

Seneca and the Text of Marvell's 'Climb at court for me that will'

The most recent editor of Marvell's poetry, Elizabeth Story Donno, in her *Andrew Marvell: The Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth, 1972; repr. 1976), produces the following version of Marvell's 'Climb at court for me that will' (pp. 137-38):

Climb at court for me that will
Giddy favour's slippery hill;
All I seek is to lie still.
Settled in some secret nest,
In calm leisure let me rest,
And far off the public stage
Pass away my silent age.
Thus when without noise, unknown,
I have lived out all my span,
I shall die, without a groan, 10
An old honest countryman,
Who exposed to others' eyes,
Into his own heart ne'er pries.
Death to him's a strange surprise.

This poem, as is well known, is a translation of the passage which ends the second chorus (and thus the second act) of Seneca's tragedy *Thyestes*. Renaissance editions of the play differ in a number of details, but they are in agreement concerning the text of these lines, and it is therefore not misleading to reproduce the passage from a modern edition which is in tune with them and which has the advantage of being widely accessible. I quote from Vol. IX, 'Tragedies II', in The Loeb Classical Library's edition *Seneca*; this volume first appeared (with a translation by FJ. Miller) in 1917, and, with revisions, has been reprinted several times, as in 1968.¹

Stet quicumque volet potens
aulae culmine lubrico;
me dulcis saturet quies;
obscuro positus loco
leni perfruar otio,
nullis nota Quiritibus
aetas per taciturn fluat.
sic cum transierint mei
nullo cum strepitu dies,
plebeius moriar senex. 400
illi mors gravis incubat

¹The Loeb series has now been published in its entirety by Heinemann in London, together with Harvard University Press (Cambridge, Mass.). I quote from the 1968 impression of Vol. IX.

qui, notus nimis omnibus,
ignotus moritur sibi.

A very similar version of the Latin had appeared in the main scholarly edition to precede Professor Donno's, viz. that by H.M. Margoliouth, *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1927; 2nd ed. 1952). Professor Donno had access to this edition, although a third (revised) version, by Pierre Legouis and E.E. Duncan-Jones, appeared only when hers was already in press (1971).

Professor Donno's version of the text differs in some significant respects from that in the three Margoliouth editions. Margoliouth's text of the poem, which has been retained in the third edition, is an 'old spelling' one. A more important difference between Margoliouth's text and Donno's, however, is that she prints line 2 from a manuscript in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, which is there designated as *Eng. poet. d. 49*. This manuscript had belonged to Marvell's nephew William Popple, and it is almost an understatement to say, as Donno does, that it is 'a valuable adjunct' to the first Folio edition of 1681. The Folio version of the line, as adopted by Margoliouth, is 'Tottering favors Pinnacle'. With some effort, we can, of course, read 'Pinnacle' as though it rhymes with 'will' and 'still', but 'hill' seems much preferable in this regard, and is an adequate enough translation of 'culmine'. While it may be difficult to determine whether Marvell would have preferred 'Tottering' or 'Giddy', the latter has the advantage of fitting in better, in sound and meaning, with 'slippery', and that word is surely Marvell's equivalent for 'lubrico'. There had been two earlier English translations of the passage, one by Jasper Heywood,² who speaks of a 'tickle' (i.e. insecure, slippery) 'top', and another one by Sir Thomas Wyatt, who uses the expression 'slipper top',³ perhaps influencing Marvell.

But, while we thus have reason to applaud Donno's departure from Margoliouth in line 2, she certainly does not improve on his work in her

²See my edition of *Thyestes* by Lucius Annaeus Seneca, translated by Jasper Heywood (1560), in the 'New Mermaids' series, which was published jointly by Bann (London) and Norton (New York) in 1982.

³There are several editions of Wyatt; I refer to my own text of the *Collected Poems*, London, 1975. The poem as printed there from the Arundel Manuscript starts with the line 'Stand whoso list upon the slipper top'. If Marvell did know Wyatt's translation, however, it would probably have come to him in the version printed by Richard Tottel in *Songes and Sonettes*, first published in London in 1557, and reprinted many times thereafter. In Tottel the poem starts with (I modernize): 'Stand whoso list upon the slipper wheel'. Wyatt's version is difficult to date with precision; we only know that it must have been written before his death in 1542. Marvell's translation was probably done before 1660. The passage was a favourite amongst translators during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; see the interesting collection in C.D.N. Costa, ed., *Seneca*, London and Boston, 1974, 197-201 (following G.K. Hunter's essay 'Seneca and English Tragedy').

punctuation of lines 8-14. According to her preface, it is her intention to produce punctuation which shall not 'prove misleading' (p. 12). As the lines stand in her edition, however, they do not make such sense as Marvell can have intended. In Donno's version, the speaker of the poem in essence says that, having spent his life obscurely, he will die uncomplainingly as an 'old honest countryman' who, while exposed to the eyes of others, never looks closely into his own heart. This is not at all an attitude which would have given satisfaction to Seneca or any of his followers; indeed, Seneca's point is that it is *impossible* (as indeed it is) to live 'unknown' and yet 'exposed to others' eyes': the person who lives obscurely will die a peaceful death, but (to follow Marvell's translation): 'He who, exposed to others' eyes, never looks closely into his own heart, he will find death a strange surprise' (a typically Marvellian understatement, as the Latin speaks of such a death as 'gravis'). The Loeb translation, accurately rendering Seneca's Latin, says: 'On him does death lie heavily, who, but too well known to all, dies to himself unknown'. Margoliouth had punctuated the passage correctly, and, to bring out the substantial difference between his text and Donno's, I quote his version of lines 8-14 below:

Thus when without noise, unknown,
I have liv'd out all my span,
I shall dye, without a groan, 10
And old honest Country man.
Who expos'd to others Ey's,
Into his own Heart ne'r pry's,
Death to him 's a Strange surprise.⁴

The important point to grasp is that there are two separate sentences here, as Margoliouth's full stop after line II indicates. Lines 12-14 form a sentence about a person – not the same as the honest countryman – who fails to lead his exemplary life. This distinction, which is vital to the whole meaning of the poem, is obliterated in Donno's version.

It is an enigma why Donno thus chose to mispunctuate the poem. The Latin in Margoliouth, as in the Loeb edition, has a full stop after 'senex'. In both Heywood and Wyatt the sense is clear and follows Seneca's. Marvell was an accomplished Latinist, and there is no ground for supposing that he would have misunderstood Seneca's meaning, or would have wished to alter it as drastically (one must add: nonsensically) as Donno's punctuation suggests. The consensus of previous editors appears to be that Margoliouth's punctuation is correct.⁵ Possibly Professor Donno considered that somehow the punctuation in

⁴I quote from the third (1971) edition. Oddly, there is no final stop at the end of the poem in this version; it should obviously be added, and I have done so here.

⁵See, for example, Alexander B. Grosart, ed., *The Complete Poems of Andrew Marvell*, 1872 (repr. New York, 1966); Hugh Macdonald, ed., *The Poems of*

the primary sources justified hers, but I cannot see how it does, and in any case she should then have produced an argument to the effect that such punctuation must be regarded as providing a better pointer to Marvell's intended meaning than Seneca's Latin does. Until that argument is offered, we should accept Donno's handling of line 2, but not of lines 8-14.

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Andrew Marvell, London, 1952 (repr. 1969); George deF. Lord, *Andrew Marvell : Complete Poetry*, 1968 (repr. London, 1984). Several editors do not print Marvell's complete poems (as Donno was the last to do), but selections, not including this translation. It does not occur, for example, in Robert Wilcher, ed., *Andrew Marvell: Selected Poetry and Prose*, London, 1986. The omission is regrettable because Marvell's version is not only fascinating and important in its own right, but also significant as a contribution to a process of translation in the Renaissance.