

James Boswell

BEN JONSON ON TRANSLATION

I HAVE DISCOVERED a poem by this great poet which has even escaped the researches of his last unrivalled editor, Mr. Gifford. Prefixed to a translation, translation is the theme; with us an unvalued art, because our translators have usually been the jobbers of booksellers: but no inglorious one among our French and Italian rivals. In this poem, if the reader's ear be guided by the compressed sense of the massive lines, he may feel a rhythm which, should they be read like our modern metre, he will find wanting; here the fullness of the thoughts form their own cadences. The mind is musical as well as the ear. One verse running into another, and the sense often closing in the middle of a line, is the Club of Hercules; Dryden sometimes succeeded in it, Churchill abused it, and Cowper attempted to revive it. Great force of thought only can wield this verse.

On the AUTHOR, WORKE, and TRANSLATOR, prefixed to the translation of Mateo Aleman's Spanish Rogue, 1623.

Who tracks this author's or translator's pen
Shall finde, that either, hath read bookes, and men:
To say but one, were single. Then it chimes,
When the old words doe strike on the new times,
As in this Spanish Proteus; who, though writ
But in one tongue, was form'd with the world's wit:
And hath the noblest marke of a good booke,
That an ill man dares not securely looke
Upon it, but will loath, or let it passe,
As a deformed face doth a true glasse.
Such bookes, deserve translators of like coate
As was the genius wherewith they were wrote;
And this hath met that one, that may be stil'd
More than the foster-father of this child;
For though Spaine gave him his first ayre and vogue.
He would be call'd, henceforth, *the English rogue*,
But that hee's too well suted, in a cloth,
Finer than was his Spanish, if my oath
Will be receiv'd in court; if not, would I
Had cloath'd him so! Here's all I can supply
To your desert who have done it, friend! And this

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Faire aemulation, and no envy is;
When you behold me wish my selfe, the man
That would have done, that, which you only can!

BEN JONSON

Reference: James Boswell (1971), *Boswell's Life of Johnson* [c1791], edited by George Birbeck Hill, D.C.L., Oxford, Clarendon Press, vol. 2, p. 362-363.