbe on Sophocles' text and La Péruse's recreation of this same metrics in his tragedy.

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Through the analysis of the different metres Buchanan adopted to translate the Choral odes (the *stasima*) of *Medea* and *Alcestis*, I meant to give a picture which was as complete as possible of the texts in the context of both Buchanan's life and career and of the reception history of Greek tragedy in Renaissance Europe. On the one hand, the metrics of *Medea*, based on a reprisal of the metrics of late Senecan tragedies (with slight but significant corrections), reveal the proximity of the text printed in 1544 to its original context of scholastic performance at the college of La Guyenne: the apparent rigidity of its metrical pattern, with the different odes all rewritten through the use of almost only one metre, is to be seen as purposely crafted to facilitate student performance. On the other, the more complex metrical patterns of *Alcestis*, where metres taken by Seneca are placed inside a scheme closer to the original Greek one, in denouncing the nature of this second translation as a more 'literary' text (i.e. less connected to its scholastic roots) also reveals its relationship with contemporary development in French poetry and literary reception of Greek tragedy. Put together, these two different solutions to the problem of how to render the difficult metrics of Greek *stasima* not only confirm Buchanan's image as both a great Latin poet and as a Greek scholar deeply involved in the literary issues of his time, but also denounce an evolution in his way of looking at and reading Greek tragedy, going from an initial attitude of reading Euripides almost exclusively through the eyes of Seneca (*Medea*) to a more nuanced view of such texts as something similar in some ways, but different in others when compared to the Latin tragedian (*Alcestis*). We can then conclude that Buchanan's translations of *Medea* and *Alcestis* turn out to be more complex texts than they have been considered to be for many decades, and that their study has much to teach us regarding the reception history of Greek tragedy.

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