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Donne's *Lamentations of Jeremy* Reconsidered

Graham Roebuck

Donne's *Lamentations of Jeremy* has attracted very little critical attention in modern times, although it has routinely appeared as a legitimate part of the oeuvre since the 1633 *Poems*. It is not clear that there was great interest among his contemporaries in Donne's exercise, although, as Biblical translation and paraphrase was of immensely greater significance then than now, it is no unreasonable conjecture that the many practitioners of the genre would have scrutinized his contribution and incorporated their responses to it in their works, rather than in critical commentaries, or their contemporary equivalents.[1] Donne's own work is itself essentially of this kind, constituting his response to a foregoing translator: the subtitle informs us that he translates "*for the most part according to* Tremelius." What he does with that "most part" constitutes both a critical and theological study, in the context of a vehement debate about the proprieties of biblical paraphrase. Donne may be using the occasion also to exercise and demonstrate his Latinity. What the lesser part derives from, and the contingent question of just what constitutes the "most part," are matters which have attracted the small quantity of recent, desultory scholarship.

It is not difficult to find reasons why, in comparison with the power of his profane and divine poetry, his *Lamentations* has lit few flames. Verse paraphrase and translation of Scripture ranks as something less-than-poetry in modern perception—a startling reversal of the judgment of earlier times—and nuances of theology appeal to few other than specialized scholarly interests. Sacred verse of the period continues to be held in high regard, at least when it displays ingenuity, but paraphrase has been denied such status by the great majority of scholars, because of its perceived deficiency of originality.[2] Gardner's comment that "Donne's motives [for *Lamentations*] may not have been primarily artistic"[3] hints at that reservation, even as her following remarks on Donne's lines on the Sidneian Psalms, on Church worship, on musical settings and on the supposed superiority of his meter to that of Drayton's 1591 *Lamentations* point to a rich context for Donne's endeavors, vitiating the claim for the primacy of artistic criteria.

Examination of that context reveals a great deal of verse paraphrase and verse translation, especially in the final two decades of the sixteenth century, and the first

half of the seventeenth, among poets who self-consciously fashioned poetic careers, setting their sights on patronage and the well-springs of political power.[4] The number of verse paraphrases alone argues the widespread interest, as the names and the reputations of the practitioners from King James (as VI of Scotland an avid practitioner and patron, and as I of England routinely celebrated as the David and the Solomon of his age) down, argue the significance of sacred verse. Donne's unequivocal description of the poetical parts of Scripture as "The highest matter in the noblest forme"(l. 11) in his poem praising the Sidney translation of the Psalms,[5] is no empty phrase. On the contrary, it makes one wonder why he completed only one such exercise, or whether it was his sole attempt.

This raises the question of the place of *Lamentations* in Donne's career. Recent editors are inclined to date it after his ordination in 1615, and more likely to 1617 after the death of his wife, 15 August. Shawcross is tentative, remarking that the position of this work relative to other poems in MSS might suggest a date about 1618, but that it is weak evidence.[6] Gardner thinks it "safe to put it after Donne's ordination," and connects it with the 1621 poem on the Sidneys. She then seeks for events of that time commensurate with the gloomy despair of the poem, lighting on "the years 1621-2 when the distress of the German Protestants turned men's minds to the captivity of Zion." She notes that Donne comments on *Lamentations* in a November, 1622 sermon.[7] Grierson chose the death of Ann More as the sufficient cause of Donne's turning to that biblical book. Bald, however, is very cautious, and rightly observes that in the absence of any other indication of date, Grierson's argument carries no "immediate conviction, and the question is better left an open one."[8]

The principal reason for seeking a biographical occasion for *Lamentations* in these later years of the poet's life is an assumption that Donne's work depends on the 1611 "Authorized" version (**AV**). Shawcross notes, "The present free translation shows the influence of the Vulgate and the Authorized Version."[9] Likewise Gardner assumes this relationship, though in her revised edition she alters a view she once held in common with Grierson that Donne consulted the Vulgate. This change responds to John J. Pollock's "Donne's 'Lamentations of Jeremy' and the Geneva Bible"[10] which argues, from "a careful collation of Donne's poem with its possible Biblical sources" (513), that it is more likely that he used the Geneva Bible. Pollock's conclusion can be readily sustained. To this, however, he adds that Donne "probably used the Authorized Version (the frequency of words and phrases identical to that translation suggests the poem was written after 1611)." In this conclusion Pollock is mistaken, as are other editors who have continued to assume the **AV** influence. On close consideration, supposed echoes of **AV** all turn out either to originate in the Geneva (**G**) version (1560), or in Tremellius's (**T**) translation (1579). The elaborate, learned annotations of Tremellius are also influential on Donne. That *Lamentations* was necessarily composed after 1611 is, therefore, open to doubt. In what follows I shall attempt

firstly to demonstrate that the several strongest claims to the existence of **AV** echoes are illusory; secondly to describe the kind of paraphrase or translation Donne is attempting, and thirdly to suggest its relationship to his life.

Pollock's general argument about the **G** and Vulgate (**V**) versions is well taken, but when it comes to his notations, or rather his augmentations of the "fine editions of Grierson and Gardner," for which he awards himself "the privilege of correcting such inimitable scholars,"[11] the demonstration is somewhat disordered. In the event, he produces two instances in which **AV** "explains" Donne. The first is in the 14th verse of chapter 1, which reads:

> His hand hath of my sinnes framed a yoake
> Which wreath'd, and cast upon my neck, hath broke
> My strength. The Lord unto those enemies
> Hath given mee, from whom I cannot rise.[12]

In the final line "from whom" occurs in **AV** ("the Lord hath deliuered me into their hands, from whom I am not able to rise vp"),[13] whereas **G** reads "y^e^ Lord hathe deliuered me into *their* hãds, nether am I able to rise vp." But **T** renders it "tradit me dominus in manus *eorũ a quibus* non possum exurgere."[14] Donne's translation (**D**) "from whom" (or possibly "whence," which is a 1633 *Poems* variant) is perfectly natural. **D**'s "I cannot" renders literally "non possum," though "posse" can also mean "to be able." There is no need to invoke **AV** here.

Pollock's second instance is the second line of verse 20, chapter 1:

> Because I am in streights, *Jehova* see
> My heart o'rturn'd, my bowells muddy bee,
> Because I have rebell'd so much, as fast
> The sword without, as death within, doth wast.

Pollock comments: "mine heart is turned within me **AV** (**AV** explains Donne's passive verb as well as **V** does)."[15] This, again, seems to have no point, for **T** reads "versat se cor meum in medio mei." A primary sense of "verso" is to turn about, to roll or to twist, which **D**'s "o'rturn'd" renders. Moreover, if **D** were really reliant on **AV** here, he would have given force, as **AV** does to "within mee." This is also **T**'s sense: "in medio mei." Even were Pollock's claim about **D**'s passive verb to be credited, he need not go to **AV**, but rather follow his own professed method, namely to go to **G**, which, not surprisingly, reads exactly as does **AV**: "mine heart is turned within me." In short, far from demonstrating **D**'s reliance on **AV**, Pollock has reinforced the view that the English Bible consulted by Donne is certainly Geneva. Intent on showing how little **D** uses **V**, Pollock has not questioned his mentors' unsubstantiated assumptions about **AV**.

There are, nevertheless, places, unnoticed by Pollock, and uncited in modern editions, where Donne adopts a sequence of words which could raise expectations of **AV** influence. One of these is at 1:8:

> Jerusalem hath sinn'd, therefore is shee
> Remov'd, as women in uncleannesse bee:
> Who honor'd, scorne her, for her foulnesse they
> Have seene, her selfe doth groane, and turne away.

In "therefore is she \ Remov'd," **D** is closest to **AV**'s "therefore she is remoued," and **G** cannot be invoked, for it reads "therefore she is in derision"; **V** reads "propterea instabilis facta est," and **T** "propterea tanquam ex immunditia [uncleanness] separata est." (A marginal gloss explains the Hebrew literally as "est in separatam propter immunditiam.") Nowhere else in the stanza is **D** coincident with **AV**. Had he relied on it he might have chosen its "nakednesse" (and **T** reads "nuditatem") where he chooses "foulnesse," which is closer to **V**'s "ignominiam." But the reason is less likely to be that he chose **AV**'s "removed"—the rhyme is already established with "shee"—than that he has **T**'s verb "migro," to remove, ("*Quomodo* migrat Jehuda . . .") from verse 3, which he has not yet used, and which is a somewhat more expressive word in the context of "uncleannesse" (**T**: "immunditia") than is "separate."

There is no other instance in the whole of *Lamentations* in which a sequence as long as this—four unremarkable words, two reversed in position—is similar in **D** and **AV** exclusively. But there are some individual words. In 2:2,

> The Lord unsparingly hath swallowed
> All Jacobs dwellings, and demolished
> To ground the strengths of *Juda*, and prophan'd
> The Princes of the Kingdome, and the land.

D's "swallowed" is the same as **AV**, but different from **V**'s "destruxit" and **G**'s "destroyed." But **T** asks "*Quomodo* absorbet Dominus . . ." where "absorbere" is to be literally rendered as "to swallow up (or down)." It is also of note that in his stanza **D** uses a word only **T** employs: "prophanum," where **G** and **AV** use "polluted."

At 4:2 **D**'s stanza reads:

> The pretious sonnes of Sion, which should bee
> Valued at purest gold, how do wee see
> Low rated now, as earthen Pitchers, stand,
> Which are the worke of a poore Potters hand.

His "pretious" is as in **AV** ("precious"), where **G** has "noble men," but we need look no further than **T**'s "pretiosissimi," and, although **D** does not here give **T**'s superlative, in the next line the meter allows him "purest" for **T**'s "purgatissimo," where **AV** gives "fine." This verse occurs in a sequence of verses all very close to **T**, leading **D** to some striking differences from the other versions. In 4:3 **D** gives "Sea-calfes" (**T**: "phocæ," and taking account of **T**'s long annotation[16]), where **G** gives "dragons" and **AV** "sea-monsters."[17] At the end of his stanza Donne has "Owles in the vast Wildernesse" (**T**: "ululis in deserto"), where **G** and **AV** have "ostriches," as does **V**. Modern scholarship supports "ostriches."

A final instance to cite here of false **AV** echoes is to be found in 4:5 where **D** reads "dunghills" like **AV**'s "doung-hilles," in distinction from **G** "dongue" and **T** and **V** "stercora":

> They which before were delicately fed,
> Now in the streets forlorne have perished,
> And they which ever were in scarlet cloath'd,
> Sit and embrace the dunghills which they loath'd.

The unremarkable similarity here is a direct consequence of Donne's metrical need: "-hills" completes the iambic foot, and makes more sense of the verbs "sit" and "embrace." It need hardly be added that the word is common. "Embrace," also in **AV** (and **G**: "embrase"), follows from **T**'s "amplexantur stercora" which Tremellius annotates as meaning to seek eagerly, out of poverty, as if it were food.[18] "To embrace" is, in any event, a primary meaning of "amplector."

The case, then, for Donne's following **AV** is unreal, and arises from unexamined presupposition, aided by the frequency (not only in *Lamentations*, of course,) with which the **AV** translators accepted Geneva readings. It is also possible that they sometimes deferred to readings from Tremellius's translation, which rapidly attained the status of the Calvinist Latin Bible.

There are some instances when one wishes that **AV** had followed Donne, for example, his rendering of 5:9: "For in the wildernesse, the sword did wait" which is elegantly compressed compared with "because of the sword of the wildernesse" (**AV** and **G**). **G**'s marginal gloss gives "Because of y^{e} enemie that came from the wildernes [etc.]." Tremellius's annotation explains the synecdoche "gladium deserti" in similar vein.

This brings us to a brief consideration of the qualities of Donne's work. It has been called a "free translation,"[19] which description has been derided as missing the point[20] by Pollock, who describes it as a "verse paraphrase . . . remarkably close to the original text of his sources." The truth is, where it translates Tremellius, it is a translation; where it paraphrases the Geneva Bible, it is a paraphrase, and in both cases there are passages in which Donne expands somewhat his sources with

a modicum of poetic license, appropriate to his conception of the highest matter and noblest form. There are other places where he is quite remarkably compressed, omitting the doublets typical of the Hebrew poetical scriptures. The fact that he stays throughout with four-line stanzas of rhymed couplets, in predominantly iambic feet, may obscure this characteristic. Each verse in chapter 1 is given the expanse of four lines. Some are from **T**; some from **G**. Likewise chapter 2. But chapter 3 is an experiment in radical compression, in which **D** frequently allots one line only to a full biblical verse. One example must stand for many. 3:33 in **G** reads: "For he doeth not punish willingly, nor afflict the children of men," and in **T**, "non enim affligit ex animo suo moestitiaque [i.e. moestitiaque—"sadness"] afficit filios viri." In **D** this is merely, "Nor is it with his heart, that he does smite," rendering "ex animo"—"from the bottom of the heart" is a common equivalent—as "with his heart." This latter phrase is given as a marginal gloss on "willingly" in **G**. In **AV** the gloss on "willingly" is "from his heart." Chapter 4 is mixed, mostly returning to amplification, but the final one, Chapter 5—overwhelmingly out of **T**—is apt to give two lines to a verse, except to verses 14 and 15, which have one each.

Donne's *Lamentations* may be the result of experiments of several kinds, and written much earlier than has been supposed. Indeed, it would make sense to assign it to the earlier 1590s when Donne was debating the claims of Calvin and Rome—and his choice of sources is strikingly Calvinist—rather than post 1619. His attitude to Calvinism is too complex a matter to discuss in this space. Enough to say that the 1590s saw a flurry of works on the Lamentations, following the several editions of Tremellius from 1579 onward, and following Thomas Stocker's enormous version of Toussaine's French *Lamentations*, together with paraphrases, exhortations, prayers, notes, etc.[21] Another of these works is John Udall's *Commentary* (1593), "a literall interpretation of the text out of the Hebrew, with a Paraphrasticall exposition of the sense thereof" as its title page declares.[22] His epistle to the reader examines at length the abuses of religion, including the licence of many in their handling of Scripture, showing off their learning in tongues, human arts and heathen writers. All these he says, "are growne to such ulcers, as may not without danger be touched."

There is in general an apocalyptic tone to them. Stocker's title page urges the application of Lamentations "for the awaking of all those that haue no feeling of their miseries: Not-with-standing the great calamities which haue fallen and still are like to fall vpon these our dayes." No specific occasion is needed for the young, ambitious poet, eager to be noticed, to attempt such a work in those days. If an atmosphere of gloom were required by Donne, however, the two terrible years of plague which virtually closed down London after he had entered Lincoln's Inn (6 May 1592) would serve. Added to that is his penury—which word startlingly occurs at 4:9 where there is no warrant in his sources, each of which gives the sense of lack of food (**G**: "frutes of the field"; **T** "proventibus agri"):

> Better by sword then famine 'tis to dye;
> And better through pierc'd, then through penury.

T's verbs "confodere," "transfigere," with their sense of stabbing and running through, give the cue for D's graphic "through pierc'd," which AV and G render as "stricken through." We may think here of his forthcoming exploits as a soldier of fortune in 1596. And again, this was, as Bald affirms, a period in which Donne was brought "close to complete cynicism in matters of religion" (p. 63).

However his *Lamentations* may be an exercise drawing on Calvinist sources, one striking instance of Donne interpreting beyond them could support Bald's judgment:

> Both good and evill from his mouth proceeds;
> Why then grieves any man for his misdeeds? (3:38)

His sources all have a quite different sense of asking why one should complain about being punished. In eliding the connection between deed and punishment (G: "Wherefore *then* is the liuing man sorowful? man *suffreth* for his sinne"), Donne seems skeptically to ask, as Pharoah might have done, what is to do when God hardens men's hearts to any deed.[23] This, perhaps, is the stony desolation which would lead him naturally to ask "Quomodo desidet solitaria civitas amplissima populo"?—"How sits this citie, late most populous \ Thus solitary"?

McMaster University

Notes

[1] An example of direct commentary on another poet's paraphrasing is Sidney Godolphin's verses on Sandys's *Paraphrase Upon the Divine Poems (1638)*, where he expresses primarily his approbation of Sandys's work, but, more interestingly, comments on the suppression by ecclesiastical authority of Sandys's paraphrase of the Song of Songs.

[2] Recent exceptions to this pattern include Emrys Jones, *New Oxford Book of Sixteenth-Century Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), arguing for verse translation as imaginative exertion equal to original composition, and Donald Davie's observation that for "the Renaissance centuries" the distinction between the two kinds of verse is "razor thin." ("From Drayton to Dryden," rev. of *The New Oxford Book of Seventeenth-Century Verse*, ed. Alastair Fowler, and *The Enemy's Country* by Geoffrey Hill, *Times Literary Supplement*, Dec. 27, 1991: 6-7).

Jones remarks on the "prejudice from the nineteenth century" that translation is inferior, whereas in the sixteenth century much of what we regard as "original" is a form of translation. "Many translations are also original poems. And this is the justification for including so many translations in the present volume" (Introduction, xxxvi). Despite this manifesto, Jones supplies very few translations or paraphrases of Scripture.

[3] *John Donne: The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) 102.

[4] Recent interest in this question is signalled not only by a number of studies in the Sidney siblings, but also by Rivkah Zim, *English Metrical Psalms: Poetry as Praise and Prayer, 1535 - 1601* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). James Doelman, "Biblical Verse Paraphrase in the English Renaissance: A Study in Literary and Social Contexts", diss., McMaster University, 1990, greatly extends knowledge of published and MSS sources. I am indebted to him for raising the question which this essay addresses.

[5] "*Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir* Philip Sydney, *and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister*", *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967) 388-90.

[6] Shawcross, 415.

[7] Gardner, 103-04.

[8] R. C. Bald, *John Donne, A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) 327 n.

[9] Shawcross, 371.

[10] *English Studies* 55: 513-15.

[11] Pollock, 515.

[12] Shawcross, 373. Hereafter this edition of Donne is cited.

[13] *THE HOLY BIBLE, Conteyning the Old Testament, AND THE NEW* [etc.] (London: Robert Barker, 1611), i.e. the "Royal version." **AV** quotations are from this edition.

[14] "Lamentationes Iirmejæ, *Bibliorvm Pars Qvarta* (Londini: Henrici Middletoni, 1579), 186. Further quotations of Tremellius are from this edition.

[15] Pollock, 515.

[16] The sense is quite different from that of **AV**, **G** and **V**, for Tremellius explains in detail the maternal instincts of sea calfs, distinguishing them from monsters and serpents. He cites Pliny.

[17] **AV** has a marginal gloss: "Or, sea calues."

[18] id est, in simetis [sic] victum quæritant præ inopia. "Simetis" may be a misprint or rare variant of "semitis" (alleys) from "semita." Thus the sense would be that "they look for food in alleys because of dearth." I am indebted to Professor Paul Murgatroyd for this explication.

[19] Shawcross, 371.

[20] Pollock, 514.

[21] THE LAMENTATIONS *and holy mourninges of the Pro-* phet Ieremiah, With a Lamentable Paraphrase and exhortation, meete euery *way to be applyed unto these our dayes* [etc.] (London, ?1587), STC 2779.

[22] *A COMMENTARIE VPON THE LAMENTATIONS OF IEREMY* [etc.] (LONDON, 1593), STC 24494.

[23] Rom. 9.17-18.