Virgil's Aeneid

Virgil Virgil
VIRGIL'S ÆNEID,

TRANSLATED LITERALLY, LINE BY LINE, INTO

ENGLISH DACTYLYC HEXAMETER,

BY

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"Per Ardentem sine fraude Trojam
  Castus Æneas patris superstes
  Librum munivit iter, datus
  Plura reliquit."

Horace, Carmen Seculare, 41-44.

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PREFACE.

It is a singular fact in the history of English Literature, that the first book printed in the English language was a "History of Troy," drawn mainly from the Æneid of Virgil, written first in French by Raoul le Feure, the Chaplain of Philip, Duke of Burgundy, and, at the command of the Duke, translated from the French, and printed as his first book, by William Caxton, the introducer of printing into England. Respecting this somewhat celebrated "first book," Caxton, in its title, says: "Whiche sayd translacion and werke was begonne in Brugis in the contree of Flaundres, the fyrst day of Marche, the yeare of the Incarnacion of our said Lord, a thousand four hondred sixty and eight, and ended and fynyshed in the holy cyte of Colen the xix day of Septembre, the yeare of our sayd Lord God, a thousand four hondred and enleven" (1471). The reason for such command to print it, is stated in the Biographia Britannica to be, "possibly to gratify the disposition there was at the time, in the English or British nation, to derive their original from Brutus and his Trojans." Subsequently Caxton issued "The Boke of Enydos; compiled by Vyrgyle; which hath be translated oute of Latine into Frenche, and oute of Frenche, reduced into Englyeshe, by me, William Caxton, the 22d day of Juyn, the yere of our Lord 1490." This, though of inferior literary merit, was, however, well received, as being the first recognized translation into English of any part of the Æneid. "The Hystory, Siege, and Dystrucccyon of Troye," written by the monk, John Lydgate, about the year 1430, but not printed until 1513, hardly
deserves mention in this connection, for it was in no sense a translation of the Aeneid; although its fine descriptions of rural scenery, and vivid portrayals of combats, as well as noble sentiments, made it popular at the time, though variously estimated by critics.

But the honor of the first poetical version, in English, of the Aeneid at all worthy the name must be accorded to Gawin Douglas, bishop of Dunkeld, Scotland, issued in 1553. This was, as it professed to be, a fairly close, and certainly spirited, rendering of the original, of the entire Aeneid not only, but of the so-called 13th Book, added by Maphæus Vegius; but, while regarded as English, it is in the broad Scotch dialect, scarcely intelligible now to those familiar only with modern English. Its literary excellence was evinced by its winning its way to popularity at once, and retaining it during that and the succeeding century, notwithstanding its dialectic peculiarities, and the appearance of other and vernacular versions.

The second noteworthy attempt at a metrical version in English of any part of the Aeneid was in 1557, by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who translated the 2d and 4th Books into blank verse, a meter invented by himself, but which has since taken such high rank in English versification. This was a work of much literary ability; but unfortunately his public duties prevented him from carrying it to completion. It is still by many highly prized for its closeness to the original, being a line by line translation, and for its vigorous and pure English diction.

The next poetic version in English was that by Thomas Phaer, of the first seven Books, issued the following year, 1558, in an entirely different, though analogous, meter, which speedily became popular, and was adopted by George Chapman in his celebrated translation of Homer's Iliad issued in 1596. Encouraged by the favorable reception of his work, Phaer applied himself to its completion; but he was able to carry it only as far as to "the first third of the 10th Book," when death interrupted his labors. It was, however, subsequently taken up and completed, in the same style and meter, by Thomas Twyne, M. D., including the Vegian addition, now no longer admitted as worthy a place by the side of
Virgil's inimitable epic. Numerous editions of Phaer's translation were issued, and its fidelity and smooth versification give it still a high standing in the estimate of scholars.

But that was a transitional period, as well in its poetry as in the English language itself; and poets seem, both in originals and in translations, to have invented, or adapted, forms of verse to suit their own tastes; but, following in the wake of Chaucer, all hitherto appear to have adopted the iambic verse, as was the case in each of the above-mentioned versions of the Æneid, each being different from the others, but all iambic in structure. But now came of a sudden a signal innovation, not indeed in classic, but in traditional usage. Scarcely a decade had passed, since the issue of Phaer's and Twyne's completed version, when there appeared a work which was destined to a notoriety far beyond the innovator's anticipations; and which at once became the target, rightly or wrongly, on which critics, with remarkable persistency, seemed to regard themselves at liberty to practice their keenest archery. It was on the 20th of June, 1582, as stated by himself, that Richard Stanyhurst published "The first four Bookes of Virgil's Æneis, translated into English historickall verse," a singular combination of pentameter and hexameter, usually, however, classed with the latter. This was a venture in disregard of already established meters, which, while it proved a puzzle to the critics, leaving them in doubt, from its peculiarities, as to whether it was intended as a burlesque, or an honest effort at a literal rendering of the classic poet's verse in its original measure, evoked a general onslaught of unsparing, almost savage, criticism, which, for persistency, and evident intent at annihilating its object, has rarely been paralleled in literature. Ten years after its publication, Thomas Nash—no slight critic in his day—thus opens the assault: "Mr. Stanyhurst, though otherwise learned, trod a foul, lumbering, boisterous, wallowing measure in his translation of Virgil." One hundred years later, Thomas Warton, in his History of English Poetry, echoing the same note, writes: "In his choice of measure, he (Stanyhurst) is more unfortunate than his predecessors, and in other respects succeeded worse." A hundred years or more still later,
Robert Southey, the poet—wedded, as were all the poets and critics of his day, to iambics, as if intent on squelching him as a pest—asserts: "As Chaucer has been called the well of English undefiled, so might Stanyhurst be denominated the common sewer of the language." Poor Stanyhurst! How little he realized the odium which the seemingly unwarranted temerity of his innovation would, for fully two hundred years, evoke. Nor is the ban, imposed so long ago upon the effort to revive a classic meter, even yet wholly lifted. Its practicability, and advisability, have been again and again discussed, and that by some of the ablest scholars, but with usually an adverse verdict. The poet-artist C. P. Cranch, in the Preface to his admirable blank-verse version of the Æneid, issued 1872, covers almost two pages in canvassing this much-debated question of translating the classic epics of Greece and Rome in what he styles "these quaint and trailing six-footers;" and closes with the remark: "The difficulty of sustaining to the end, in hexameter, a poem so varied in thought and action as the Æneid, is a consideration which might well make the most gifted rhythmical artist shrink from the task; a task tenfold greater, if it be a main object with him to keep close to the literal phrasing of the text." This is simply a reiteration of an older decision, many times repeated with honest intentions by the masters of criticism in the past. With such reiterated intimidations, ancient and modern, warning against it, it hardly need occasion wonder that not a single hexametrical version of the Æneid (as far as the writer is aware) exists in the English language; and, if the Virgilian Catalogue of the British Museum may be relied upon as a true exponent of facts in the case, only one has ever been even attempted; but that one grappling with precisely what the poet C. P. Cranch has signaled as so formidable, if not impossible, a "task." In 1865 there was published in London, in small, pamphlet-like form, an edition of "The Æneid in English Hexameters, by W. Grist, Head-master of Central Hill Collegiate School, Upper Norwood." The author, however, as if to forestall what seemed an impending storm of adverse criticism, states distinctly in his Preface, that the task was undertaken solely "to assist his own pupils in the work of translating
Virgil, and in the composition of Latin hexameters.” Only one Book of the Æneid in this form was issued.

But why, it may reasonably be asked, such persistent disparagement of a legitimate meter, from the days of Thomas Nash down to the present time; especially when the meter interdicted as inadmissible is certainly within the reach of the availabilities of the English as well as other languages, and success in it, in other lines of poetry, is already marking the poetical achievements of the present age. It is becoming more than ever open to grave doubt whether the disparagement of hexameter, which has been so long sanctioned by the dictum of the older critics, is not after all an aspersion on the English tongue itself, than which no modern language is more pliable; none more capable of adaptation to all conceivable metrical forms. The late poet-scholar, Dr. James G. Percival, successfully reproduced in English nearly every meter found in classic lyric poetry; and our much-lamented and universally honored national poet, the late Professor Henry W. Longfellow, has certainly shown, in his charming “Evangeline,” and “Miles Standish,” that the English is not incapable of being harnessed to the classic hexameter, and triumphantly achieving therein success, in a race for popular favor. In fact, Longfellow had, from his own admirable translations, become thoroughly convinced of its utility, if not indispensability, in giving the classic epics a fitting setting in English. To his friend, Mr. Fields, under date of April, 1871 (See Century magazine for April, 1886, page 891), he made this emphatic statement, embodying his own strong conviction: “To translate a poem properly, it must be done into the meter of the original; and Bryant’s ‘Homer,’ fine as it is, has this great fault, that it does not give the music of the poem itself.” Dr. Edward Guest, in his History of English Rhythms, in like manner favors rather than discourages a similar correspondence, in translations from classic poets; Matthew Arnold’s advocacy of it for like purposes needs simply a reference. The nearly simultaneous appearance in England of three independent versions of Homer’s Iliad in hexameter, viz., by E. W. Simcox (1865), by J. D. Dart (1865), and by Sir William W. Herschel (1866), only corroborates
the estimate of Professor H. W. Longfellow, and warrants, if it does not encourage, effort in it.

This is a progressive age, welcoming improvement in every department of literature, as well as science and industry; and the time is fast approaching, if it has not come already, when disparagement of any justifiable meter, and especially of one so inwoven with the epic poetry of ancient times, but whose capabilities in modern languages are as yet very far from being exhausted, will no longer be tolerated. In German it has already become fully legitimated; and why not welcome honest effort to popularize, in English, a measure which for ages was the recognized voicing of the heroic Muse, especially when its rich cadences, in classic languages, have continued to charm the ears of scholars, down through all the centuries of literature to the present time?

Objections, it is true, have been raised against the use of hexameter in English, and it is admitted that some of these have pertinence and weight; but, when the availabilities of the English language are rightly understood and utilized, in their proper adaptations to it, these are not insuperable, and ought not to be allowed to put it under a perpetual ban. The crucial objection, that hexameter is suited only to languages such as the Greek and Latin, whose versification is based on quantity, and not to languages like the English, whose poetry is all controlled by accent, is more apparent than real, because it overlooks the flexible nature of hexameter, and totally ignores the value of accent as an element of power in language. It regards the variable cadence, made by the classic poets in their versificational collocation of consonants and vowels, as absolutely essential to hexametrical rhythm: whereas the exquisite charm of duly collocated accented words in verse is what constitutes one of the prime excellencies of the English, as a language rich in poetry and song. To render hexameter as available as iambic in English, the fact must be accepted that accent is a ruling factor in its versification; and the attempt to compel the ear, as has been perhaps too much the case in its use, to ignore its own culture, and shift accent to suit the poet’s arbitrary arrangement in his verse, must end in failure. In hexameter, as in