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*Chairlie Angiolieri:  
a Sonneteer Scotticised*

L'articolo discute la traduzione in Scots di alcuni sonetti di Cecco Angiolieri; l'analisi critica di cinque "battibecchi" tradotti dall'autore di questo studio è inserita in un quadro di riferimento storico sulla traduzione del testo poetico in Scots e viene messa in relazione con altre traduzioni svolte da autori contemporanei. L'obiettivo è di metterne in luce i tratti distintivi e le diverse soluzioni adottate per rendere il testo più accessibile al fruitore, eventualmente anche discostandosi dall'originale e adottando varietà linguistiche diverse.

Practitioners in the art of poetic translation may have many purposes: to offer homage to writers whom they happen to love and admire, to develop their own skill in interpreting works in the source language, writing in their own, or both; to enrich their own language and expand its literary range. A function of poetic translation which may be almost incidental to the translator, however, may well be of primary importance to his readers: namely, to introduce them to the works of poets with whom they would not otherwise have become acquainted. Cecco Angiolieri, one of the most individual figures of the Italian Duecento, is not well known in Scotland;<sup>1</sup> and my first introduction to him was through the splendidly lively and imaginative translations by George Campbell Hay.<sup>2</sup> Wishing to find out more about the poet who inspired these, I read the sonnets translated by Hay, and then others, in the original; at once became fascinated by the remarkable personality of this flamboyant young scallywag (*youth*, with its self-preoccupation and self-drama-

<sup>1</sup> The language and literature of Italy, indeed, are not widely studied in Scotland; but most Scots with any degree of education have at the very least *heard* of, say, Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. Not even this is true of Cecco Angiolieri.

<sup>2</sup> For references and discussion, see McClure (forthcoming). Hay used both Scots and Gaelic for his translations: a fascinating demonstration of his contrasting techniques in the two languages, arising from the enormous differences between them in both their linguistic structures and their associated literary traditions, is furnished by a comparison of his *Gin I were eld, this world wi flames I'd ring it* and *Na'm bu teine mi, losgann an domhan uile*.

tisation, its exuberance and its passionate emotions, being a dominant aspect of the persona which he invariably presents); and decided to venture on translating some of his poems myself.

As a medium for literary translations, the credentials of Scots are established beyond dispute. The entire European tradition of poetic translation as a creative art may be said to have been initiated, in the post-mediaeval period, by the *Eneados* of Gavin Douglas: indeed, the audacity of his venture in translating the most admired of classical Latin poems into his vernacular speech is hard to appreciate in our own time. Douglas's modesty regarding what he called his "bad harsk speche and lewit barbour tung"<sup>3</sup> was to some extent a conventional pose: by 1513, the date of his translation, Scots had already become one of the richest and most extensively developed vernaculars in Europe, with a diversity of vocabulary, style and register far surpassing that of contemporary English. The abundance of Latin- and French-derived words in the language, and the remarkable inventiveness of the poets in concocting others as it suited them, set one level of the language in extreme contrast with a startling wealth of colloquial, vulgar and even obscene terms, often highly expressive both semantically and phonaesthetically, on which poets drew for comic and vituperative effect. The flexibility of the language had already been enhanced by poets of outstanding skill, the most brilliant being Douglas's older contemporary William Dunbar; and was exploited to the full in the *Eneados*, by some estimates the greatest single work in Scots poetry and unquestionably one of the finest secular translations ever made. Later in the sixteenth century, the reign of James VI, a dedicated patron of letters, saw other distinguished translations, of which the most impressive is *Roland Furious*, a rendering of part of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* by John Stewart of Baldynneis (working from a French version as well as the Italian original). King James himself made a disappointingly pedestrian translation of the *Uranie* of his favourite contemporary poet, the Huguenot Guillaume Salluste du Bartas; and another work of the same poet, *Judith*, was rendered into Scots verse of rather more distinction by Thomas Hudson. Also notable among the poetic achievements of James's reign is a vogue for the Petrarchan sonnet, which enjoyed a new and brilliant lease of

<sup>3</sup> *The Proloug of the First Buke of Eneados*, l. 21, in Douglas (1513 / 1957: 3).

life in Scotland after ceasing to be fashionable in England. Many poets, including the king, made worthy contributions to this; and it includes a remarkable number of translations and adaptations from contemporary French, Italian and Spanish poets: the greatest poet of James's reign, Alexander Montgomerie, translated several sonnets by Ronsard, William Fowler produced a somewhat mechanical version of Petrarch's *Trionfi*, and one of the king's most attractive sonnets is a free rendering of Saint-Gelais' *Voyant ces monts de veue assez lointaine*, in which the French poet's unidentified *monts* are made into the Cheviot Hills (south of Edinburgh).

Despite the abundance and success of the Scots poetic translations of the sixteenth century, it was not until the twentieth that the practice was resumed in the Scots language to any important extent. The difference in the status of the language in these two periods is fundamental to the implications of using it as a vehicle for poetry, original or translated. For Gavin Douglas, Scots was simply the language which he spoke and wrote: he is, in fact, the first major writer to make a patriotic point of the fact that Scots is different from English, stating that he wrote *kepan na sudron bot our awyn langage* (Douglas 1513 / 1957: 6, 1.111). By the end of the century, largely because of the advent of printing and the widespread distribution in Scotland of texts from England, especially religious ones pertaining to the Reformed church and faith, English as opposed to Scots had come to be widely familiar in its written form in Scotland; and many writers of Scots had begun, probably with no conscious intention, to assimilate their language to English.<sup>4</sup> There was, however, no apparent sense that the prestige of Scots as a *spoken* language was in any way affected. It was in the eighteenth century, with the great emphasis placed by Enlightenment thinkers and literati on "pure" English, that a definite revulsion against Scots came to be visible, and a frequently expressed belief that this "rustic dialect"

<sup>4</sup> Two interesting cases in point are John Knox, whose *History of the Reformation in Scotland* is written in an almost random mixture of Scots and English forms, and James VI, whose early writings show a quite clear dichotomy between pure Scots for prose and a much more anglicised language for poetry. This process has been examined in detail: see for example Devitt (1989). A deep-rooted tendency in Scotland, among academics as well as writers, is to see this "anglicisation" (as it is commonly but simplistically termed) as a treacherous selling of the cultural pass; but this view stems from an unrealistic backward projection of modern attitudes to Scots: it would not have been understood in the sixteenth century.

was doomed to rapid extinction. The Scots poetry of Ramsay, Ferguson, Burns and a substantial number of lesser writers<sup>5</sup> represents a deliberate counter-attack on this attitude. Scots as a literary vehicle, that is, now that it had ceased to be the language which Scottish writers used *automatically*, inescapably carried a political significance: to write in Scots was to set one's face against the conventional assumption that English was the expected language of socially respectable discourse.

In the twentieth century this political aspect of Scots writing has been given much greater emphasis than previously, as Scots came to be overtly and deliberately associated, in a development of which the prime mover is the portentous figure of Hugh MacDiarmid, with Scottish political as well as cultural nationalism.<sup>6</sup> Internationalism as well: a central tenet of the Scottish Renaissance was that Scotland had once been, and should endeavour to become again, a European nation with a culture that enjoyed a productive and stimulating mutual relationship with the cultures of other nations. In this context, it could be argued that nothing was more natural and appropriate than that the practice of poetic translation should assume a high degree of importance on the literary scene, and should be pursued with vigour and imagination. By producing Scots versions of major poems in other languages, Scottish poets were furthering several desirable goals: extending the expressive power and scope of the Scots tongue, re-establishing Scotland's cultural links with other countries, opening Scottish poetry to the vitalising influence of foreign poetic traditions, and emphasising the cosmopolitan outlook of the independent Scotland soon — as was hoped, though the hope has not yet been realised — to re-establish itself on the world stage.<sup>7</sup>

The Scots tongue, with its long history and wide range of dialects, sociolects and literary registers, offers an enormous range of possibilities for creative writing; and this has been exploited in translations as well as in other branches of literature: the initiative and skill which Scots poets

<sup>5</sup> Not all *much* lesser: as one example, the pastoral epic *Helenore, or The Fortunate Shepherdess* by Alexander Ross of Lochlea is one of the outstanding Scots poems of the eighteenth century.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of this development and its effects on Scots poetry of the twentieth century, see McClure (2000).

<sup>7</sup> For a full discussion of the changing importance and status of literary translation in Scots through the ages, see Corbett (1999) — the title is a translation of a line from Gavin Douglas's prologue; and for detailed studies of several individual translators and their works, see Findlay (2004).

in the twentieth century have applied to the work of poetic translation has resulted in a corpus of truly extraordinary variety and quality. Classical and modern languages, and all poetic genres, are represented: French and Italian literature have been the principal sources, but several poets of revolutionary and post-revolutionary Russia have inspired Scots translators to distinguished work. This might have been predictable in view of the political radicalism of many of the finest mid-century Scottish writers; but whereas hard-hitting left-wing poets such as Sydney Goodsir Smith and Alastair Mackie chose (among others) Alexander Blok, Fyodor Tyutchev, Osip Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova to translate, perhaps the most exuberantly experimental translation from modern Russian poetry is *Wi the Haill Voice*,<sup>8</sup> from Vladimir Mayakovsky, by Edwin Morgan (1972), who was much less strongly associated with radical political thought than some of his contemporaries; and on the other hand Tom Scott, one of the mightiest of the Scottish Renaissance poets and one whose fervent socialism resounds throughout his work, chose for his exercises in translation not voices of modern radicalism but Anglo-Saxon poetry, Dante, St John of the Cross, Villon and Baudelaire. Many writers have translated poetry which might be thought to fit very naturally into the Scottish poetic tradition: an outstanding example is Alexander Gray, whose reputation as a Scots poet is founded on his translations from German and Danish ballads and folk poetry, and also the works of German poets (Heinrich Heine being the most notable both in himself and as a source for Gray) strongly influenced, in a manner very common in Scottish poetry too, by the folksong tradition. On the other hand, the romantic *angoscia* of Giacomo Leopardi is a mood which rarely surfaces in Scottish poetry; yet Alastair Mackie, whose original poetry is characterised by a grim, tough and bleakly humorous outlook on the ironies and tragedies of life, rendered such poems as *A Silvia*, *La quiete dopo la tempesta* and *Il sabato del villaggio* with exquisite sensitivity.<sup>9</sup> Any and all of the attested forms of Scots, past and present, have served as translation media: one or another in particular has sometimes been chosen for a literary reason, as in Robert Garioch's choice of Edinburgh demotic instead of the more classical Scots favoured in his original work to trans-

<sup>8</sup> For discussion see Mulrine (2004).

<sup>9</sup> For references and discussion see McClure (1992).

late the Roman dialect sonnets of Giuseppe Belli;<sup>10</sup> sometimes purely according to the preference of the individual translator, as when Ronsard was translated into the dialect of the North-East by Alexander Hutchison and into that of Shetland by William Tait, both of whom are reputable writers of original poetry in their respective dialects. Douglas Young selected a deliberately archaic form of the language, approaching a reconstructed Middle Scots, to render Dante's *Mentre io pensava la mia frate vita*, a poem from *La Vita Nuova*:

Ae time that I our flownrie life appraisit  
and saw hou brief and bruckil its duratioun,  
i ma hert, whaurin he wones, Luve sabbit sairlie,  
an wi Luve's sabbin then my saul wes frazit,  
sae that I sychit and spak in conturbatioun... (Young 1943: 18)

And in contrast to this adoption of what might seem a straightforwardly appropriate procedure, Edwin Morgan rendered Racine's *Phèdre* into the punchy vulgarity of contemporary Clydeside argot, phonetically spelt: an audacious but surprisingly effective move, for though the language itself could not be more remote in its social and literary overtones from Racine's refined and disciplined classical Alexandrines, its abrasive vigour conveys the passions of the characters with startling immediacy and intensity:

Whit huv Ah no sayed?  
D'ye wahnt me tae hing up his bed-claes, eh?  
Um Ah tae be sae truthfu, sae ower-truthfu  
Ah gie ma ain faither the shame o a riddy?  
Naebdy but you knows the hatefu secret.  
You an the godes, Ah kidny tell nae ither. (Morgan 2000: 61)

It is in this context of a rich and exuberant tradition of poetic translation that any new venture should be seen and assessed. The specific project of a set of translations from the sonnets of Cecco Angiolieri is, in

<sup>10</sup> This is an artificially polarised contrast, for Garioch, linguistically one of the subtlest of Scots-writing poets, ranges through all registers in both his translations and his original work; but as a broad generalisation it can stand. For detailed discussion of Garioch's Belli translations see Durante (1989) and Whyte (2004).

principle, as readily acceptable, even obvious, as anything could be. In the Renaissance period, Italian was second only to French among contemporary continental literatures, and a very close second, as a source not only for specific translations but general influences on the literature of Scotland.<sup>11</sup> And in the twentieth century not only poetry but narrative prose and drama from Italy have attracted Scots translators: as a far from exhaustive list, we have (besides the works already mentioned) translations from Umberto Saba and Salvatore Quasimodo by Alastair Mackie, North-Eastern dialect versions of stories by Italo Calvino, Alberto Moravia and Italo Svevo by Sheena Blackhall, and a rendering of Dario Fo's *Mistero Buffo* by Stuart Hood. The sonnet form, too, as already noted, has a distinguished history in Scots poetry. In principle, therefore, the exercise of turning the work of a sonneteer from the Italian Duecento into Scots is not even a breaking of new ground. If it requires any special justification, however, it inheres in the fact that Cecco Angiolieri has an astonishing abundance of qualities that harmonise with elements in the Scottish tradition, and could be expected to make an immediate appeal to a contemporary Scottish audience. His vein of irrepressible, even anarchic youthful exuberance is more than slightly suggestive of Robert Fergusson; his prickly pugnacity, expressed characteristically in volleys of expressive words and images, of Dunbar.<sup>12</sup> Probably all literatures have their share of poems celebrating the joys of drinking and wenching, but in Scotland this is associated with not only an abundance of anonymous tavern songs but with some of the greatest writers in the national pantheon, including Robert Burns in the eighteenth century and Sydney Goodsir Smith in the twentieth; and the cheerful effrontery of:

There jist three things in life can mak me fain,  
Three things o whilk I'll never get eneuch:  
It's lassies, howffs an dice: an thaim alane  
Can set my lightsome hert tae reel an heuch ...<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For detailed discussion see Jack (1972), particularly valuable for its examination of the poetry of James VI's court.

<sup>12</sup> Something else which he has in common with Dunbar is a fondness for harping on about his poverty; but that in Dunbar is a personal idiosyncrasy rather than a feature of the tradition within which he writes.

<sup>13</sup> *Tre cose solamente mi so 'n grado*: Angiolieri's Sonnet LXXXVII in *Rime*, a cura di Gigi Cavalli, Milano (Rizzoli), terza edizione 1975: the edition I use throughout.

chimes very harmoniously with that aspect of the national poetic tradition. (The *Carmina Burana* have been translated into Scots with skill and conviction by J.K. Annand.) Scots has no dearth of serious love poetry, but love treated satirically is also found in abundant poems through the ages, with Dunbar's *In Secreit Place* leading the procession, and with another poetic maestro of the genre, namely Catullus, inspiring excellent translations by Douglas Young. Above all, Angiolieri's fondness for attack and riposte — his sheer 'cheek', or in Scots 'gallusness' — finds a natural response in a language which has been the medium for flytings since time immemorial.<sup>14</sup> Not only the poetic tradition but the language itself seems to welcome Angiolieri: the sensory intensity of Scots words, their highly distinctive phonological shape, the force and pungency of their sound as well as their semantic precision, are admirably suited for the cuts, thrusts and below-the-belt punches of Angiolieri's verse.

As weel I coud rin backlins tae yestreen,  
Or win hert's likin frae my *sneisty* hure,  
Or *runch* down *glentin* diamants intae flour,  
Or *gutsie* friars see growein *skrank* an lean...<sup>15</sup>

*Sneisty* (haughty, disdainful), *runch* (grind), *glentin* (sparkling), *gutsie* (greedy), *skrank* (gaunt): surely words such as these convey Angiolieri's tone and manner as well as he could have wished. It is of interest to note that Gifford P. Owen (1979: 11-12) criticises English translators of Angiolieri: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, C.H.M.D. Scott, Thomas Caldicott Chubb: for failing, despite the merit of their translations in other respects, to capture what he calls the "racy guttiness and vulgarity" of the Italian poet, and expresses the view that a translation into *American English* might have more success. Scots, assuredly, is still better equipped to accommodate this aspect of Angiolieri.

It is an axiom of poetic translation that the translator has a degree of licence to depart from the actual words of the original if enjoined to do

<sup>14</sup> Angiolieri's famous attack on Dante has a distant parallel in Thomas Walker's reproof to Burns; though Burns, unlike Dante, was not above giving a spirited response in kind.

<sup>15</sup> XC: *I' potre' anzi ritornare in ieri.*



so by either the structure of his target language or the requirements of his metre or rhyme scheme. In the case of making an Italian sonnet into a Scots one, this issue is certain to arise in respect of two factors, namely rhyme and decasyllabicity. Scots, for both phonological and grammatical reasons, does not possess the enormous rhyming resources of Italian. Even on the scale of an individual sonnet, this is liable to present an insuperable difficulty: Angiolieri's octaves invariably contain only two rhymes — either ABAB ABAB or ABBA ABBA — but a Scots translator may be simply unable to find that number of rhymes without transgressing the bounds of fidelity to either source text or target language. In such a case, the solution of using different rhymes in the second quatrain from the first, as has been the practice in both original and translated sonnets in Scots (and English) since the genre was introduced, may surely be accepted without cavil.<sup>16</sup>

The necessity of writing lines of ten or eleven syllables is likely to call for solutions which may be more debatable. Since a given Italian word may well be two or even three syllables longer than its Scots translation equivalent, a translator will be obliged at times to fill out his lines by the use of words with no specific counterparts in the source text. To the extent that these words are vacuous, recognisable as 'padding' even to readers unacquainted with the original, or to the extent that they are out of keeping with its mood and tone, they will make for a bad translation: they must fit seamlessly into the poetic fabric of the translation as a unit. To illustrate this, consider the following tercet from Angiolieri's most famous sonnet:

S'i fosse morte, andarei da mio padre;  
s'i' fosse vita, fuggirei da lui:  
similimente faria da mi' madre.<sup>17</sup>

George Campbell Hay's version (1948: 62) reads:

<sup>16</sup> Another possibility is to resort to imperfect rhymes: a good example (that is, not only a clear example but a *successful* one) from Hay's Angiolieri translations is his use of *cheer – floo'r – fair – are*, all showing consonance (nobody, surely, needs to be told that final *r* is pronounced as a consonant in Scots) but no two rhyming, in his version of LXIII: *È non ha tante gocciole nel mare* (1948: 63). Since rhyme is a strict requirement in the sonnet tradition, however, this device is in principle more questionable.

<sup>17</sup> LXXXVI: *S' i' fosse foco, arderei 'l mondo.*

Gin I war Daith I'd seek my faither's dure;  
Gin Life, I'd rin lik stoor an' jink the knave.  
Sae wi my mither. Baith are steive an' soor.  
(*Dure* – door; *stoor* – blown dust; *jink* – dodge; *steive* – harsh, stern.)

An elaboration as minor as “Seek my faither’s *dure*” can pass without comment. The simile in “rin *lik stoor*” and the neatly expressive word *jink* embroider the original and indeed improve on it: Angiolieri’s use of a pronoun as a rhyme word results in an uncharacteristically weak and colourless line. (Even logic should tell us that if a translation can be worse than the original, which nobody would deny, it can equally well be better; and examples abound.) The interpolated phrase “Baith are steive an soor” is certainly in keeping with the original, is sufficiently expressive in itself, and has the advantage for Scots readers, who are unlikely to know that a virulent animosity towards his parents is a recurring theme of Angiolieri’s verse, of giving some kind of comprehensibility to the extraordinary sentiment expressed in the lines. In departing from the exact words of his model to this extent in order to produce a version which reads well as a Scots poem, Hay can hardly be said to have transgressed his artistic licence.

The issue of poetic translation, however, goes deeper than the practicalities of rhyme and metre. It is not necessary to have recourse to recent translation theories, but merely to some practical experience in the field, to realise the inadequacy of what I call the “either true or fair” fallacy — the simplistic assumption that literal accuracy and good poetic style in a translation are somehow in an exact relationship of inverse proportion, and that the art of poetic translation is a matter of striking a balance between them. The task of a translator is to produce a poetic statement of equivalent meaning, and comparable literary merit, to the source poem; and this is not merely a matter of exploiting the resources of the target language as skilfully as the original poet did his with its necessarily different linguistic structures, but of creating a literary persona recognisable as that projected by the original text — or as near as possible given the disparity, which may be vast, in the cultural backgrounds of the poet and the translator. The challenge of reconstructing as powerful and as individual a poetic persona as that of Cecco Angiolieri is a very enticing one; all the more so for a translator working in as

potent a medium as Scots. But (I am now writing expressly of my personal experience) this eminently desirable situation offers its own pitfall. Precisely because the vigour of the original poetic voice is so splendidly matched by that of the translator's medium, the temptation is to exploit the lexical and phonaesthetic riches of Scots to the extent that Angiolieri's new voice out-shouts his old: a form of translator's infidelity artistically and ethically<sup>18</sup> less culpable, perhaps, than some; but infidelity nonetheless. Hay manages to avoid it; whether I have been equally successful, readers must judge. A possible defence against the charge, should it be brought, which occurred to me (still speaking personally) was that since Angiolieri, brilliant though he is, is scarcely the most profound of poets, the reverence with which Gavin Douglas approached Virgil is uncalled for: the licence to depart from his model which a translator may always claim is at least slightly greater than in such a case, provided that the result is good writing, internally consistent, and specifically justified in each case by some feature in the original text.<sup>19</sup> This argument, if acceptable at all, clearly may not be taken too far; and whether it will suffice in doubtful cases, again, readers must judge.

I examine here the five *battibecchi* sonnets:<sup>20</sup> imaginary dialogues between Angiolieri and his mistress Becchina. At the outset, a feature of my translation must be defended. I take it as given that poetic translation always entails an element of naturalisation: that a Scots translation of an Italian poem is a Scots poem, with its place, whatever place it may earn, in the Scots poetic corpus. Translation, that is, is not simply a matter of replacing words in one language with words in another: elements of the foreign culture may, or must, be represented by equivalents in that of the target language. I have therefore ventured to re-christen the *Becchina* and *Cecco* of the sonnets as "Bessie" and "Chairlie". This, I suggest, is less of a liberty than some readers may feel it to be. *Cecco* and (we have no reason to doubt) *Becchina* are the names of the histori-

<sup>18</sup> That there is an ethical dimension to poetic translation need not be argued: it is assumed, and comprehensively demonstrated on several grounds, by Steiner (1975 / 1992).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Bassnett (2004: 57): "It is well known in Translation Studies that norms governing translation vary according to the status of the original author". For a personal reflection on the difficulties and responsibilities of translating a much greater poet than Angiolieri, see McClure (1995).

<sup>20</sup> Numbers XXII, XXVII, XXXII, XLVII and LIV.

cal figures in the drama which the sonnets present in poetic form; but the hapless pursuit of a mocking, shrewish mistress by a besotted lover is a scenario which has been played by countless other protagonists in other times and places, and of which literary embodiments can and do appear just as appropriately in modern Scotland as in mediaeval Italy. The arguments, backchat, scorings-off and outright insults of the sonnets could appear in the mouths of a Bessie and a Chairlie as readily as in those of a Becchina and a Cecco, and often have in both literature and reality: the actual historical context of the events that inspired the poems is, in this respect, irrelevant, and can be altered with no disrespect to and no betrayal of the originals. In translating Angiolieri's sonnets to Dante (McClure 2004) I have *not* altered the name *Cecco*, since there the historical context is unique and unrepeatable, and the identity of Cecco Angiolieri is essential to the significance of the poems.

As already mentioned, one of the great assets of Scots as a literary language is its variety of dialects and sociolects, and its extensive development in many literary genres, styles and registers. It has long been accepted practice for a writer to choose *either* a consistent representation of one particular form of Scots *or* a literary register using words and idioms from a variety of dialects, sociolects and/or historical periods: provided that the grammar and phonology remain consistent (characteristically in this form of written Scots, they are based on the literary language as it emerged in the eighteenth century from the dialect of the Lothians), a literary text with a vocabulary which could never, in its entirety, have belonged to any single idiolect is in principle perfectly acceptable, though the writer's skill in handling the register will be assessed on its own merits. For these translations, this is the practice which I have followed: much of the vocabulary is drawn from the common core of spoken and written Scots; but some words, though well established in literature, are unlikely now to be heard in conversation; and conversely, some are drawn from contemporary urban argot and would never have appeared in poetry before the last few decades. This has already drawn criticism. Alexander Hutchison, previously cited as a distinguished poet and translator in the North-Eastern dialect of Scots, has suggested (in a personal letter) that even within a single sonnet, and much more throughout the set of five, there are not two voices but several, calling from different parts of Scotland and different periods in

Scottish history. In one or two cases, as will be shown, I have deliberately used a contrast in register for effect: a more general answer to this objection, however, is that in the originals there are not two voices but only one. There is no *stylistic* or other linguistic difference between Cecco's lines and Becchina's; and in reality the dialogue format is a fiction, both "Cecco" and "Becchina" being imaginative projections of Angiolieri's emotional conflict. By this reasoning, the function of the language is to demonstrate the conflict, by presenting the cut-and-thrust of the verbal duels as effectively as possible, rather than to suggest two well-defined and consistent personalities. Furthermore, since this particular manifestation of the eternal war between the sexes is as timeless as any other, notwithstanding its factual historicity, a language closely identified with a specific period might be considered less appropriate than one less bound in space and time. But as with all *post hoc* justifications, the strength of these arguments must be assessed by the poems' readers.

The first of the sonnets maintains, in intention at least,<sup>21</sup> the tone and register of a contemporary scolding match. *I dinna think it, the deil ye are, ye're jist no fair; I'm no thaim,*<sup>22</sup> *ye're daffin jist,*<sup>23</sup> *an whit wey no? I canna mak ye out,* are imitative of a strongly colloquial mode. The mild insult *ye geet* and the fanciful but well-established expression (of a kind very typical of Scots) *flee-luggit* are consonant with this tone; and if the latter would not spring readily to the lips of a Glesga dolly-burd in reality, poetic licence (as this is a poem and not a naturalistic drama) can surely accommodate that. A few other words: *screive*, *tairge*, *taiver*, *daff*, the euphemism *Hecklebrae* (reduced by assumed licence from the more usual *Hecklebirnie*): similarly represent the spoken language of a couple of generations ago rather than today. The ironic understatements of *I dinna think it* and *It winna gar me greet* are also characteristic of

<sup>21</sup> This proviso should be understood as applying throughout the discussion. Writing about my own translations, I can only state what I *intended* to do: any reader who wishes to retort "But you haven't managed!" is perfectly entitled (and indeed most welcome) to do so, if he explains his objection cogently.

<sup>22</sup> *Thaim* is "them", which is pronounced [ðem] rather than [ðem] in west-central and south-western forms of Scots. This is the writer's ancestral language area and the one to which his memories naturally direct him.

<sup>23</sup> *Jist* is "just", i.e. "only", and is pronounced with no intonational prominence. This syntactic position for it is typical.

this form of Scots (indeed, the device is notably common in all forms and registers): the latter, though milder on the surface than the original *Non vi dò un fico*, conveys much the same message though with slightly more subtlety. Other departures from the original have the same effect of retaining its venom but expressing it in a way appropriate to the new cultural context. *Fowk at taivers me* is milder than *nimico*, but it is hard to imagine a modern Scots girl describing an importunate lover as an ‘enemy’; *ruggit hair* is less drastic than *il capo fesso*, but certainly more realistic.

The second sonnet, in which the exchanges are in half-quatrain and tercets rather than half-lines, has for that reason a less frenetic quality; and I have therefore thought it appropriate to use a less colloquial register. The number of words now more familiar from literature than from conversational speech is decidedly greater: *lire*, *fleetch* (a word often used to refer specifically to the pleadings of a lover), *grein*, *skyre* as an intensifier,<sup>24</sup> *dowie*, *hecht*, *smuir*, *browden’t* (another word largely reserved for excessive or uncontrolled affection), *list*, *fain*; and are not drawn to the same extent from the semantic field of mockery. On the other hand, there is no suggestion of an elevated tone: *ye maun be donnert* is scarcely tactful or gracious, the euphemism *dance the Bogie Reel* is not much less plain than a direct statement would be; *ye’ll ne’er dae that wi me*, especially in reference to the preceding, is sufficiently blunt, the force of the strongly critical *gowk yoursel* is enhanced by the understated *I’m suir*,<sup>25</sup> and the final *I’m for aff*, drawn in overt contrast to the rest of the sonnet from a markedly demotic register, supplies a punchy conclusion. The ironic elegance of the original *che ’l buon dì m’ha’ dato* is deliberately replaced, in accordance with the new cultural context, with a much more brusque expression; and both the rhythm of the line, highlighting the opposition between “I mean” and “you mean”, and the rhyme with the mild and harmless word *daff*, serve to throw the expression into relief.

The third in this set (in which fortuitously I have found it possible to maintain the original ABAB ABAB rhyme scheme, slightly embroi-

<sup>24</sup> I have to admit that the colloquial and realistic *donnert* does not collocate at all naturally or convincingly with the very literary *skyre*.

<sup>25</sup> The pronunciation of this word in the writer’s dialect (and the most widespread of its various pronunciations) is [fer]: i.e. it rhymes with *fair*.

dered by the alternating *me – ye – me – ye* as the unstressed syllable in the feminine rhymes) opens with an exasperated exclamation in the Scots as in the original, *per cortesia* becoming the typical Ayrshire or Glasgow expression *for ony sake*. *Wheesht* is not only onomatopoeic but, from its traditional use by parents to fractious children, pointedly appropriate in the dramatic context. The alteration of Angiolieri's *gal-luccio* to a *bubbly-jock* is not only a cultural naturalisation: the word is the literal name for a turkey, but is also commonly used of a child (or anyone) prone to fits of tears or temper: Angiolieri's poetic persona in his Becchina sonnets not only *is* this on occasion but is ironically self-aware enough to appreciate the fact; and might fully recognise the import of using the word, even in a simile, of himself. In the next quatrain I have ventured to make more explicit the somewhat cryptic lines in the original, with the semantically forceful verbs *deave* and *taiver*, the overt reference to *a frichtsome enn*, and the expansion of *trarripare* to *lowpin aff a craig tae die*.<sup>26</sup> The exaggeration of *ch'assa' mi piaceria cotal novella* to *Sic news wad hae me birlin blye an cheerin* not only is in keeping (I hope) with the extravagant statements characteristic of the Scots flying tradition, but by evoking a ridiculous physical reaction instead of a mental state reduces the seriousness of the response — and after all, Angiolieri can hardly have expected his readers to believe that his Becchina would *really* have been delighted if he committed suicide by jumping off a cliff. The translation, that is, makes more explicit an overtone which is only suggested, if that, in the original; but one which (perhaps) clarifies the meaning for the target audience. The superb ending "*Tèlla!*" of the last line was one of the most difficult effects to translate with even a remote degree of adequacy: having struggled vainly to find a set of rhymes which would enable me to conclude with "*Tak it!*" I resorted in despair to "*I'm your ain!*" : far from ideal but, as any translator must say sometimes, simply the best I could manage.

Another sonnet follows in which each line is divided between the two speakers. Here again, the vocabulary, especially in the sestet, is predominantly from a basic and colloquial register, but more literary expressions appear for effect. *Fause-hertit sackit* is certainly not as naturalistic, considered as a possible spoken expression, as *falso tradito*:

<sup>26</sup> *Die* is pronounced [di:], of course.



*fause-hertit* suggests the atmosphere of the ballads and *sackit*, expressive though it is, is not a common word in speech. However, the powerful imprecatory force of the phrase gives (it is hoped) an arresting opening to the poem. The concentrated *Nae founjin or I'll flist!*, more forceful and more explicit than *Non calmar, ch'i' ne vegno*, is, undisguisedly, an indulgence in the expressive resources of the Scots vocabulary. These are cases which do not suggest a spoken register (though it is by no means *inconceivable* that the words could appear, even now, in speech): the effect of the phrase *Ye've got your fairin* is different. To many readers it will certainly recall a line from Burns's *Tam o' Shanter*,<sup>27</sup> suggesting a literary source; but in fact it is credible in itself as an expression, and until within living memory the popularity of Burns in Scotland was such that phrases from his poetry could weave themselves into the conversation of his compatriots as easily as phrases from the Bible. Specific exceptions apart, the idiom is conversational. Alterations to the grammar of the original have been chosen to convey the brusque, dismissive tone in a colloquial register: the use of a third instead of second person pronoun in *he's cuissen down*, the ironic question in *Wha'll lairn me? You?* (irony is of course present in *Tu m'inse- gnerai*, but the rhetorical form of the Scots version underlines it), the imperative replacing an interrogative in *Gang your gait eenou!* Such additions as the contemptuous *puir wee lad*, the blunt *Drap deid* and the ironically conciliatory *Aa richt* are consistent with the intended tone.

Finally, in a sonnet in which the dialogue exchanges in the octave are in larger sections than any of the others, a very obvious register change is deliberately brought into play. The first quatrain begins in a plain and neutral style, in which context the somewhat archaic word *teen*, and then much more strongly *the wecht o wae an grame* (an obviously poetic phrase with its alliteration, assonance and use of a lexical mediaevalism revived in mid-twentieth century poetry) sound suspiciously overstated. The implied self-dramatisation by the persona is then undercut by the undignified *warsle*. In the next quatrain, *the dule ye dree* is a phrase from a ballad, as if the second speaker were taking up the posing of the first with pointed irony; and then a total destruction

<sup>27</sup> Ah, *Tam!* Ah, *Tam!* Thou'll get thy fairin'! / In hell they'll roast thee like a herrin'! (Noble / Hogg 2001: 268).



of the quasi-poetic mood is portended by the blunt insult *brock* and shattered by the eighth line, with the vituperative (but perfectly credible) *the bauchly scunner* and the use of *banjo*, a recent coinage in the argot of Glasgow. Supposedly, the speaker is dropping all pretence at social or literary refinement and letting her feelings show in the most crudely realistic manner possible.<sup>28</sup> The interrogative *hou* for “why” (instead of *whit wey*, used in the third sonnet) is characteristic of less prestigious sociolects of this area, and the later *mollicate*<sup>29</sup> is from the same sociolect and register. Finally, a cultural naturalisation is adopted with the change from *Troia* to *Lunnon* (London): Troy is of course timeless but a reference to it would scarcely be expected in the mouth of the speaker of line 8; and the implied reference to its fabulous wealth made explicit by *wi 'ts gowd an siller*; the sense of *noia* is taken, once again, as a licence to indulge in some expressive Scots words; and *ye couardie breet, ye!* — an interpretation of the original though not an actual translation of anything in it — is brought in to bring the sonnet to a forceful conclusion.

Invariably and by the nature of the procedure, a poetic translation is a new creation, in which the translator has chosen his own individual methods, principled but ultimately pragmatic, of conveying something as near as possible to the original poet's message in a different language and for a different culture. The stratagems which I have used are now open to examination; and as in all such cases, readers may (and certainly will) form their own estimates of the extent to which they are justified, or successful. My last line of defence, as it could be that of any translator, is expressed in the words of the father of secular poetic translation in Europe, Gavin Douglas (1513 / 1957: 16, l. 478): *Quha can do bettir, sa furth in Goddis name!*

<sup>28</sup> *Banjo*, meaning “bash”, gives a line in which the literal sense of the original *perché non hai chi mi ti tolse spento?* is much reduced; but as in the third sonnet, the sentiment attributed to “Becchina” in the original cannot — one hopes — be interpreted realistically.

<sup>29</sup> Also spelt *maulicate* (the sound value of the two forms would be the same), suggesting a derivation from *maul*. Whether correct or not, this was assumed at the primary school which the writer attended in the 1950s, where the word was popular.

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## Appendix

### ***Becchina mia! — Cecco, nol ti confesso.***

Bessie, my ain! — *I dinna think it, Chairlie.*  
But I'm aa yours! — *The deil ye are, ye geet.*  
I'll finn anither! — *'T winna gar me greet.*  
Ye're jist no fair! — *Jist screive it tae me fairlie.*  
I'll tak a hure! — *She'll finn her hair gets ruggit.*  
An wha's tae rug her hair? — *Jist bide an see.*  
Ye're sic a tairge! — *Tae fowk at taivers me.*  
Weel, I'm no thaim! — *My fegs, ye're fair flee-luggit!*  
Ye're daffin jist! — *Awa tae Hecklebrae, lad.*  
Come on, ye dinna mean 't! — *An whit wey no?*  
Ye're loesome raelly — *No wi you the day, lad.*  
War I anither cheil — *Mair chance ye'd hae, lad.*  
I canna mak ye out! — *That's weel seen, tho.*  
Bessie, I maun — *Och, rin awa an play, lad!*

*Geet* – brat; *greet* – cry; *screive* – write; *rug* – pull, tear; *tairge* – shrew; *taiver* – annoy; *fegs* – [exclamation of surprise]; *flea-luggit* – scatterbrained; *daff* – play, tease; *Hecklebrae* – euphemism for "Hell"; *loesome* – charming; *cheil* – fellow; *mak out* – understand; *maun* – must.

***Oncia di carne, libra di malizia...***

Ye punn o ill for ilka unce o lire,  
Whit wey shaw furth whit ne'er wes in your hairt?  
*Ye're fleetchin still? Ye maun be donnert skyre*  
*Tae grein for whit wad cost a bonnie pairt.*  
My spreit's no dowie, lass, for aa your speil:  
The waur ye flyte, the brichter howp ye gie.  
*Ye aiblins think tae dance the Bogie Reel?*  
*I hecht ye, lad, ye'll ne'er dae that wi me.*  
Ye canna smuir 't: ye're browden't on me fair!  
I ken: sic tung nae lass hes ever gien  
That wesna fond, houbet she list tae daff.  
*Ye're unco fain tae gowk yoursel, I'm suir!*  
*Wha will tae Cupar... Fortune be your frein!*  
*Gin I mean that, whit you mean's "I'm for aff!"*

*Lire* – flesh; *fleetch* – plead, beg; *donnert* – crazy; *skyre* – completely; *grein* – yearn; *spreit* – spirit; *dowie* – melancholy; *speil* – exaggerated talk; *waur* – worse; *flyte* – scold, insult; *aiblins* – perhaps; *the Bogie Reel* – euphemism for sexual intercourse; *hecht* – promise; *smuir* – conceal; *browden't on* – infatuated with; *houbet* – although; *list* – choose; *fain* – keen; *gowk* – fool; *wha will tae Cupar* [*maun tae Cupar*] – i.e. a wilful man must have his way; *I'm for aff* – I'm leaving.

***Deh, bàstat' oggimai, per cortesia...***

*Hech man, for ony sake, speir nae mair at me!*  
*Ye've fleetch't anew — nou wheesht an lat me be!*  
Aye, certie, lass, richt blythelie wad I quat ye:  
As swippert as a bubbly-jock coud flee.  
*Ye deave me sae an taiver whan ye chat me,*  
*A frichtsomenae tae come or lang I see.*  
Lass, whit wey thraip ye sae: I canna lat ye!  
Ye'd hae me lowpin aff a craig tae die?  
*Sic news wad hae me birlin blye an cheerin,*  
*Gin Guid tae pit it in your myn war fain,*  
*Sen naeweys can I gar ye stap your steirin!*  
Sae braw's your face, lass, gin your hert coud mane,  
Onless my thochts begeck me past aa beirin,  
Ye'd say, insteid o flytin, "I'm your ain!"

*Speir* – ask; *enew* – enough; *wheesht* – hush; *blythelie* – cheerfully; *quat* – leave; *swippert* – nimble, agile; *bubbly-jock* – turkey; *deave* – exhaust; *or* – before; *thraip* – argue; *lowp* – jump; *craig* – rock, cliff; *birl* – dance; *blye* – joyful; *steir* – pester; *braw* – beautiful; *mane* – feel pity; *begeck* – deceive.

***Becchin' amor! —Che vuo', falso tradito?***

Bessie, my dou! — *Whit is't, fause-hertit sackit?*  
Forgie me, lass! — *Ye've got your fairin, loun.*  
For guidsakes! — *Puir wee lad, he's cuissen down.*  
For aye, I sweir! — *Ye'd gie your hecht an brak it.*  
My word o honour! — *Honour? Ye hae nane o't.*  
A fouth, for you! — *Nae foungein or I'll flist!*  
But whit's my wyte? — *I've hard — ye ken whit is't.*  
Jist tell me, lass! — *Drap deid, an I'll be fain o't.*  
Ye'd hae me deid? — *There nocht ava I'd raither!*  
I wush ye'd be mair kyn! — *Wha'll lairn me? You?*  
Aa richt, I'll die! — *I dinna trou that aither.*  
May Guid forgie ye! — *Gang your gait eenou!*  
Aye, gin I coud! — *I'm haudin nane your tether.*  
My hert ye're haudin! — *Aye, tae gar ye rue!*

*Dou* – dove [a term of endearment]; *sackit* – rascal; *fairin* – reward; *cuissen* – cast; *fouth* – abundance; *founge* – beg; *flist* – fly into a rage; *wyte* – fault; *trou* – believe; *gang* – go; *gait* – way; *eenou* – at once.

***Becchina, poi che tu mi fosti tolta...***

Bessie, sen ye war stown awa frae me  
Jist twa year syne (it feels mair lik a hunner),  
My hert's bou'd doun wi teen — jist luik an see  
The wecht o wae an grame it's warslin unner.  
*Chairlie, I ken ower weel the dule ye dree:*  
*An gin I wush 't war mair ye needna wunner:*  
*The brock at hes me — hark an think a wee —*  
*Hou dae ye no banjo the bauchly scunner?*  
Bessie, my conscience widna lat me dae't.  
He loes ye, efter aa: 't wad be a peety —  
A frein o yours I coudna mollicate!  
*Chairlie, gin ye wad gie me Lunnon ceety*  
*Wi 'ts gowd an siller, nou I widna hae't,*  
*Tae gar ye peenge an pewl — ye couardie breet, ye!*

*Stown* – stolen; *syne* – ago; *teen* – sorrow; *grame* – grief, anger; *warsle* – struggle; *dule* – sorrow; *dree* – endure; *brock* – badger [term of contempt]; *banjo* – bash; *bauchly* – puny; *scunner* – object of disgust; *mollicate* – beat up; *peenge* – whine; *pewl* – wail.

