

Angelo Poliziano
(Politian) (1454-1494)

FROM THE LETTER TO POPE SIXTUS IV,
ON HERMOLAUS BARBARUS, TRANSLATION OF THEMISTIUS
[1480]

[...] in translating these books, not only did we avoid translating word for word, which is, as Cicero reminds us, the custom of the unskilled, but, while keeping the sense, we freely had recourse to turns of phrase, figures of speech and sentence shapes peculiar to Roman usage. We took full discretion, but brought over the author's meaning in its entirety. So far were we from leaving something out or concealing it, that we incurred the danger of letting our scholarship run away with us, and giving grounds for the unfriendly to claim that we had added something rather than leaving it out. I wished not so much to translate Themistius fully into Latin, as to struggle with him. For, as the great Latin critics say, it is the glory of the Latin language to equal, or even surpass in one's translation, the peculiar qualities of the Greek and its grace. I do not claim to have achieved this; but I freely confess my shortcomings, but I have worked towards this goal. But whether I have done what I set out to do, let others judge. Certainly, I do not boast of my performance, nor am I completely satisfied. But, most learned of masters, why keep you with a long exposition. I shall end by saying something of Themistius. He lived at the time of Libanius the Sophist and Julius Caesar. Certain writers believe him to have been an epitomiser of Alexander who came from Caria in Asia Minor. But this is not correct. For he differs from him boldly, and, when he wishes to, varies both his order and method of treatment. Besides, he became a commentator on Aristotle. Commentary by paraphrase is a type of rhetorical exercise. Among the Greeks it was intended that the final text have a close kinship with its original. Now it is with this end in view that we translate the writings of others, and not to produce something that is more or less striking, which makes it different from our Metaphrase. But we aim at equal texts, with the sense intact, as Fabius explains in two passages : "At one time we can translate into different words, at another use bold paraphrases which may shorten our original or embellish it with the sense intact. This is indeed a task difficult for the most expert of specialists; those who do it well are amply repaid by the profit they draw from it."

And in another place he says, “But although one can add oratorical force and supply what is missing, and trim useless burbling, I do not want translation to be a mere paraphrase, but struggle and rivalry.” Some people call this *ecphrastes*, *Ecphrasis* is sober, pure speech. As I said at the beginning, most learned Pope, do not abandon your patronage of letters, now you have begun. “Letters” to me is philosophy joined with eloquence. In you, there is the height of learning, the height of prosperity. We can confidently expect that in your time, with your encouragement (for you, and no other can assure this), learning will once more return to its former dignity.
