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# Mekill Wirdis: Vulgarisms in Jean-Jacques Blanchot's French Translation of the *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy*

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## Introduction

- 1 There is a long-standing tradition, in critical literature, of referring to *flyting* as a literary genre which is quintessentially Scottish, and *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* as its first exemplar (see discussion on Bawcutt, 1983 and 1992, p. 222). The prominent standing of William Dunbar and Walter Kennedy's poem might lead to the expectation that translations in different languages would have been attempted along the centuries, particularly considering that Dunbar is, among poets who wrote in Older Scots, the one whose work has been translated the most. And yet, a search on the authoritative *Bibliography of Scottish Literature in Translation* (BOSLIT) shows no records of any full translations of this poem having been published in any language, with the exception of French. This notable exception is due to the work of Jean-Jacques Blanchot, whose interest and research in the work of William Dunbar spanned several decades and culminated, in 2003, with the publication of *William Dunbar (1460?-1520?): poète de Cour écossais*, a full anthology of all works of William Dunbar that features Blanchot's own translations in French. The reasons behind such apparent dearth of interest can only be conjectured, although perhaps one could be tentatively advanced: the text's abrasive linguistic content (earlier criticism framed it as "the most repellent poem" [Lord Hailes, quoted in Bawcutt, 1992, p. 221]), coupled with its highly distinctive stanzaic and metrical form, may have deterred writers and translators from

engaging with it unless they made changes so substantial that they would effectively alter its lexical nature altogether.

- 2 Priscilla Bawcutt, to date one of the most important editors of William Dunbar's works, defined this *flyting* as a "quarrel, not a formal debate; a contest in abuse and poetic virtuosity. Each poet speaks both as an individual and as a representative of a group, voicing the mutual antagonisms of Lowlander and Highlander" (1998, p. 427). The distinction between quarrel and debate is very useful because it helps to frame this text as a highly skilled linguistic exercise, where each participant's aim is to disparage verbally the other whilst simultaneously seeking to better them in the creative deployment of lexicon and rhyme. Although the act of *flyting* could have serious legal and personal consequences (Bawcutt, 1992, pp. 223–4), there is no real animosity between Dunbar and Kennedy, but only "sheer high-spirited fun" as W. H. Auden put it in his *Ode to Medieval Poets* (1991, p. 863). No topic is considered off-limits: from one's own bodily functions and familial relations, to ethnic or political affiliations, everything is fair game. For Bawcutt, Dunbar and Kennedy's *Flyting* "seems to have initiated the long-lasting popularity of flyting in Scotland" (2007, p. 303), which continued in later texts such as David Lyndsay's *Answer to the King's Flyting* (1536) and Montgomery and Polwart's own *Flyting* (1584). The verb "flite/flyte" itself has earlier attestations in Old English and Old High German, and is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) as a word of Germanic lineage with the meaning of "strive" and "contend". Critical literature has identified instances of *flyting* in texts from the Old English canon—Lenker (2012, pp. 328–9) cites *Beowulf's* lines 525–532a, while Cuddon (2013, p. 280) mentions *The Battle of Maldon*; others such as Meier (2007 and 2008, pp. CVII–CIX) argue that the *flytings'* themes and structures drew substantial inspiration from Celtic sources. In his 1979 edition of Dunbar's works, James Kinsley remarks that "it seems very unlikely that the 'flyting' style and vocabulary used here, rhetorically mature and assured, and linguistically rich and varied, are his [Dunbar's] invention" (1979, p. 283). Indeed, Kennedy and Dunbar may have been following a Gaelic tradition which includes texts such as the *aoir*, a poetical invective that survived from the medieval Irish period: Nicole Meier details how satirical vituperations in song or rhyme had a long-standing tradition in Celtic society, and so strong was their effect on those taking part that they could "cause shame and desocialisation" (2008, p. CVII) if not even "physical ailments such as boils, perhaps through psychosomatic stress" (McKean, 2007, p. 130).
- 3 Stylistically, Older Scots *flytings* are categorised as "low-life verse" (Macafee & Aitken, 2002, part. 9.2.6): these are texts that can include a large amount of abusive expressions and vulgarisms, whose etymology and meaning at times can be obscure. They have also a greater likelihood of featuring *hapax legomena*, or words that have only one single attestation, making their interpretation even more difficult. As we shall see, Dunbar and Kennedy's *Flyting* is a paradigmatic example of such texts, pushing its translators to either omit unknown words or include potential equivalents whose selection relies more on stylistic coherence than on any attestable meaning. Macafee argues that the dense presence of vocabulary unique to Scots is due to the distinctiveness of the *flyting*:

The poems of vituperation specify directly, in a series of insulting invocations, declamations or descriptive narratives, various repulsive or ridiculous personal traits of the person addressed or described. Since these homely or undignified topics were presumably infrequent in most of the English and other literatures known to the Scottish poets, the only known terminology for them was native, local and colloquial.

(Macafee & Aitken, 2002, part. 9.3.6)

- 4 Furthermore, vituperative poems could also employ complex metres: Dunbar and Kennedy's *Flyting* is characterised both by tight end-of-verse stanzaic rhyming, internal rhyming within half lines (such as in stanzas 30 and 31), and frequent alliteration. The latter is the most typical feature of medieval Germanic poetry, and a major factor in the selection of the *Flyting*'s lexis.
- 5 For all these aspects, *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* is a very challenging text for potential translators to tackle: the lack of any plot or development ensures that the readers' (or the listeners') attention is constantly focused more on the words themselves than on a sequence of events. The whole point of the poem could be summarised by the closing line, where readers/listeners are called to *iuge now quha gat the war*: the *Flyting* was primarily conceived to entertain its audience, who was called to declare a "winner" based on their most unexpected and amusing turns of phrases that relied vastly on the rhythmical and phonetic (if not phonaesthetic) qualities of the verses. Both poets are equally abusive towards each other, and the main difference between the two revolves on their ethnic and social affiliations: they voice "the antagonisms of Lowlander and Highlander" (Bawcutt, 1992, p. 228), with Dunbar as the *Inglis*-speaking lowlander facing the *Erse*-speaking Gael, Kennedy, who accuses Dunbar of being a traitor of Scotland and too close to the English. Their vitriol is only apparent though: Dunbar actually admired Kennedy's poetic skills, and would remember him in his mournful poem *Lament for the Makaris*, further framing their *Flyting* as a playful verbal competition, if one particularly abusive in register.
- 6 By engaging with critical literature that analyses lexical obscenities in the Middle Ages, and historical corpora available for all languages discussed, this article will focus specifically on Blanchot's use of *gros mots*, or overt vulgarities, to translate Dunbar and Kennedy's poetic quarrel. It will focus particularly on Blanchot's treatment of those lexical items that Lord Hailes deemed "repellent" and will take into account Nicola McDonald's remark that modern analyses of medieval obscenity should "accurately reflect the kind of discursive—or visual—register in which (we can only imagine) it was originally understood" (2006, p. 9), particularly in the production of new translations.
- 7 All verses discussed will be presented in tables that compare the French translation with the original text as printed in Priscilla Bawcutt's edition, published in 1998 by the *Association for Scottish Literary Studies* and used as the source text by Blanchot. The tables will also include my own back translations in Standard English to facilitate discussion. To chart the frequency in use and the potential archaicity of words in the French translation, different lexicographical resources have been employed. The main corpus of French used is *Frantext*, while the principal monolingual dictionary is the *Trésor de la langue française* (TLF) alongside *Le Petit Robert* and one aimed at a less specialised audience such as *Larousse Compact* (2005). The main French-English bilingual dictionaries consulted were *The New Collins-Robert* (5th ed., 1998) and *Larousse Concise Dictionary* (1999). To discuss both Older Scots an English lexicon, the online versions of the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (DOST) and the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED)

were consulted, as well as the glossaries of the *Flyting*'s two reference editions—namely Bawcutt (1998) and Meier (2008).

- 8 Terms drawn from Translation Studies, such as Lawrence Venuti's taxonomy of "domestication" and "foreignisation" (for a useful summary see Munday, 2016, pp. 225–9), will be used throughout. This classification refers to Venuti's identification of a continuum in translation processes: "domestication" is the silent omission, in the target text, of linguistic and cultural references present in the source text, to create a translation which minimizes all foreign elements to obtain maximum reading fluency; conversely, "foreignisation" is a strategy whereby the target text privileges, in vocabulary and syntax, the language and cultural references in the original text, resulting in a translation which reads less fluently but makes the reader more aware of the source text's foreignness. Also, the expression "source text" will refer to the original poem, while "target text" will be the translation. It will also employ the concepts of *surtraduction* ("overtranslation"), and *soustraduction* ("undertranslation"), as discussed by Jean Deslisle in his textbook *La traduction raisonnée*. For Deslisle, *surtraduction* is the literal, word-for-word explicit translation of all items found in a source text that results in a forced, "unnatural" and redundant target text; conversely, *sous-traduction* is the non-literal, modulated translation, which results in a target text that departs, in varying degrees, from the wording originally used by the author (Deslisle, 2013, pp. 682–3).
- 9 Lastly, the text adopts the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) system<sup>1</sup> whenever it discusses phonetic features. Accordingly, sounds will be indicated between forward slashes—e.g. the initial "c" in "cloud" is /k/.

## The *Flyting*: structure and dating

- 10 *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* is composed of 552 lines distributed within sixty-nine stanzas of eight lines each. The stanzas follow two rhyming schemes: *ababbccb* for all Kennedy's parts, and both *ababbccb* and *ababbcbc* for Dunbar's. As mentioned above, alliteration is a very distinctive feature of vituperative poems, and in the *Flyting* it is very prominent, particularly in verses which display a pile-on of insults and vituperative terms; but contrarily to rhyming, it is not employed in a consistent way.
- 11 Similarly to the majority of Dunbar and Kennedy's poems, it is difficult to establish the *Flyting*'s exact date of composition. Nevertheless, a *terminus ad quem* can be given with relative certainty: Walter Chepman and Andro Myllar established in 1508 the first printing press of Scotland, and the *Flyting* is one of the first items they published (Meier, 2008, pp. XIX–XX). Only one incomplete copy survives from these early prints, but the poem was copied in later manuscripts, allowing modern editors to collate full versions.

## The translator: Jean-Jacques Blanchot

- 12 As mentioned above, Jean-Jacques Blanchot spent many years researching and writing about William Dunbar and his work. He was a steady contributor to the triennial *International Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Scottish Language and Literature* since its inception in 1975 down to 1984, and his papers all focused on William Dunbar. His

PhD thesis, discussed at La Sorbonne in 1987, was an extensive study called *William Dunbar (1460?-1520?), rhétoricien écossais*, in which Blanchot attempted a systematic linguistic and stylistic classification of Dunbar's entire oeuvre by applying statistical methodologies and quantitative analysis. A few years later Blanchot joined the considerable team of translators that worked on the multi-volume anthology *Patrimoine Littéraire Européen*; his contributions, published between 1994 and 1995, were translated extracts from the works of major Older Scots poets such as John Barbour, James I, Robert Henryson, Sir David Lyndsay and indeed William Dunbar—and precluded to the later publication of his own curated monograph on Dunbar.

- 13 This short summary of Blanchot's publications demonstrates that he had great familiarity not only with William Dunbar, but also with Older Scots literature in general. It is reasonable to assume that his renditions of Dunbar (and Kennedy) will have been greatly influenced and enriched by years of extensive research, resulting in translations that undoubtedly reflect a thoughtful choice of words and meanings. In order to recreate the colourful and rich linguistic palette of those poems rich with informal and coarse expressions such as the *Flyting*, Blanchot indicated in the book's Introduction that he would use contemporary argot as a close register equivalent (Blanchot, 2003, p. 13), and in a footnote to verse 43 in the poem he explains that he thought it would be suitable to *franciser culturellement* ("culturally Frenchify") one of the many insults exchanged by the two poets (ibid., p. 99). It should be noted that this approach may have been somewhat aided by the publication being exclusively in French, with no facing parallel text showing the original text in Older Scots. Thus, his footnotes are the only peritextual section where samples of Dunbar and Kennedy's original lines can be seen within the overall text itself.
- 14 His careful selection of words, coupled with the extensive work made on alliteration, arguably signals that Blanchot kept the *Flyting* in high regard, and sought to further a modern appreciation of Dunbar and Kennedy's work among francophone readers.

## The translation (1): low-style features of the *Flyting*

- 15 Before discussing the translation, it might be useful to list briefly the characteristics which identify a *low style* text in Older Scots literature according to John Corbett in his study *Language and Scottish Literature*. These texts generally feature:
1. Comedy and satire.
  2. "Peasants and vices" as characters or main topics.
  3. Immorality and vulgarity.
  4. A virtual absence of anglicisation.
  5. Marked vernacular diction, or "northernisms", with comparatively few Latinisms.
  6. Simpler rhyme schemes, with less complex sentence structures.
- (Adapted from Corbett, 1997, pp. 222-5)
- 16 To test whether this systematization applies to the *Flyting* let us look at stanza 63, which is part of Kennedy's last answer to Dunbar towards the end of the poem:

Table 1.

Line	Original text – Bawcutt (1998)	French translation – Blanchot (2003)
497	<i>Greit in the glaykis gude maister Gilliam gabkis.</i>	<i>Grotesque guignol, grognon, grossier ragoteur.</i>
	Good at deceptions/deceiving, Master William talks foolishly	Silly clown, moaner/grumpy, crass gossip.
498	<i>Our imperfyte in poetry or in prose.</i>	<i>Incompétent en poésie tout comme en prose.</i>
	Over-imperfect in poetry or in prose,	Inept at poetry much as in prose,
499	<i>All clovis vndir cloud of nycht thou calkis.</i>	<i>Tu couchies les cours sous couvert de la nuit.</i>
	All closes/small courtyards, under the cover of the night, you soil with excrement	You soil courtyards with excrements, hidden by the night
500	<i>Rymis thou of me, of rethory the rose?</i>	<i>Veas-tu rimer sur moi, rose de rhétorique ?</i>
	Do you want to make rhymes about me, you rose of rhetoric?	Do you want to make rhymes about me, you rose of rhetoric?
501	<i>Lunatick lymare luschbald, loose thy hose.</i>	<i>Fou furieux, foitreas flou, baisse ton hose.</i>
	Lunatic rascal, luschbald*, loosen your stockings,	Furious madman, coward crook, lie down hose.
502	<i>That I may touch thy tone wyth tribulation. –</i>	<i>Pour que ton cul connaisse la correction</i>
	So that I may hit your buttocks to chastise you physically/no give you sorrow	So that your arse can get the spanking
503	<i>In recompensing of thy conspiracy.</i>	<i>Que mérits amplement ta conspiration.</i>
	To reward your conspiracy	That your conspiracy rightly deserves
504	<i>Or tarse the out of Scotland, tak thy choise?</i>	<i>Si non quite vite l'Écosse, fais ton choix !</i>
	Or get yourself out of Scotland, make your choice!	Or leave Scotland quickly: make your choice!

\**luschbald* – no translation supplied by Bawcutt in her glossary. For DOST it is “an abusive term of doubtful meaning”.

17 Although no poem can be expected to fit neatly within retrospective classifications devised by later critics, this stanza arguably displays most of the features identified by Corbett:

1. The hyperbolic insults and threats hurled by Kennedy at Dunbar are purposely meant to be extreme for satiric purposes and to elicit laughter from the audience.
2. Dunbar and Kennedy are most certainly not peasants, but the scatological references as well as the mention of parts of body reserved to “low” functions are semantically related to the trope of eliciting disgust (see Larrington, 2006, p. 141).
3. The language is vituperative, and sometimes overtly obscene and vulgar in form and content (see the scatological reference in line 499, or that to spanking in line 502).
4. The Chepman & Myllar print (CM) shows that processes of anglicisation (meaning the gradual erosion of Scots words in favour of Southern English equivalents and forms [see Macafee & Aitken, 2002, part. 2.5 for a full discussion]) were still not fully in place at this point. The spelling of *greit* and *gude* in line 497 may be cited as proof, though it should be noted that CM occasionally shows internal variation and forms commonly found south of the border.
5. Latinate words are indeed very few, and those present seem to be used more to enhance the speakers’ sarcasm and mocking intentions than to elevate the tone as they would in “aureate” poems (for Macafee, the few Romance words present attest to the contestants’ education [Macafee & Aitken, 2002, part. 9.3.6]); there are also words whose etymology and meaning are obscure, and whose sense is deducted from the overall context—again, that of abusive language (e.g. *luschbald* in line 501). Macafee & Aitken (2002, part. 9.3.6) provide a list of northernisms found in the *Flyting* to prove this point.



6. The *Flyting*'s rhyming scheme is certainly more intricate than simple couplets or of those quoted in Corbett's study, making this the only fully divergent point from his indicative classification. It is worth noting that alliteration itself should be added to these features, as that is another distinctive feature of low-style/low life verse at this stage—see R. D. S. Jack's comment on how full-blown alliteration “invades” Dunbar's *The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* to mark that poem's bawdiness (Jack, 1997, p. 50).

## The translation (2): alliteration

18 Establishing how the *Flyting* aligns to the *low-style* genre helps to explain Blanchot's strategy to represent its lampooning spirit, both in register and in its playful and insistent alliteration. The latter plays a significant role on the target text's lexical make-up, and should be briefly commented on. Even at a cursory glance, the stanza included in Table 1 shows its noticeable influence, with lines 497, 499 and 500 featuring examples of Blanchot's adoption of viable equivalents. In these verses, the insistent alliteration on the sounds /g/, /k/ and /r/ is equally prominent in both Scots and French, and Blanchot manages to make direct use of the shared Latinate/Greek origin common to the words in line 500 (*rymis/rimer* “rhymes/to rhyme”, *rethory/rhétorique* “rhetoric”, *rose/rose* “rose”) and line 498 (with its mirror use of *poetry/poesie* and *prose*). These are rare exceptions, as the poem has generally few cognates that can be borrowed between French and Older Scots. Thus, lines 497 and 501 (the French text of the latter adopting words alliterating in /f/ instead of /l/) show how Blanchot managed to select words that alliterate whilst loosely keeping within the same semantic field, but completely avoiding any attempt to translate literally the Older Scots text. Blanchot's strategy to favour alliteration can also be noticed in line 497, whose French translation consists solely of terms of abuse that have no literal lexical connection to the original verse, save for the use of the same alliterating sound /g/. In light of the discussion in the subsequent sections, it is interesting to find here dated insults now almost endearing such as *filou* (“crook”), *guignol* (“clown, puppet”), *grognon* (“grumpy”) and *ragoteur* for “gossip” (incidentally, the latter is a word with just five attestations in *Frantext*, and is unrecorded both in bilingual French-English dictionaries consulted and in *Larousse Compact*).

## The translation (3): scatological and body parts references

19 As highlighted whilst discussing Corbett's taxonomy, the poets make many scatological references, and in Table 1 we find the verb *cuk* “to void, or foul with, excrement” in line 499 and *tone* “the buttocks, the anus” in line 502. For DOST, *tone* is a Gaelicism—from Gaelic *tòn*—and registers only three occurrences: two are from this text (in lines 502 and 520), and one is from the translations of Rabelais works by Sir Thomas Urquhart, whose unique use of language has been well discussed elsewhere (see Smith, 2018). Blanchot, probably relying on the verse's main alliterating sound /k/ translates it as *cul* (“arse”), which to this day is still filed in the category of words “liable to offend in any situation” (for the *Collins-Robert*) or simply “vulgar” (for the *Larousse*). It is difficult to assess whether Kennedy used *tón* because it was an overt vulgarism, or just for the semantic associations which that part of the body carried. *Tón* is still attested in



modern resources such as Angus Watson's *The Essential English-Gaelic Dictionary*, which translates it as "arse", "backside" and "bottom"; but as a full historical dictionary of Gaelic is still in the process of being assembled,<sup>2</sup> it is more difficult to assess what register it signalled at the time. The bilingual *Collins-Robert* suggests a similar range of English equivalents for *cul*, which demonstrates that it might be comparable to modern "arse". Altogether, Blanchot uses *cul* eight times in his *Tournoi* to translate items either written by Dunbar or Kennedy: *ers* "buttocks" (56, 131, 358), *go naikit* "walk about naked" (120), *dok* "arse" (248), *brekeles* "without breeches" (384) and *tone* "arse, bottom" (502, 520). The analysis of the diachronic development of *ers* raises interesting issues, as tokens from corpora support the idea that it went through a significant semantic and register shift in its long history: Mohr (2013, pp. 94–7) illustrates how that was the standard term for "buttocks", and indeed for the OED *arse* would only be "generally regarded as coarse after the 18th century".<sup>3</sup> OED citations include one of the earliest medical books printed in English (Andrew Borde's *Breviary of Health*, ca. 1547), where it seems that *arse* was just the standard word used to identify that part of the body; earlier tokens such as *arse-ropes*, used before the introduction of the Latinate "intestines" appear both in the Wycliffite Bible and in the 15th century Middle English translation of Guy de Chauliac's *Chirurgia Magna*, testifying to the word's use in high-register contexts. On Dunbar's use of *ers* as a term of abuse towards Kennedy, Blanchot adds an interesting footnote: since *ers* is a homophone of *Erse* "Gaelic, Irish", Dunbar would enjoy "using this not very euphonious word, which is close to *arse*" (Blanchot, 2003, p. 102, my translation) as an added coarse wordplay. Leaving aside for a moment discussion on register, it should also be noted that the consistent use of *cul* to translate both Dunbar's *ers* and Kennedy's *ton* prevents a francophone reader from noticing the purposeful use of distinct markers of linguistic identity by the duelling poets (see the Introduction). Of course, there are several passages in the poem which make the Highlander/Lowlander difference explicit, as well as Blanchot's numerous explanatory footnotes, so this observation applies specifically to the treatment of these items.

- 20 Line 99 offers another example of a French term of abuse morphologically, if not semantically, related to the field of scatology, as well as *gluntoch*, which is one more *hapax legomenon*:

Table 2.

Line	Original text – Bawcutt (1998)	French translation – Blanchot (2003)
97	<i>Thow callis the rethore with thy goldin lippis</i>	<i>Tu te crois éloquent et toujours parler d'or</i>
	You call yourself a master of rhetoric with golden lips	You think you are eloquent, and always say wise words
99	<i>Thow art bot gluntoch, with thy giltin hippis</i>	<i>Tu n'es qu'un minable, un petit merdeux</i>
	You are only a man with big/protuberant knees and yellowed hips	You are only a pathetic person, a little shit

- 21 Similarly to *luschbald* in Table 1, *gluntoch* is another word of uncertain origins, which is unrecorded in DOST and apparently derives from Gaelic *glúinteach* meaning “with big or protuberant knees” (see Bawcutt, 1998, p. 434). To translate it Blanchot dismisses possible paraphrases and opts for *minable* (“pathetic/shabby-looking”), an adjective which makes explicit one of the underlying medieval prejudices towards people with physical deformities (see his identical use of *minable* in line 177 to translate *schulderis narrow* [Blanchot, 2003, p. 105]). In the second half-line, Dunbar uses *giltin hippis* to create a direct metrical and rhyming contrast with *goldin lippis* in line 99 above, and draws its effectiveness from the parallel between the physical appearance of someone showing symptoms of jaundice, whose hips may yellow due to their medical condition, and the rhetorical image of someone whose impressive oratorical skills turn their lips to gold. Blanchot dispenses entirely with this parallelism and simplifies the line by using the insulting *merdeux* (“shitty”), perhaps to contribute to the alliteration by adding another word with a voiced nasal articulation after *ne, un* and *minable*. *Merdeux* reoccurs later in Kennedy’s last reply to translate *dirt* in verse 519, which Bawcutt glosses with a standard “excrements” (see Table 3 below). Further examples of *surtraduction* here include *innombrables chiasses* (“innumerable shits”) in verse 188 instead of *ourhie tyd* (“over high tide”), and *crotte* (“droppings”) in verse 211 for *clay* (“clay”).
- 22 Verses 517–20, again part of Kennedy’s last intervention, feature further points of great interest :

Table 3.

517	<i>Fowmart, fasert, fostirit in filth and fen</i>	<i>Putois, pédé, pétri de fange et de fumier</i>
	Polecat, hermaphrodite fowl, nurtured in filth and mire	Polecat, faggot, filled with mire and manure
518	<i>Foule fond, flend fule, apon thy phisnom fy!</i>	<i>Infâme imbécile, ingrate face de fouine !</i>
	Foul silly [man], <i>flend*</i> fool, on your face, fie!	Vile idiot, ungrateful weasel face!
519	<i>Thy dok of dirt drepis, and will newir dry,</i>	<i>Tes miches merdeuses ne sécheront jamais,</i>
	Your rump drips excrements and will never dry,	Your shitty bum will never dry,
520	<i>To tume thy tone it has tyrit carlingis ten.</i>	<i>Te décrasser le cul a crevé dix pétasses.</i>
	Emptying your buttocks has wearied ten old women	Scrubbing your arse has worn out ten sluts

\**flend* – no translation supplied by either DOST or Bawcutt.

- 23 Whereas the figurative *fasert* is translated by Bawcutt in her glossary as “hermaphrodite fowl, coward”, Blanchot turns it into *pédé*, which is also the most widespread homophobic insult akin to English “fag/faggot” (see discussion in Tin, 2003, pp. 424–8). Its ubiquity in current French has somewhat eroded its univocal meaning, leading partly to a process of desemanticization whereby it has become for Tin the “quintessence” of French insults (ibid., p. 427). Arguably, that is the meaning which Blanchot used it for in this passage, especially considering how he dealt with verses that refer overtly and insultingly to homosexual practices just a few lines below:

Table 4.

525	<i>Sarazene, symonyte provit, pagane pronunciate,</i>	<i>Sarrasin, simoniaque et athée avoué,</i>
	Saracen, proved simoniac, professed heathen	Saracen, simoniac and sworn atheist,
526	<i>Machomete, manesuorne, bugrist abhominabile,</i>	<i>Maudit Mahomet, détestable dépravé</i>
	Mahomet, perjured, abominable buggerer	Damned Mahomet, detestable depraved,
527	<i>Deuill, dampnit dog, sodomyte insatiable,</i>	<i>Démon, damné dogue, assoiffé de simonie,</i>
	Devil, damned dog, insatiable sodomite,	Devil, bloody mastiff, thirsty of simony

- 24 Both Dunbar and Kennedy call each other *sodomyt(e)* in the poem (verses 253 and 527 respectively), and Kennedy also calls Dunbar *buggrist abhominabile* (“abominable buggerer”) in verse 526. Blanchot may have certainly had the chance to “overtranslate” again: instead, he used *sodomyte*’s direct equivalent once (*sodomite* in verse 253), and then omitted it altogether in the rather unpalatable passage in verses 526–7: *buggrist abhominabile* is turned into a milder *détestable dépravé* (“detestable depraved”), while *sodomyte insatiable* in verse 527 becomes *assoiffé de simonie* (“thirsting for simony”), using once more the mention to simony made just two lines above—a reference to Dunbar’s numerous petitionary poems addressed to the king (see chapter 3 in Bawcutt, 1992). Blanchot’s treatment of verse 527 exemplifies his confidence in tackling the task of translating Dunbar, as he silently excises from these two lines all mentions to sodomy and replaces them with a well-attested reference to Dunbar’s begging-poems (perhaps supported by the lack of the original text on a facing parallel page: had it been there it may have led him to translate this passage differently, or at the very least explain it with additional footnotes).
- 25 On the other hand, going back to line 520 in Table 3 above, we can observe that *carlingis* (“old women”) has been turned into *pétasses*, ie “sluts” (like in verse 247, but not in 221, see Table 6 below). Dunbar uses elsewhere in other poems the words *harlot* and *hure*, both meaning “whore”, and *hursone* (“son of a whore”) in the *Flyting* itself on verse 359 (which Blanchot regularly translates as *fils de pute*), with the specific meaning of “prostitute”. The entry for “unchaste/loose woman” in the *Historical Thesaurus of English* displays an extensive list of nouns used both in English and Scots literature dating back to the Old English period;<sup>4</sup> and yet, it holds no instances of *carling*, which is filed under the more neutral categories of “woman” and “old woman”. This leads to the impression

that Blanchot here may have effectively “overtranslated”, increasing the *Tournoi*'s quotient of vulgarisms.

- 26 The category of body parts also includes mentions of testis. Both *bawis*, “balls” (104) and *bellokis*, “testicles” (119) are translated with *couilles* (“bollocks”), as an avowed citation from the *chansons grivoises* (Blanchot, 2003, p. 101). Similarly to *ers*, the OED records that *ballok* was in standard use in earlier stages of English and only became coarse slang after the 17th century—it too is in the Wycliffite Bible and in medical treatises. DOST first attests it in Scots in Robert Henryson's satirical poem *Sum Practysis of Medecyne*, which Fox describes as “a parody of a quack's promotional speech” (1981, p. 475). Although purported remedies in Henryson's poem can be “violently scatological” (*ibid.*, p. 476), it could be argued that Henryson used *bellokis* only as the more appropriate term at his disposal to identify that specific part of the body, rather than as a vulgarism.

## The translation (4): speech-like patterns

- 27 Macafee and Aitken discuss how works in the category of low-life verse generally had low-life settings and featured homely characters and contexts (Macafee and Aitken, 2002, part. 9.2.6), whereas Dunbar and Kennedy were both educated, well-connected members of the court. Clearly, they may have purposely code-switched to *flyte* with each other, but it is arguably very difficult to make a full sociolinguistic comparison between their speaking patterns and that of the more general populace only based on surviving poetical texts, and to assess how and where their register, however extreme the insults, may have been leaning “downwards”. Lines 218 and 221–2 feature a passage that includes the only instances of the reported speech of speakers other than the two *flyters*. Here, Dunbar depicts a group of youths and older women taunting Kennedy as he walks along the streets of Edinburgh:

Table 5.

217	<i>Off Edinburch the boyis as beis owt thrawis,</i>	<i>Les gamins d'Édimbourg comme un essaim s'échauffent</i>
	The boys in Edinburgh throng like bees,	The street urchins of Edinburgh become heated like a swarm
218	<i>And cryis owt: 'Hay, heir cumis our awin queir clerk!'</i>	<i>Et vocifèrent : « Hé ! V'là not' foutu intello ! »</i>
	And they shout out 'Hey, here comes our own worthless/base learned man'	And they shout out angrily 'Oi! There he is, our bloody/fucking egghead!'
221	<i>Then carlingis cryis 'Keip curches in the merk.</i>	<i>Les commères caquètent : « Cachez bien vos coiffes !</i>
	Then old women cry out 'Keep your kerchiefs in the dark/out of sight	The old women/gossips prattled 'Hide well your headgears!
222	<i>Our gallowis gaipis, lo, quhair ane graceles gais!'</i>	<i>Not'potence t'attend, on va t'pendre, pauv'toquard ! »</i>
	Our gallows are opening their mouths/hungry for you, look where a villain goes/ends up!	Our gallows waits for you, you'll be hanged, poor halfwit

- 28 Here Blanchot adopted an overt domesticating approach adding a transcription-like reproduction of colloquial French, the kind generally stigmatised when discussing correct usage (see Lodge, 2004, p.168). Markers of orality include the elision of unstressed vowels (*v'là* for *voilà*), the elision of post-consonantal /r/ before final schwa (*not'* for *notre* "our", *pauv'* for *pauvre* "poor"), and apocope (*intello*, marked in *Le Petit Robert* as the pejorative and derogatory form of *intellectuel*). Notably, a close back translation of line 218 shows that the expletive *foutu*, "bloody, damn" (but also "fucking", depending on the collocation), was deliberately added by Blanchot, as *queir* is glossed by Bawcutt as "base, rascally" and by Meier as "rascally, worthless". DOST also specifies that from the year 1663, *queir* is used with the meaning of "strange, odd", a sense which the OED attests in English texts at least from 1551.

## The translation (5): obscure terms

- 29 Sections above have already shown the poem's inclusion of obscure terms unattested elsewhere. The presence of such words, of uncertain meaning and etymology, makes the assessment of the register used by medieval authors even more challenging. Going back to stanza 63 included in Table 1 above, Blanchot's interpretation of *luschbald* follows the overall style of the verse. Given that *lunatike lymare* ("lunatic rascal") is translated with *fou furieux* ("furious madman"), the only possibility to keep the alliterating pattern in translation would be to include a word that starts with /f/. Interestingly, Blanchot increases the effect by using two with *foireux filou* ("cowardly crook"). It may be coincidental, given that Blanchot has no set metre, but all lines in this particular stanza are hendecasyllables: this might partly explain Blanchot's inclusion of the extra qualifier *foireux*, to place beside *filou*, a word marked as *vieilli*

(“antiquated”) by the TLF which has lost its abusive potential becoming yet another almost endearing epithet. The inclusion of *foireux* adds one further item that draws the translation’s metre nearer to the original text, since it adds an internal rhyme with *furieux*.

- 30 Verses 517–20, shown in Table 3, offer further examples. *Flend* (518) is not translated in English by either DOST or Bawcutt, and both just label it “obscure”. With no help from any of the available sources, Blanchot concentrates instead on *phisnom* (“countenance or expression of the face”) in the same line, and uses *ingrate* (“ungrateful”), a derogatory term which is not in Dunbar’s text, potentially as a substitute for both *flend* and *fule*. To increase somewhat the abuse quotient he also adds *fouine* (“beech-marten”), a weasel traditionally considered rather badly due to its tendency to kill hens in its search for food (see the examples in its TLF entry<sup>3</sup>).

## The translation (6): attenuation and archaisms

- 31 So far, this article has discussed examples of Blanchot’s “overtranslations” of lexical items semantically linked to scatological or vulgar and abusive tropes, as well as words that in later stages of the history of both English and Scots would be resolutely filed under the category of overt vulgarisms. However, it would not be correct to say that Blanchot adopted this approach consistently. We have already seen how he toned down homophobic abuse, and adopted very mild taunts such as *grognon*, and there are several other instances which testify how he fluctuates between the inclusion of overt vulgarities and affected, less common terms throughout the translation (one example among many is *traine-savate* “bum, good-for-nothing” literally “slippers-dragger” for *wallidrag* (43) “good-for-nothing, slovenly person”). The *Flyting* features other significant instances of words that later on developed into overt vulgarisms such as *wanfukkit*, “misbegotten” (38), *cuntbittin*, “impotent” (50, 239), *skitterand*, “defecating” (58), *skittand*, “shitting” (194), and *beschittin*, “befoul with excrement” (195, 239). With the exception of *chié* (“shat”) for *beschittin* in line 195, these items are all translated with non-vulgar standard French equivalents, signalling Blanchot’s awareness that a semantic shift had not taken place yet for all of these. Other words which may have been made overtly vulgar such as *skaldit* (37) i.e. “scabby”, labelled in DOST as a term of abuse and translated as *échaudé* (“scalded”) could have been “overtranslated” in an abusive way, but they are certainly not as strong as other terms Blanchot employs elsewhere. Line 499 includes the verb *cuk*, which DOST translates with “to void, or foul with, excrement” and records only in another text—appropriately another *flyting*, that between Alexander Montgomery and Patrick Hume of Polwart from later in the sixteenth century. Blanchot translates *cuk* with *conchier*, a verb which the TLF labels as vulgar, similarly to the online version of *Le Robert* for which it is at the same time vulgar and literary and that *Larousse* describes as “*vieux, par plaisanterie*”; but both bilingual dictionaries such as the *Collins-Robert* and the *Larousse Concise*, as well as monolinguals such as the *Larousse Compact*, do not include it at all. Furthermore, *Frantext* reports only 116 occurrences of its various forms attested from the 12th century onwards, which would prove that in spite of its continued if occasional use, it is a learned word uncommon in informal or overtly vulgar current French. In short, the examples raised in this section might prove that Blanchot did not intend to aim consistently at an overtly vulgar register.



## Conclusions

32 This article has shown a brief sample of Jean-Jacques Blanchot's impressive French translation of *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy*. It has sought to present Blanchot's strategy in translating the poem's terms of abuse and vulgarisms by analysing the two texts' metrical and lexical content, using lexicographical resources and discussing the semantic evolution of different words observed in their diachronic development. The main findings could be summarised thus:

- Blanchot adopted a domesticating approach, which includes both overt vulgarisms and features of spoken French.
- Words that can be ascribed to the categories of scatology and low bodily functions, such as *ers* and *bellok*, are often translated with a vulgar equivalent, even if corpora interrogated show that the same words were also used in formal contexts at the time of the *Flyting's* composition. This might suggest that Blanchot purposely adopted an approach favouring the addition of overt vulgarisms.
- This strategy was not implemented consistently: other words, considered obscene in contemporary Scots, were correctly translated according to their intended meaning and register.
- The “overtranslation” of specific items could have been facilitated significantly thanks to the publication's peritext, which does not include the original text, making it inaccessible to readers wishing to compare the two.
- Blanchot's attempt to keep alliteration as much as possible had a significant impact on the lexical make-up of the final translation.
- The translation of terms of abuse shows great variety, with overt vulgarities or *gros mots* coexisting with archaic, literary and affected terms.

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## Lexicographical resources and corpora

- BOSLIT – *Bibliography of Scottish Literature in Translation*, <<https://boslit.glasgow.ac.uk/>>.
- DOST – *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, <[www.dsl.ac.uk](http://www.dsl.ac.uk)>.
- Frantext, <[www.frantext.fr/](http://www.frantext.fr/)>.
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TLF – *Trésor de la langue française*, <<http://stella.atilf.fr/>>.

## NOTES

1. See <[www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/](http://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/)> for a full chart.
2. See *Faclair na Gàidhlig's* website at <[www.faclair.ac.uk](http://www.faclair.ac.uk/)>.
3. "arse, n. and int.", *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2022, <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/11089](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/11089)> (accessed 11 February 2023).
4. *Historical Thesaurus of English*: <<https://ht.ac.uk/category/?type=search&qsearch=unchastity&page=1#id=171907>> (accessed 8 February 2023).
5. <[http://stella.atilf.fr/Dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/visusel.exe\[...\]](http://stella.atilf.fr/Dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/visusel.exe[...]>)>.

## ABSTRACTS

William Dunbar's *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* has long been seen both as one of the most representative texts written in the *low-life verse* in Older Scots poetry (see Macafee & Aitken, 2002, part. 9.3.6; Bawcutt, 1992, p. 222; Corbett, 1997, pp. 221–3), and a prime example of *flyting*, a distinctive Scottish poetical genre in which two poets harangue each other using all their linguistic skills. The poem's prominent alliteration, as well as the use of several words and expressions labelled as vulgar and abusive by lexicographical resources, make it a particularly challenging text for translators aiming to convey its metrical and lexical features. Indeed, the BOSLIT archive (*Bibliography of Scottish Literature in Translation*) has no record of it having been translated in any language; however, a full French translation was included in an anthology featuring the complete works of Dunbar in French, curated by Jean-Jacques Blanchot and published by Ellug in 2003. This article aims to highlight the main strategies Blanchot adopted to tackle this *low* vocabulary: it will offer a broad framework of the poem's main stylistic features before discussing how its abusive lexicon was translated. It will do so by using lexicographical and corpora resources (such as DOST and OED for Scots, and Frantext and TLF for French), and a number of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries.

*The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* de William Dunbar est depuis longtemps considéré à la fois comme l'un des poèmes les plus représentatifs du « style bas » adopté dans bon nombre de poèmes en ancien écossais – *Older Scots* (Macafee & Aitken, 2002, part. 9.3.6; Bawcutt, 1992, p. 222; Corbett, 1997, p. 221–223), et comme un excellent exemple de *flyting*, un genre poétique distinctif et typiquement écossais où deux poètes se haranguent l'un l'autre en utilisant toutes les ressources linguistiques à leur disposition. L'allitération proéminente du poème, ainsi que la présence de mots et expressions qualifiés vulgaires ou insultants par les ressources lexicographiques, en font un texte particulièrement difficile pour les traducteurs désireux de transmettre ses caractéristiques métriques et lexicales. En fait, dans l'archive BOSLIT (*Bibliography of Scottish Literature in Translation* – « Bibliographie de la littérature écossaise en traduction ») on ne trouve aucune trace de traductions de ce poème dans aucune langue ; néanmoins, une traduction française a été incluse dans une anthologie présentant les œuvres complètes de Dunbar, dirigée par Jean-Jacques Blanchot et publiée par les Ellug en 2003. Cet article visera à mettre en évidence les principales stratégies de traduction adoptées par

Blanchot pour s'attaquer aux gros mots employés : il proposera une vue d'ensemble des caractéristiques stylistiques principales du poème avant de discuter des choix de traduction de Blanchot à l'égard des vulgarités et insultes. Pour ce faire, il s'appuiera sur des ressources lexicographiques et des bases de données (telles que DOST et OED pour l'écossais, Frantext et TLF pour le français), ainsi que sur différents dictionnaires monolingues et bilingues.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** vieil écossais, français, William Dunbar, Walter Kennedy, Jean-Jacques Blanchot, flyting, traduction, poésie allitérative, Écosse médiévale

**Keywords:** Older Scots, French, William Dunbar, Walter Kennedy, Jean-Jacques Blanchot, flyting, translation, alliterative poetry, Medieval Scotland, vulgarisms, abusive language

## AUTHOR

### RUGGERO BIANCHIN

University of Glasgow  
ruggerbianchin@gmail.com

Ruggero Bianchin est chercheur doctorant en linguistique anglaise à l'Université de Glasgow, où il travaille aussi comme assistant d'enseignement. Sa recherche porte sur l'analyse linguistique des traductions en langues romanes des poèmes écrits en ancien écossais parmi les XIV<sup>e</sup> et XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles, et il a présenté des résultats préliminaires de sa thèse à plusieurs conférences (parmi elles, FRLSU 2021 et WCSL 2022). Il a aussi une longue expérience de traducteur et auteur de chansons, et pour donner suite à sa traduction complète du poème *The Buke of the Howlat* en italien, réalisée pour sa thèse de master, il est en train de planifier une anthologie de traductions italiennes de poésie écrite en ancien écossais.

Ruggero Bianchin is a PhD researcher at the University of Glasgow's English Language & Linguistics department, where he also works as a Graduate Teaching Assistant. His doctoral thesis focuses on the linguistic analysis of Romance translations of Older Scots poetry, and has presented preliminary findings of his research at a number of conferences (among these FRLSU 2021 and WCSL 2022). He is also an experienced translator and published songwriter, and after completing a full Italian translation of the alliterative poem *The Buke of the Howlat* for his MA thesis, he is planning a collection of Older Scots poetry in Italian translations.