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Neo-Latin Poetry in 18th c. Scotland – John Pinkerton Translates

Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski

The task of this paper is to present a little known Scottish translation of a minor lyric ‘Ad suam testudinem’ (Lyr. II 3) written by the Polish Neo-Latin poet Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski. The translation, entitled ‘To his Harp’ and included in the notorious Letters of Literature published by John Pinkerton under the pseudonym of Robert Heron in 1785, shall be presented in the context of the place of Neo-Latin poetry in Scotland, Pinkerton’s own approach to literature presented in his Letters, as well as contemporary reactions to the publication.

In Scotland, as in other European countries, Latin was first the language of the Church and, to a lesser extent, administration, and as such it arrived in the country, if we disregard the rather short period of Roman occupation, with St Columba, an Irishman who also wrote Latin poetry on the Scottish soil (Crawford 2007: 27). David Howlett begins his Caledonian Craftsmanship: The Scottish Latin Tradition in the eleventh century when the Scottish Latin prayer, ‘Oratio ante Dominicam Orationem’ (‘Prayer before the Lord’s Prayer’), was composed. It was written down in Book of Deer – (Howlett 2000: 1-5), but it is quite clear that the tradition was much older and it was by no means limited to religious poetry (Crawford 2007: 25). Latin became especially important for the Scottish literature after the royal court of Scotland became de-Gaelicized in the late eleventh century (Crawford 2007: 53). From the fourteenth century on, however, it gradually fell out of fashion with the development of poetry written in Scots.

Although the 1496 Education Act included Latin in the curricula, the greatest Scottish Neo-Latin poet George Buchanan was more likely to learn how to compose original Latin
poems in Paris than in St Andrews (Ford 1982: 3-4). Neo-Latin poetry flourished again at the court of Buchanan’s charge, king James VI, among the so called “Castallian band” (Crawford 2007 146-147). Their works were brought together in 1637 by Arthur Johnston in the two large volumes of Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum. However, the departure of the court for London in 1603 and the political as well as religious turmoil of the second half of the seventeenth century spelled the end of any Scottish interest in Latin versification (Adams 1955: 98).

Scotland differed greatly in this respect from England where such interest and the resulting Neo-Latin compositions remained quite lively at least until the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Latin as such, however, remained a part of Scottish school curricula, even though its demise as the language as the medium of instruction in Scottish universities took place already in the mid-eighteenth century (Crawford 2007: 14). Even if Scots were much less likely to write Neo-Latin verses than their Souther neighbours, they still read them and, every now and then, translated into their native tongue.

Among those Neo-Latin poets known and celebrated in the eighteenth century Scotland there was Polish poet Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski, one of the most eminent Neo-Latin poets in the seventeenth century Europe.¹ One of the Scots who attempted to translate Sarbiewski’s poems was John Pinkerton (1758-1826), antiquarian and historian, poet, and editor of Scottish ballads and poems, also the author of studies in medals, rocks, geography etc. Pinkerton is best remembered today because of his An Enquiry into the History of Scotland preceding the reign of Malcolm III or the year 1056, (2 vols, London, 1789, republished 1814), in which he presented a somewhat eccentric theory that Lowland Scots

¹ A more detailed presentation of the reception of Sarbiewski’s works in Scotland shall be available in Fordoński, K. Robert Burns and Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski. A Translatological Investigation into the Mystery of ‘I Dream’d I Lay’ Scottish Literary Review, in press. A more general introduction to Sarbiewski’s reception in the British Isles see: Fordoński and Urbański (eds.) 2010: 20-27.
were not Celts but the race of ancient Goths. In the debate which started in the late 1780s
Pinkerton was an Arch-Teutonist as far as the ‘Pictish Question’ was concerned. He believed
that the ancient Picts, from whom the Lowland Scots were allegedly descended, were
originally Goths, a Teutonic (i.e. Germanic) tribe, while Celts were ‘congenitally inferior’, a
view he first expressed in *A Dissertation on the Origin and Progress of the Scythians or
Goths* in 1787 (Kidd 2002: 22). As a part of his anti-Celtic campaign he contested the
authenticity of the songs of Ossian, recently published by James Macpherson (Hammond
2006: 4). Although his motives and arguments in this particular case were disputable,
Pinkerton’s activities as historian have not been fully rejected, some of his works e.g. on
numismatics such as *An Essay on Medals*, published in London in 1784 (Sweet 2001: 188),
*Modern Geography* (1802), translated into French and Italian, or *Petralogy* published in 1811,
were well received and respected.

Pinkerton started to write poetry and plays in his early teens but his literary talents
were apparently indifferent at best. Soon after he moved to London in 1781, he published in
quick succession but with very moderate success, three volumes of poetry. He also wrote
tragedies, one of which, *The Heiress of Strathern, or, The Rash Marriage* was ultimately
staged for the first and last time on 23 March 1813 at Edinburgh, and it was ‘hissed off the
stage’ (Couper 2008). Pinkerton’s more lasting literary endeavour was the publication of
Scottish ballads which he had collected since the 1770s but published for the first time only in
1781 (as *Scottish Tragic Ballads*) and republished two years later as *Select Scotish Ballads*,
now in two volumes. However, ‘Pinkerton got his comeuppance when he was forced by
Ritson to admit that he had passed off traditional ballads as his own compositions’ (Crawford
2007: 373) and, conversely, included some of his own compositions as traditional ballads.

Pinkerton attempted to defend himself (as Robert Heron) in *Letters of Literature*
where he argued: ‘Perhaps in fact nothing can be more heroic and generous in literary affairs
than a writer's ascribing to antiquity his own production; and thus sacrificing his own fame to give higher satisfaction to the public’ (Heron 1785: 384). However, he soon changed his position and just a year later he published *Ancient Scotish Poems*, containing no further forgeries, in which volume he confessed to his earlier deception. This collection of previously unpublished Middle Scots poems is now regarded as his greatest most significant contribution to Scottish literary scholarship (Couper 2008).

Pinkerton expressed his views on literature in *Letters of Literature* (1785) published under the pen name ‘Robert Heron, esq.’. The very title is quite interesting as it reflects Pinkerton’s disgust with with Saxon genitive which, according to the author, could be replaced (‘supplanted’) either by ‘of’ or by ‘belonging’. The opinions presented in the volume are radically critical, hardly any Ancient, medieval, or contemporary author escapes Pinkerton’s scathing criticism. The most often mentioned deficiency is lack of originality as the following excerpts will prove:

Plautus ... is not original, except perhaps in one or two plays. ... Terence need not be mentioned, his plays being mere translations ... Lucretius was not altogether original ... Cicero, nor Caesar, cannot be called original in any view. ... Sallust is an evident imitator of Thucydides, and Livy of Herodotus; yet they are both superior to their originals. Still they are imitators. ... Virgil is the most pitiful imitator of the whole Roman writers ... Catullus appears to me not original ... two

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2 John Pinkerton a.k.a. Robert Heron should not be mistaken for Robert Heron (1764–1807) also a Scottish poet, historian, and translator, one of the first biographers of Robert Burns. Pinkerton later claimed that he had based his pen name on his mother’s maiden name and did not know of the existence of any other Robert Heron. This could have been true as Pinkerton moved to London when the other Heron was sixteen, while *Letters of Literature* was published when Heron was twenty-one and had not yet published anything.
or three of his pieces are known to be translations without acknowledgment; a strong proof against the rest (Heron 1785: 387-389).

It is only Horace who deserves praise almost unconditionally. Although Pinkerton starts by doubting the originality of his odes (which he finds his worst works) yet he concludes: ‘We must estimate him by his chief works, his Satires, and his Epistles: and in them, especially in the last, heavens! Whan an original, what an exquisite writer!’ (Heron 1785: 390). Pinkerton concludes by listing eight Roman writers who passed his test of originality: Tibullus, Horace, Celsus, Phaedrus, Juvenal, Pliny the Elder, Tacitus, and Boetius (Heron 1785: 394). A very odd group, indeed. Even Ovid fails to qualify as ‘his originality is futile, and of no value’ (Heron 1785: 391).

Pinkerton’s critical approach seems to know no middle ground, he either rejects an author outright or he is enraptured with his works. He feels free to suggest possible improvements wherever he sees such a need. Even Shakespeare does not escape easily, Pinkerton suggests that the question marks in the line ‘To die? – To sleep – No more?’ of the famous Hamlet’s monologue should be replaced with a mark ‘of strong assertion, if there was such a one in typography’ and concludes with his explanation of the line ‘To die is no more than to sleep: they are synonymous terms, and the one implies no more than the other’ (Heron 1785: 312).

Combined with superficiality which Pinkerton often (though not always) exhibits, this highly emotional attitude and easiness with which he pronounces his mordantly critical opinions make his Letters quite a surprising reading. Pinkerton’s formal education ended when he was twelve as his father opposed his son’s wish to attend university choosing for him a legal career instead which Pinkerton abandoned immediately after his father died in 1780 (Couper 2008). Pinkerton was, consequently, an autodidact, his opinions were based on
extensive but probably largely unguided reading and a rather limited knowledge of Latin and Greek. The reviewer of the *Monthly Review* noticed for example that in a quotation from Aristotle Pinkerton reads “satyrs” as “satires”, drawing from this misreading far-fetched and, in effect, rather comic conclusions concerning the antiquity of satire as a literary genre (*Monthly Review* 1786: 178-179). They reflect, however, in their insistence on originality, a new trend, present in Scotland for example in the works of Alexander Gerard of Aberdeen, who published his *Essay on Genius* in 1774 (Crawford 2007: 373), which would be popularized in the South only in the days of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Pinkerton rejects the concept of literature as the art of imitation, one of the crucial concepts of the Augustan Age.

The book ‘earned Pinkerton ... reputation for eccentricity and arrogance [due] to [its] deprecation of respected classical and contemporary authors’ (Couper 2008). Numerous reviews amply support this claim. Some critics initially found the volume interesting, especially immediately after its publication. In a review which appeared in July 1785 in the *Westminster Review*, the anonymous reviewer claimed that ‘while Mr Heron is a whimsical writer, he has contrived to lodge in this book a fund of ingenuity and good sense’ (1785: 380). The review in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* begins with the following words ‘we have ... received much pleasure and information from the perusal of this work and recommend it to the attention of our readers’ (1785: 544) but end more ominously ‘we cannot close the present account ... without remarking, that [Letters] contain great eccentricity of taste, and sometimes an incorrectness of style’ (1785: 546).

The latter attitude quickly started to dominate. One critic wrote: ‘We sometimes admire the talents of [Pinkerton] but we wish to remember him no more’ (*Critical Review* 1786: 26). Another Scottish critic concludes his review with the following advice addressed to the author: ‘rather to study carefully a few subjects only, than to wander amidst such a variety of learning, and load the press with monstrous and unheard-of errors and mistakes. ... No
degree of merit, indeed, could render tolerable [Pinkerton’s] excessive presumption and vanity’ (*Edinburgh Magazine* 1785: 162). Yet another reviewer finds Pinkerton ‘the strange author ... who from a passion for singularity, or rather absurdity, hath declared war against the general taste of mankind’ (*English Review* 1786: 34) ‘bizarre rather than romantic and wrong-headed without being ingenious’ and concludes (quite rightly as we now know):

We have been all along tempted to imagine, that Robert Heron is merely a fictitious name; and that the real author of these letters is some disappointed, disgusted and damned poetaster, who wishes to revenge his quarrel with the public, against those celebrated authors who have been their favourites in all ages (*English Review* 1786: 37).

By the summer of 1786 one of his incited readers went as far as to publish a booklet entitled *A Letter to Robert Heron, Esq. Containing a Few Brief Remarks on his Letters of Literature: by one of the barbarous Blockheads of the lowest Mob, who is ‘a true Friend to Religion, and a sincere lover of Mankind* (the strange pseudonym was made up of quotations from the *Letters*) in which some of Pinkerton’s ideas were criticized in detail.

Pinkerton’s only known reaction at the time is a letter to the editor of *The Gentleman’s Magazine* in which he defended himself against the charges of ‘puffing his own writings’ (in the sense of arranging the publication of favourable reviews) and of plagiarising *The Thirty Letters* of Mr Jackson (Heron 1786: 95). It was only later that Pinkerton came to regret the vehemence of his literary criticism. In a letter to David Laing dated July 8th, 1800, he wrote:

from a constitutional irritability of nerve, I have in my earlier productions shown much controversial asperity … were I revising my books, I should dash out all
such passages, which I never see without disgust. I can only say they are the products of infirmity, and not of malice (Pinkerton 1830: 2, 176).

The 37th letter in which Pinkerton discusses Modern Latin poetry does not differ much from the others. Pinkerton begins by boasting an impressively broad (though, in fact, rather superficial) knowledge of Neo-Latin poets of whom very few, including Sarbiewski, escape his scathing remarks. As he concludes the first part of the letter:

were all the works of [modern Latin poetry] to be thrown into the fire ... there are [only] one or two that I would risk burning my fingers to redeem. The Basia of Secundus would be one of these, and indeed the only entire work: in other authors I should be content with two or three select leaves (Heron 1785: 290).

This choice is especially striking as Pinkerton chooses as the only Neo-Latin book worth preserving a rather slim collection of nineteen poems about kisses (Basia are more properly called Liber Basiorum, The Book of Kisses) which are hardly original, being extended imitations of Catullus (whom Pinkerton actually criticizes further in his volume, not very surprisingly, for lack of originality) and various Ancient Greek poets. Pinkerton’s attitude towards the works of Sarbiewski, from whose works the “select leaves” he is willing to save, is also far from unequivocal. In his comments on the Marian lyric Ad Rosam (Lyr. IV 18) Pinkerton finds the first two introductory stanzas ‘exquisite’, but as for the final two stanzas his opinion is brief: ‘the rest, containing the religious part, is, as usual, foolish enough’ (Heron 1785: 297).
The letter includes two translations by the author, the only instances of Pinkerton’s own literary work in the volume, one is from Sarbiewski, the other from Thomas Gray. This is the Latin original of the former:

**Ad suam testudinem**

Sonora buxi fillia sutilis,
Pendebis alta, Barbite, populo;
Dum ridet aer, & supinas
Solicitat levis aura frondes.
Te sibilantis lenior halitus
Perslabit Euri: me juvet interim
Collum reclinasse, & virenti
Sic temere jacisse ripa.
Eheu! serenum quae nebulae tegunt
Repente caelum? quis sonus imbrium?
Surgamus. Heu semper fugaci
Gaudia praeteritura passu! (Sarbiewski 1759: 58)

The poem may be rendered in English prose as follows:

Sonorous daughter of woven box, / hang, lyre, on the high poplar tree, / as long as the air laughs, / and light wind touches the lazy twigs. / May a more delicate puff / of the whistling Eurus blow through you; / whereas I am glad to recline / blithely on the green bank, / looking
up with my head propped on my hand. / Ah! What clouds suddenly covered / the serene sky!
What sound of rain! / Let us rise. Alas, joys always leave us with swift step.

Which Pinkerton translated as follows:

**To his Harp**

[Lyr. II 3]

Sonorous daughter of the pliant boxen stem,

On the high poplar, O my harp, thou shalt depend:

While laughs the sky, and the gale

Softly revives the listless leaves.

The Western Wind will solicit with gentlest breath

The music of thy charming strings: I the mean while

Lost in sweet ease, will recline

Along the green of this fair bank.

Alas! What sudden clouds invade the sunny sky?

What unexpected show’rs in sounding haste descend!

Let us be gone. Ah how soon

Will happiness still pass away!

Pinkerton added to this translation the following comments. First he describes his design as a translator:

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3 Due to different sentence structure in Latin and English the following division into lines may not be fully precise. I would like to express my gratitude to Elwira Buszewicz for correcting the above translation.
I shall beg leave to subjoin to [the Latin text of Sarbievius’s ode] a translation of my own, upon a new plan, syllable for syllable, a little in the manner of Milton’s translation of Quis te puer gracilis sub antro save that Milton, and his followers in this stanza, have only adopted the mechanic form, not the syllabification, which I shall religiously preserve (Heron 1785: 293).

and later shares with the reader some remarks on the original and his own efforts:

In the original I do not like testudinem, shell, when it appears from the first line, to be made of box; nor the epithet sutilis, which implies patched or sewed together, not capable of being wrought into musical or other instruments, which must have been the author’s idea; and which, perhaps, I have not strongly expressed by pliant. Sibilantis is unhappy, so I think is collum. The last stanza is faultless (Heron 1785: 295).

Unfortunately, Pinkerton’s attempt is not fully successful. The rendering of the original content is incomplete, although it should be noted the conciseness of Sarbiewski’s Latin makes the task of rendering his Latin text within the same length of English text next to impossible. Pinkerton feels free to skip whatever he finds “unhappy” such as the whistling Eurus. The instrument mentioned in the original poem is not a harp but rather a lyre. The poet may have failed to understand that ‘testudo’ is not a ‘shell’ but a rare, learned word for ‘lyre’, originally meaning ‘turtle’, as the first lyre was made of a turtle’s shell by the god Hermes.

It is possible that the change of ‘harp’ for ‘lyre’ was made on purpose as Pinkerton intended to allude here to Psalm 137, lines 2 and 3, in order to make the allusion present in the original text more pronounced. If it was the intention of Pinkerton, however, it means that
he fails to notice that Sarbiewski made the change on purpose. Harp symbolizes religious poetry while lyre stands for lyrical poetry. The exiled Jews in the psalm hang their harps on poplars refusing to perform their songs in Babylon, the poet in Sarbiewski’s ode ceases his song in a mood of joyful rest, allowing nature to perform its own music, the whistling of the wind among the trees as well as in the strings of the hanging lyre (Buszewicz 2006: 123-125).

The form of the translation largely departs from the original Alcaic stanza. Even by mere counting the syllables we can see that Pinkerton failed to follow the original. It is not very clear if he knew at all what he was supposed to imitate in his translation. His definition of the Alcaic stanza provided further in the same letter is, to say the least, disputable: ‘The Alcaic measure, as used by Horace, consists of six feer, or twelve syllables in the two first lines; three feet and a half, or seven syllables; and four feet, or eight syllables, in the fourth’ (Heron 1785: 299). Pinkerton not only changes the number of syllables in every line of the stanza (in his description it is 12 – 12 – 7 – 8 instead of the correct 11 – 11 – 9 – 10) but also seems to believe that the only possible metric feet are the disyllabic iambs and trochees. He does, however, retain one quality of Latin poetry, he does not introduce rhymes which all other translators of the poem did.

Contemporary reviewers noticed Pinkerton’s efforts quite unfavourably, although none of them bothers to specify their criticism:

The thirty-seventh Letter contains some modern Latin poetry, which the author selects as deserving praise. We are not more fond of the modern attempts than Mr. Heron; these are not of the best kind; but he is the worst of translators. Let the reader judge from his attempt to translate an ode of Casimir’s ‘syllable for syllable’. We shall select only the first stanzas .... The rest contains some mistakes, not excusable in a schoolboy. The translation of Mr. Gray’s famous
Alcaic Ode, is neither more correct nor more elegant (*Critical Review* 1786: 20-21).

It may amuse the public to read the poetical attempts of one who censures poets so freely. We have two specimens in the 37th Letter, the one a translation from Casimir, the other from Gray ... [translations quoted] We venture to affirm, that Virgil, nor Racine, nor Pope, ever wrote such verses. If Mr Heron thinks, like the Tartars, that he is to inherit the virtues of those he murders, he is prodigiously mistaken (*English Review* 1786: 36).

*Monthly Review* quotes the first three lines of Pinkerton’s translation ending in the words ‘While laughs the sky’ and concludes: ‘And who can forbear to laugh? Though, in truth, it is ... almost too ridiculous to be laughed at; for there is a point where ridicule itself is repelled, and absurdity is left to wander on, unnoticed and alone’ (*Monthly Review* 1785: 181). The harshness of these opinions (a similarly critical one may be found in the review published by *The European Magazine* 1785: 293) seems the more explicable when we consider the context. Having denigrated most of the famous authors, apparently revered by his critics, Pinkerton ultimately presents two poems of his own. The reviewers simply could not miss such an opportunity to demonstrate that Pinkerton did not live up to those whose position he had questioned.

Pinkerton’s failure was at least partly a result of his insufficient skill or talent. He was apparently unable to produce a translation which would fully retain the form of the original and, at the same time, would pass the test of aesthetical evaluation, especially that of his contemporaries. However, it is disputable whether such a translation is at all possible, bearing
in mind differences between Latin and English versification, as well as differences of expectations towards translation between Pinkerton and his critics.

Pinkerton’s apparent claim to modernity, however, can be seen in his efforts to approach the translated poem as a whole – the form and the content, both of which deserve equal attention from the translator. Actually, the resulting poem is one of the closest to the original among the thirteen translations published in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Pinkerton attempts to follow the original as closely as he is able to, he neither introduces new characters of Damon and Cecilia as Samuel Say does (Say 1745: 46), nor expands the text to twenty lines as does John Margetson Heald (Hucks 1798: 181). As it was stated above, Pinkerton is the first to take into consideration the fact that the original was unrhymed.

In a part, however, this was exactly what turned the reviewers against Pinkerton. The Scottish poet refused to follow the modernizing attitude towards the original which was still the dominating one in his time. First ushered in in the 1670s and soon supported by John Dryden, e.g. in the 1685 introduction to *Sylva* (Hopkins 2005: 63), this approach was ultimately made the most popular and generally accepted by Alexander Pope and his translations from Homer in heroic couplets. This attitude resulted in the publication of numerous collections of poems “imitated” from classical authors such as Horace which were rendered in currently fashionable literary style while original allusions and setting were replaced with these of the eighteenth century Britain. Pinkerton’s own attitude is much more in tune with the poets and critics propagating new concepts of translation such as Edward Young and Sir William Jones (Kelly 2005: 72-73), however, at the time of publication of his *Letters* such opinions were still only gaining ground.

Pinkerton’s harsh attitude towards the Neo-Latin poetry (which actually hardly differs from his opinions concerning most Ancient, medieval, and contemporary authors whose
works he discusses) may strike us today as it did his contemporaries. It is, however, more acceptable if we consider that the *Letters of Literature* was written in the late Pre-Romantic period. Pinkerton applies in his evaluations clearly Romantic categories, stressing foremostly the originality of the works under discussion. His opinions concerning the Neo-Latin poetry were well ahead of his time but the Romanticism was soon to put an end to any Neo-Latin poetry as a living literary phenomenon. The poetry has been since often perceived as derivative, the charge of lacking in originality seemed particularly justified if we bear in mind the degree of dependence on Classical models which most of such compositions exhibit.

Furthermore, and this was probably particularly irritating for his contemporary English readers, as a Scottish autodidact Pinkerton was not brought up with the same reverence for original Neo-Latin composition as the English for whom it was an important and highly respected part of education. English public schools and universities needed almost a century more to ultimately drop the subject from their curricula.

Pinkerton’s *Letters of Literature* and the included translations may seem today a queer work. It is easy to disregard the sizeable volume as a bitter attack on literature of a poetaster who had dreamt of fame and fortune as a poet, and found that his dream was never to come true. Yet even if we may find large passages of the work merely ridiculous and the included criticism unjustified, *Letters of Literature* still deserve our critical attention as a testimony to the changes in the ways the British approached literature and literary translation at the turn of the nineteenth century, changes from the results of which our modern understanding of the phenomena is largely derived. Even though the criticism which Pinkerton, his *Letters of Literature*, and his translation of Sarbiewski faced was largely justified, Pinkerton the translator is worth remembering for proposing a novel attitude to his task which in modern translation we tend to take for granted.
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