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Serving Twa Maisters: Five Classic Plays in Scots
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(in William Carlos Williams' translation) the 'counterpoint of the void', the twentieth-century void, translatable our void too, I am grateful.

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Serving Twa Maisters: Five Classic Plays in Scots Translation. Edited by John Corbett and Bill Finlay. Pp. xxxvii + 376. Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2005. Pb. £12.50.

Only two of these versions of five classic plays might count as already well known. Robert Kemp's *Let Wives tak Tent* (1948), translated from Molière's *LEcole des femmes*, was once a staple of Scottish amateur theatre, and, according to one of the useful appendices supplied here by John Corbett and Bill Finlay, has been revived professionally eight times up to 2001. It has not however been printed for more than twenty years. *The Burdies* of Douglas Young (1959), translated from Aristophanes, achieved something like notoriety in its Edinburgh Festival production of 1966. But it has never again been professionally performed; it was printed privately in 1959, and not reprinted till now. Its fame, which is real enough, rests mainly on gossip. The other three have never before been printed. Victor Carin's version of Goldoni, *The Servant of Twa Maisters* (1965), has been four times professionally produced, last in Perth in 1983. *The Hypochondriack* (1987), Hector MacMillan's version of Molière's *Le Malade imaginaire*, was last produced five years ago in Edinburgh, but this was only its third outing. Peter Arnott's version of Brecht's *Mr Puntilla and his Man Matti* (1999) was produced in the same year in both Dundee and Glasgow. The last two are published from typescripts supplied by the translators. This kind of summary of contents and contexts makes the enterprise of the anthology sound parochial and its ambitions quixotic or reactionary; but the achievement of the translators, taken together, is a cause for wonder, and we owe the editors every kind of gratitude. So do the translators.

The title is adapted from Goldoni's. The 'twa maisters' served by these translations are on the one hand the Scots language and on the other the five classic originals. Being a servant with loyalties divided in this way is not a happy condition. Goldoni's servant Truffaldino is described at the end of the play (in Carin's version) as a 'rascal', a 'villain', and a 'twister', who deceives both masters. But though betrayal is a necessity of such double loyalty, happy outcomes are still possible. Of course, as ordinary servants cannot, translators choose their

originals. They choose with a sense of what matches not just their own talents and preferences, but those of their theatrical collaborators and audiences. A splendid bibliography appended to the present volume, detailing plays translated into Scots since 1945, enlightens us about what choices have been made. There are surprises. For example, though Ibsen has from William Archer's time been delivered with a Scottish accent, he has only once since 1945 been delivered in Scots (by Duncan Campbell in 1981). The vote has gone instead, quite unpredictably, to Molière. Out of a total of about forty translations, he appears nine times – there is no anomaly in his appearing twice in this anthology. For the generality of translated plays into Scots the bias is overwhelmingly to comedy. And the comic crops up in unlikely places. A public discussion of Edwin Morgan's version of *Phèdre*, reported in this journal (Vol. 9, 2000), featured a Parisian Raciniste sent home to pay more attention to the play's 'hints of the comic'. The pressure to make the plays more Scottish is all the stronger when the originals are comic: about half of those listed in the bibliography are marked as adapted to Scottish circumstances. Kemp authorizes this fashion for thorough-going domestication: Arnolphe becomes an eighteenth-century Edinburgh burgher called 'Oliphant Laird of Stumpie'; a good deal more locally accessible business is introduced; more 'difficult' jokes are cancelled (even Agnès' notion, funny in six different ways, that babies are made through the ear). Carin likewise transfers Goldoni's action to the Edinburgh house of Pittendree. Young's Aristophanes, depending on wholly surreal premises, is decorated with concessions to recognizable or comfortable local detail: Euelpides is mugged by a 'a teuch Teddy boy' as he makes his way to Portobello; gay sex is euphemized away. And Athenian topicalities are updated: Darwin stands in for Prodicus, Harold MacMillan for Teleas, Colonel Nasser for Pharnakes, and – in a beautiful compliment to Young's St Andrews colleague – the composer Cedric Thorpe Davie stands in for Phrynicus. It is sour, in one of the reviewers collected by Young himself in the mainly self-lacerating *Scots Burds and Edinburgh Reviewers* (1966), to pretend that Aristophanes' Athenian jokes must have been funnier than 'jests about St Andrew's House and the credit squeeze, Morningside and pink stamps'.

For Kemp and for Young there is a political agenda, inherited in more or less heavily modified ways by the younger dramatists here. It precipitates in a preoccupation with the Scots language. And it is supported by a diffuse anglophobia that encourages an assumption of some kind of community of interest between Scots writing and almost any non-English writing. All the translators represented in this volume take what they suppose to be friendly liberties with supposedly

congenial material – to make it Scots is to be true to its genius. Robert Kemp is quoted as finding himself exposed by Jouvet's Edinburgh production of *LEcole des femmes* to an acting style 'that had a parallel with Scottish practice, and the link between that actorly practice and the Scots language'. Rikki Fulton, who adapted *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* as *A wee touch o' class* (1988), judged that 'the Scots line has a music which is close to the French original'. Hector MacMillan finds in his own efforts in Scots a medium closer to Molière's genius. 'We share a very European enjoyment for abrupt transitions', he says, citing a taste for tragic-comic mix, for the serious grotesque, for the tearful clown – the elements of the so-called 'Caledonian antiszygizy'. In fact, MacMillan's version of *Le Malade imaginaire*, given here, eschews the more extraordinary discontinuities in the ballet-comic version of the French, explicitly in the interests of 'unity'. There's something still a bit cosy about this. It is actually offered in commendation of Kemp's version (not quoted here, but in Noel Peacock's admirable but often dismaying *Molière in Scotland*) that it is a 'pawky little Scots comedy' and 'even more amusing than the original'. The assumption voiced by sympathetic reviewers is that Molière – or whoever – would have approved. Kemp's was no doubt a risky enterprise, but hardly risky in the way that Molière was. There is less going on in his play; it will offend no-one, and, being a period drama, is less true to current comic propriety. What is recognizable at one level is a satirical pageant of burgher types – professors, doctors, clergymen. Molière's aristocratic take on it all is eliminated.

The flattening of the tone, of linguistic texture, comes as the price of the scottification. Scots no longer has a conventionalized range of registers, at least not for those committed to writing a pure form of it. Tom Fleming, who directed Carin's *Servant o Twa Maisters*, is quoted as saying that Goldoni's Venetian translates superbly into Scots, and that 'the Scottish actor has a greater affinity with European plays and continental comedies than his English counterpart'. This is a wholly fanciful affinity. In any case, Goldoni employs more than Venetian in this play, and his characters are as much circus as theatrical types. Carin's characters have to spend the opening sequence fussily establishing their identities because their linguistic eccentricities are sacrificed to right thinking about what Scots should sound like. Even for accents a democracy is assumed: there are heroes and lovers in Possil and Pennicuik too, or even Pittenweem. Our sense of regional stereotypes is weak, and were it not we should feel guilty. Music-hall Gaelicisms ('ochone, ochone') aside, the servants in MacMillan's *Hypochondriack* – comic devices merely – seem to speak the same dialect

as the masters. Truffaldino is translated as Archie Broon from Dundee (maybe an escapee from the pages of the *Sunday Post*); but Truffaldino's Bergamask dialect is (at least on the page) rendered identically with everyone else's – the Venetian of Pantalone or the Tuscan of the lovers, this last in any case abridged in the interests of simplifying the tone: Carin's Beatrice forgets even the gesture of grief for her murdered brother allowed by Goldoni.

Ronnie Jack, quoted by the editors, commends Carin's gift for giving full play to the theatrical, to mime and pantomime. Goldoni works with harlequins and pantaloons. Methuen advertises Lee Hall's 1999 version of Goldoni as a 'Christmas pantomime with an Italian accent'. The explanation of the popularity of *Le Malade imaginaire* in Scotland, says Noel Peacock, 'may lie in the felicitous adaptation of Molière's text to native pantomime'. It wouldn't take much adapting. Pantomime survives vigorously in Scotland, perhaps more than elsewhere, and the bias to the pantomimic is evident in all the plays collected here. Brecht's *Puntila*, a not very folksy *Volkstück*, uses verse and music and slapstick to carry its allegory of disappointment, and the much-applauded version by Lee Hall (1998) relied on the clowning talents of Sean Foley and Hamish McColl (from a comic show called 'The Right Size'). And though it has other more obvious virtues, Arnott's version never lets go of a kind of Laurel and Hardy charm. The only unambiguous praise of *The Burdies* was for the staging and costume (done by an Algerian). The *Glasgow Herald's* Christopher Small praised it for its frivolity, arguing the unprofitability of asking for a point: the original and its 'transliteration' alike, he says, 'have been playing with clouds, puffs of air. The lightest of wish-fulfilments of "puir wingless mannies that last but a day".'

Insistence on the dreamlike is a good option. Pantomimic possibilities may mesh with comic realism in contradictory or uncomfortable ways. One reviewer quoted in Young's collection thinks it shaming to have the Scots presenting themselves to the world as 'quaint, uncouth clowns' – as if we took *The Burdies* for a representation of life in Portobello. *Let Wives tak Tent* is a different matter. To offer the possibility that Molière might be writing about life in Edinburgh provokes one reviewer to reflect 'it's a long way from the Palais-Royal to the Canongate'. He evidently feels that Canongate manners don't quite come up to scratch. Duncan McCrae and Rikki Fulton, cast one in succession to the other, as Arnolphe/Oliphant in Kemp's version of *L'Ecole des femmes*, were both great popular pantomime actors. Kemp's version is faithful at least to strong possibilities in the French. But it hasn't the courage to be quite pantomimic enough. Kemp's version is tipped towards realism more than any other way by his avoidance of

rhyme. Kemp does this because, he says, it is overly obtrusive in heavily stressed Germanic languages. This is very blinkered. Tony Harrison has explained apropos of his own version of *Le Misanthrope* (quoted by Peacock) how he goes in for 'running the lines over, breaking up sentences, sometimes using the odd half-rhyme to subdue the chime ... letting the occasional couplet leap out as an epigram in moments of devastation or wit'; and how rhyme can be softened by devices now habitual and available to English poets even of Molière's own generation, by breaking up lines or varying vowels. To abandon rhyme is to throw away a great comic tool. Kemp's view is not shared by MacMillan, who, although represented here by a prose play, is a gifted versifier (as in his 1986 *Misanthrope*). An American verse adaptation of *Le Malade* by Timothy Mooney is designed precisely to give a pantomimic distance to Molière's prose. Kemp's version strands particular jokes, and it abandons the risky language games (like those played in Patrice Leconte's movie *Ridicule*) that keep our interest afloat. The most famous joke in *LEcole des femmes* – perhaps the most famous joke in all Molière – is about rhyming, where Agnès is supposed not to conceive that 'tarte à la crème' doesn't rhyme with 'bordillon'. Kemp throws it away by having Arnolphe declare, 'If I have my way of it, she'll not even know what a rhyme is.' Ranjit Bolt compensates with a completely new joke that involves rhyming 'What I mean is' with 'a penis'. When Horace asks Arnolphe to admire how witty Agnes has become since she has fallen in love, Kemp has him say 'What say you to this new turn and this billet doux ... What, dae ye no marvel at her readiness o wit?' Ranjit Bolt has: "Reply"! Now go on, tell me, aren't you stunned? / Under Love's tutelage Agnès had *punned!*' Where Kemp translates Molière literally and gives 'The truth even outstrips my report', Bolt has Arnolphe answer Chrysalde's 'To judge from your report one must suppose ...' with 'Agnès is poetry, / My report was prose.' Kemp might have replied that the artifice of his language compensates for the artifice of rhyme. There is some truth in that; but his artifice is not funny often enough.

No one takes *The Burdies* for a play about real people in Edinburgh, because the characters are got up as birds and the way they talk is too ostentatiously unlike the way people in Edinburgh talk: – 'Blythelie nou, wi your flute sae clear, / lat the music o spring ootring, / and stert the anapaests here' – They sing a cosmology in anapaests, or they sing 'sangs for Pan in a halie shouer, / and solemn dansetunes for the Mountain Mither'. Tereus calls the birds together 'and the burdies i the ivy o the gairdans / that seek for pastur, / rowan-eaters, bramble-eaters, burds of bare hens, burds o fair dens'; and then 'Pyat, jay, and dou, and laivrock, / shilfie, yalla-yite, and cushie', and having enumerated

twenty-four birds his note adds, just for fun, 'a wheen mair' – twice as many again. The relation of the language used by any of the translators collected in this volume to anything used in Scotland is at best tenuous. Young's frenzied multiplication of exotic syllables is wholly remote from it. It is also quite remote from the purposes Young pretended to, or Kemp pretended to, or the editors are evidently sympathetic to. The editors eliminated from their selection the body of contemporary work cast in 'naturalistic Central-Belt urban Scots' because they wanted to display the greater variety of non-naturalistic or quasi-naturalistic period Scots, to show what Scots can do – in a way that, say, the virtuoso minimalism of James Kelman or Tom Leonard cannot. They favour a language that is quite frankly made up. Even Kemp's prose, masquerading as the speech of the Canongate, is made up. Kemp writes 'a synthesis of North Eastern Doric and Ayrshire Lallans', a reconstructed eighteenth-century idiom. Its supposed modern vernacular underpinning, its reliance on 'the rhythms of the spoken language', makes it speakable. But the language is, from the start, not the language of the streets. It's copious, because unfiltered by ordinary speakers, unworn and uncontaminated by ordinary use. It sometimes comes across in a fuzz of nostalgia: of Kemp one reviewer writes that the old words he'd been brought up with – he must have been very old indeed – came back 'as if a part of me locked away had come to life again'. It's 'plastic' in the sense of not natural; plastic also in the sense that it can be shaped at will. For Kemp, recovery of the language promised recovery of a lost cultural ascendancy. For Young the promotion of Scots promises to 're-establish the cultural contacts with other literatures which the English predominance has occluded'. Its hostility to Anglicism ('admit a Hottentotism rather than another Anglicism') could only be disabling if it were taken seriously. Young's own Scots is resolutely literary, with 'shading', as he calls it, from Fife and the Northeast. The language of *The Burdies* is exotic enough for Young to have supplied the play with an ample glossary – the core of the glossary that the editors supply for the anthology. Its notes take more or less amusing sideswipes at the speech habits of the English. The ambition in both Kemp and Young, and one to which the editors are evidently sympathetic, is to create a Scots fit to be a national language, fit for prose, taken out of the hands of those for whom it is an exercise equivalent to writing Greek elegiacs or Latin hexameters – 'the "Plastic" Makars maun uis the leid for ither purposes than poetry, namely for prose and for speikin'.

It's unclear how translating Greek anapaests into Scots anapaests might advance the cause of a language fit for ordinary intellectual purposes. But Kemp's prose is at least evidently designed for 'speikin'.

With the exception of Young, all the translators represented in this anthology are professionally connected with the theatre or the media. Their loyalties were or are to the theatre as much as to the Scots language. The editors are less generous than they might be to the English-speaking theatrical environment of the Central Belt, in particular to the Citizens Theatre of the 1970s, which, through Robert MacDonald's translations into what he called 'gutter mandarin', educated audiences in a range of European drama. For the editors, the 1970s represent a trough in the production of Scots drama. MacMillan and Arnott write on the other side of it, and both write an impure urban Scots. Both are native Glaswegians, though one worked in Switzerland for a decade and the other was educated at Cambridge. Arnott speaks of his own 'unholy guddle of regional variations', and in a letter to Finlay quoted in the introduction, of its going 'beyond ethnicity into invention', or as Corbett puts it, discarding the differences between 'plastic' and 'realistic' Scots.

The 'speikin' of Scots promoted by these dramatists is of a Scots speakable only in the theatre. There are no novels written in this language, let alone philosophy. It is a language not obliged to make the sort of sense that what Brecht calls the *gestus* can supply. Brecht records his own dealings with Charles Laughton in creating an English version of *Galileo* – 'we had to agree on the *gestus* of the dialogue by way of my performing it all in bad English or even German and his trying out a range of versions in correct English'. The new text is generated by a sympathetic engagement with something not so much in as behind the old one, and which is revealed in the interactions of actors and directors. Corbett and Finlay indicate that Arnott's *Puntila* is 'revisited' in rehearsal to yield a version whose intelligibility was created in performance. Arnott's *Puntila* is more buoyantly lyrical than its original, because the strengths of his essentially unintellectual idiom lie in that direction. When Puntila and Matti climb on a Mount Hatelma (Halti) fabricated from broken furniture, Brecht says that though the sky 'ist an anderen Stellen blauer, die Wolken gehn feiner hier, die finnischen Wind sind behutsamer'. Arnott translates: 'The blue is mebbe merr vievish in foreign pairts, but where ur clouds mair harrish, where's the wund merr fuffly than in Finland?' The glossary gives 'fuffly' as Arnott's coinage. This idiom can do coarse, ordinary things: 'Aye, but ur you a wicked shag, boy?' – incomparably more convincing, without even being current, than the standard version in Willet. It also has confidence enough in itself to create its own discriminations: 'Tae eject me frae yer property wad cross that line where a stramash may evolve intae a stooshie' (for 'die feine Grenze, wo's ein Skandal wird'). The

glossary gives ‘riot, commotion’ for the one, and ‘uproar’ for the other; but we know what more than nuance is intended. And in that line ‘evolve’ is a brilliant anomaly.

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