

MICKLE'S TRANSLATION: A REAPPRAISAL

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I was glad when I became acquainted with Professor Lipking's article about Mickle's translation of *The Lusiad* (1776).¹ After having written my M.A. thesis on "William Julius Mickle: a Translator and an Interpreter" some years ago,² I was pleased to find someone whose literary interests point in the same direction, especially because there are so few people writing about Mickle's translation — a milestone in the reception of our epic Poet's literary merits in England. And it was made even more pleasant when I found out that Professor Lipking's reading differed from mine quite significantly, as far as the main critical approach is concerned.

Whereas Professor Lipking places emphasis upon the transmigration of myths as founding narratives of a people's history or a people's country — in other words, myths of nationhood underlying both Camões's poem and Mickle's translation and their inherent contradictions, which led him inevitably to explore the translator's Scottish heritage at various levels, namely its relation with the *Poems of Ossian* by James Macpherson — throughout my reading I was very much more concerned with the fact that Mickle, as he himself confesses, wanted to "give a poem

¹ Lawrence Lipking, "The View from Almada Hill: Myths of Nationhood in Camões and William Julius Mickle", in *Post-Imperial Camões* (University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies 9, 2003), pp. 165-176.

² Isabel Simões Ferreira, *William Julius Mickle: Um Tradutor, Um Intérprete* (Lisboa, Dissertação de Mestrado em Estudos Anglo-Portugueses, Apresentada à Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 1988). The present text was presented at a seminar, CEAP, Lisbon 2003.

that might live in the English language”.³ In other words, my reading was pragmatically oriented and attuned to the concept of readers’ response theory, not bearing in mind Mickle’s nationality or birthplace in particular, but rather the success of his poem as a meta-literary exercise, set in a wider context: Great Britain and the British empire in India.

After all, we can’t forget that Mickle was almost bankrupt when he started his translation in 1772 and died a rich man in 1788. As Professor Lipking states, “England had been good to him: nor did his commercial and literary achievements seem to owe much to the country where he was born.”⁴ In fact, even the list of subscribers to his translation, composed of names belonging to the East India Company, English academic and literary circles, among many others, confirm that his translation was aimed at a wider audience that went far beyond his Scottish origins.

As a consequence, my attention was focused on a close comparison of the original text by Camões, *Os Lusíadas*, and Mickle’s translation of it, followed by another poem of his, *Almada Hill: an Epistle from Lisbon*⁵ (1781), seen as a sort of supplement to his translation. So in order to account for the enormous success of Mickle’s translation, I read his mutilations of the original text (enlargements, deletions, interpolations, transfigurations, etc) in terms of a group of leitmotifs that seem to be clustered around two or three sets of basic themes: the importance of commerce and British expansion overseas, the questions of literary form and taste and, finally, Mickle’s idiosyncrasies, though at present these won’t be my primary concern.

As to the first set of ideas, the transformation of our epic Poem into “the Epic of Commerce” bestows upon the Poem of Camões a frontierless and a universal meaning that does not exist as long as it is considered to be our national epic Poem. Mickle advertised *The Lusiad* as “the Poem of every trading nation, [...] the Epic Poem of the Birth of Commerce. And in a particular manner the Epic Poem of whatever country has the control and possession of the commerce of India.”⁶ From the

³ William Julius Mickle, *The Lusiad; or, The Discovery of India. An Epic Poem. Translated from the Original Portuguese of Luis de Camoens* (Oxford, Printed by Jackson and Lister, 1776), p. CLI.

⁴ Lawrence Lipking, *op.cit.*, p. 169.

⁵ From now on, this poem will be just referred as *Almada Hill*.

⁶ William Julius Mickle, *The Lusiad; or, The Discovery of India. An Epic Poem. Translated from the Original Portuguese of Luis de Camoens* (Oxford, Printed by Jackson and Lister, 1776), p. CXLVII.

reception theory point of view, this reflects a significant shift in the orientation of English nationalism since the defeat of the Spanish Armada (1588): a surge in the pride and consolidation of a tradition of maritime enterprise, commercial ambition and achievement, led by English merchants.

Thus the representational framework underlying Mickle's interpretation of the Poem indicates us how much the ideological posture of the middle-class Scottish translator differed from that of the aristocratic Portuguese Poet. It is enough to recall the first stanzas of *Os Lusíadas*, as they immediately give us an overview of the theme, to confirm that the Poem is made up of the memory of a people, "the illustrious Lusitanian breast" — a poetic record of its deeds and valour. "Weapons and barons", are, to sum up, the two axes around which the Poem is structured.

Besides, the very title of the translation, *The Lusiad; or, the Discovery of India*, establishes a relationship of semantic equivalence, which does not exist in the original, and seems to delimit and circumscribe *Os Lusíadas* to a single historical event and restricted context from the outset, to the detriment of other significant related episodes. Not to attribute to them their due importance is to misrepresent the text as a whole. The fact that Camões chose as the central action of the Poem Vasco de Gama's voyage, the very real goal of which was to arrive in India and set up trading connections, does not impede him from building up the History of Portugal around this central theme. The resulting story informs and gives life to the Portuguese spirit of heroism, which is recorded starting with the establishment of the kingdom up to the crossing of unknown seas. To back up this interpretation is the story told by Vasco de Gama to the King of Melinde, as well as the gallery of warriors presented by Paulo da Gama to Catual, thus widening the Poem's scope in keeping with that of an epic national Poem.

Within this context, the reinforcement of the epic tone in relation to Infante D. Henrique (known as Henry the Navigator) on the part of the translator takes on an even greater significance when we confirm that the two characters that Paulo da Gama emphasises most are Afonso Henriques and Nuno Álvares Pereira. The former founded the nation and the latter consolidated its independence. From this we can deduce that Mickle, in contrast to Camões, gives greater emphasis to those characters and elements which are associated with maritime expansion.

This viewpoint fits in with the dedication of *Os Lusíadas* to Vasco de Gama, going against the collective meaning inherent in

the original title of Camões's epic Poem, *The Lusiads* (in the plural form) and not *The Lusiad* (in the singular).

Based on these observations, it seems that Mickle intends to put much greater emphasis on Vasco da Gama than Camões does, with a view to preserving at all costs the dignity of the character who, according to his version, is the sole hero of *Os Lusíadas*.

The significant alteration introduced by Mickle at the beginning of Canto IX, certainly the weightiest in the whole poem due to its length (three hundred and six verses) — preceded by the almost complete omission of the last twenty-four stanzas of Canto VIII — stems from this deliberate attempt to maintain the heroic character of Vasco de Gama intact, in order to better mould him to fit the patterns of the epic genre.

It would seem that Vasco da Gama's shrewd and cunning approach throughout the negotiation process with Catual does not sit well with the bravery and daring required of the epic hero. To the translator's effort to play down any possible deficiencies due to the fact that they do not fulfil the requirements of the epic genre, we can add his enormous admiration for the protagonist in discovering the sea route to India. Thus, in Mickle we find verses alluding to Gama imbued with a vibrant enthusiasm, which is not present in Camoens. This effect is felt in *Almada Hill* in which the evocation of the glory of the sixteenth century is characterised by figures such as Infante D. Henrique, Vasco da Gama, Columbus and Ferdinand Magellan.

Thus, the content of some of the critical appreciation of *Os Lusíadas* that appears at this time in England is not surprising. An article published in *The Edinburgh Magazine* reads thus:

“[...] the principal defect in our author appears to be his introducing too long and frequent episodes, and at improper places; episodes, some of which have no relation to the subject of his poem. The whole third and fourth books are taken up in an episode, in which the history of Portugal is described. Part of the seventh and eighth is taken with the same”.⁷

In fact Mickle is interested in underlining everything in *Os Lusíadas* that is able to take on a more universal meaning. Seen

⁷ “The Lusiad; or, the Discovery of India. An Epic Poem. Translated from the Original Portuguese of Luis de Camoens. By William Julius Mickle”, in *The Edinburgh Magazine* (vol. V, May, 1776), p. 204.

in this light, the references to the river Tagus take on a special significance. The Tagus becomes a singular point of reference, even coming to represent a preferred translating term for Portugal and its related terminology. In *Almada Hill* we come across terms such as “Tago’s iron race”⁸ or “Tago’s gallant race”.⁹ It could be said that while Camões lyricises the Luso people, Mickle lyricises the Tagus race, thus stressing the epic tone in everything linked to a greater or lesser degree with trade.

Camões is far from being a simple glorifier, be it of trade or of imperialistic expansion. This is confirmed by the venerable Velho do Restelo. His voice resounds with bitterness about the imperial adventure. His good sense and critical spirit contrast starkly with the Promethean heroics of the sixteenth century discoverers. Given our discussion above, it is hardly surprising to discover that Mickle omits eight out of the eleven stanzas which make up this episode. He thus leaves out all objections to expansion in the East, as well as the curse of the man who built the first boat.

We have to bear in mind that at this time Great Britain was already firmly established in the East. Since the signature of the treaty of 1661, which settled the marriage of Charles II to Catherine of Bragança and the subsequent cession of the island of Bombay to the English monarch and granting of commercial privileges, followed, later on, by the defeat of the French forces by Robert Clive at Plassey, in June 1757, Great Britain had become the only dominant European power in India. In addition, British society in the second half of the eighteenth century saw an unparalleled growth in technological progress and trade — the keys of its coeval and future plans of aggrandisement and expansion.

For that reason, Mickle not only transforms the trade route to India into a voyage of light, but also portrays India as the very fountain of life and wealth. The introduction of opposing semantic fields to characterise trade — *light versus darkness* — present throughout *The Lusiad* and *Almada Hill* corresponds to the clash between the Modern Age and the Middle Ages, which Mickle lingers over in the *Introduction* to the poem in order to defend the benefits coming out of the exchange between East and West. This acts simultaneously as a form of response to the theory of the

⁸ William Julius Mickle, “Almada Hill: an Epistle from Lisbon”, in *Poems, and a Tragedy* (London, Printed by A. Paris for J. Egerton, 1794), p. 175.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

'noble savage' put forward by Jean Jacques Rousseau and Abbé Raynal, and also to the criticisms of Dr. Johnson on the pernicious effects of the Portuguese and Spanish discoveries.

Underlying the arguments in favour of the superiority of European civilisation, described as being able to express itself as fair and enlightened colonisation, Mickle also has in mind the defence of the policies carried out by the East India Company, founded in 1600 as a joint-stock association of English merchants who received, by a series of charters, exclusive rights to trade to the "Indies".¹⁰ Their abuses prompted bitter criticism from fellow citizens, namely from Adam Smith, who advocated the abolition of the monopoly of this company and the consequent opening up of trade in India to the rules of the free market of private initiative.

It is worth pointing out that the Company had always needed friends at court and in Parliament. This had already happened in the seventeenth century in order to fight off challenges to its monopoly of trade to Asia. But serious objections to the Company's activities re-emerged after the take-over of Bengal. The Company's servants, named sarcastically nabobs — after *nawab*, the Indian word for an Indian Muslim prince —, brought about widespread criticism. People feared that an empire of conquest would corrupt the new empire-builders in India and cause profound change in Britain. The so-called nabobs purchased country estates, solicited peerages, managed to get advantageous marriages and sought seats in Parliament. According to Anthony Farrington, British society was used to "embracing the self-made man, returning from distant parts of the world to set himself up with a country estate or a seat in Parliament [...]. But the new 'nabobs' of the Company's service were returning with fortunes equalling those of the landed aristocracy, without, it would appear, either too much effort or ability. A corrupt political system at Westminster combined jealousy with morality to curb the corruption of the Company rule in India."¹¹

Therefore, Mickle's translation has to be read against this backdrop. And he contributed a great deal with his translation and long *Introduction*, more specifically with the parts that gave rise, in the second edition (1778), to his essay on *History of the Rise and Fall of the Portuguese Empire in the East*, followed by

¹⁰ In contemporary usage, the "Indies" were defined as the lands lying between the Cape of Good Hope and the Straits of Magellan.

¹¹ Anthony Farrington, *Trading Places. The East India Company and Asia 1600-1834* (London, The British Library, 2002), pp. 114-115.

Application, to the polemic of the abolition of the East India Company's monopoly, in which he was interested in getting a job. As one of his biographers states, he repented not having dedicated his *Lusiad* to someone belonging to the East India Company.¹²

Furthermore, the instructive purpose of *History of the Rise and Fall of the Portuguese Empire in the East* is reflected in *Almada Hill*, in which we see the culmination of a process outlined in the *Introduction* to the translation. It consists of the dialectical alternation between progress and decline, corruption and justice, the aim of which is to stimulate the presumed audience, in this case the English, to be on their guard against disorder and the downfall of their empire.

In the meantime, it is worth pointing out that all this debate gave rise, some years later, to Pitt's India Act of 1784, Warren Hasting's impeachment and Edmund Burke's concept of trusteeship.¹³ That Mickle found in Camões a pretext to take part in this controversy only goes to show the capacity of the translator to adapt the original Poem to the circumstances surrounding his readers.

So apart from these themes related to Trade and Empire, Mickle made several other changes, in order to make his poem readable and enjoyable. Some of these have to do with sensitivity and emotion, two of the fundamental poetic motifs of the Pre-Romantic period, mainly concerning the intrinsic relationship between the sublime and other aesthetic concepts, such as Gothic and Picturesque.

In the light of this, it does not surprise us that Mickle recreated the form of the Giant Adamastor, emphasising its hideous, hostile appearance, which is highlighted by the mariners' reaction to it. However, it is in the immensity of the sea and the untimely force of the wind, as well as in the eruption of earthly forces, that Mickle finds an opportunity to give vent to his creative talents. Let us take by way of example the description of the breaking of a storm of gigantic proportions, which creates an atmosphere propitious to the appearance of Baco to the Moorish

¹² John Sim, *The Poetical Works of William Julius Mickle* (London, Printed by J. Barfield, 1806), p. XXXIX.

¹³ According to Edmund Burke, "All political power which is set over men, being all artificial, and [...] in derogation from the natural equality of mankind at large, ought to be [...] exercised ultimately for their benefit [...] such [power is] in the strictest sense a trust; and it is the very essence of every trust to be rendered accountable." Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness. British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 76.

priest in Book VIII. After the gradual crescendo of the signs of the storm growing near, culminating in the image of an earthquake, Mickle refers to the mournful crowing of the cockerel and the dreadful howling of the dogs, thus giving emphasis to the exteriorisation of animals' pain. As Edmund Burke points out, not only the cries of affliction of people but also those of animals are important for rousing strong emotions.¹⁴

In *Almada Hill* there is a passage, which surprises by its similarity at the level of the atmosphere of horror in general and its descriptive features in particular. It deals with the Lisbon earthquake in 1755, the catastrophic dimensions of which unleashed a direct appeal to the Pre-Romantic sensibilities, to which Mickle did not remain immune. The recounting of battles is another area in which the translator feels at home, obtaining awe-inspiring effects. If the epic poem is in its essence, to paraphrase John Dennis,¹⁵ sublime, weighty and majestic, there is no doubt that Mickle skilfully learned these qualities from Camões's text to later rework and reinvent them as he saw fit. Even in *Almada Hill*, Mickle recalls the passionate attitudes stemming from the Restoration of Independence and the ensuing massacres. The violent way of describing death at times takes on a markedly gothic aspect. In fact, in Mickle there is a strong disposition towards the macabre and the grotesque, towards all that is excessive or abnormal, to the point of distorting the proportions of what is described or the sense of reality evident in Camões. In this particular case, I don't think that Mickle tames Camões, "in harmonizing a stormy and often savage text with gentler, enlightened tastes",¹⁶ as Professor Lipking has suggested.

However, if sentiment, one of the basic characteristics of the Pre-Romantics, controls man making him vulnerable to the world which surrounds him, there is no doubt that parallel to these poetics of excess, the sentiment of Nature also captures Mickle's attention. Let us refer specifically to the love for rural landscapes and rustic scenes. In Mickle we see a greater descriptive capacity for the outside world. It particularly deals with a new vision of the landscape, in which there exists a new sense of the richness of reality, more vivacity and detail in outlining

¹⁴ See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London, T. Tegg, 1810), p. 79.

¹⁵ See Hugh T. Swedenberg, *The Theory of the Epic in England, 1650-1800* (New York, Russel & Russel, 1972), p. 64.

¹⁶ Lawrence Lipking, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

contours and views. Thus the range of colours and the elements which make up the Mediterranean flora — the vine, the olive and lemon tree — which tend to define Camões's descriptions, are filled out with grasses, lawns, or the bleating of milk-white sheep running down hillsides, which immediately put us in mind of some of the more typical characteristics of the British countryside. On the other hand, the exploration of the sonorous aspects of water and contrasts between light and shade conjure up an obviously picturesque style, which culminates in the extravagant description of the Isle of Love, given its typically rural setting. This aesthetic approach in relation to nature is evident not only in the translation of *Os Lusíadas*, but also in *Almada Hill*, in which the poet describes to us the magnificent view that his eyes feast on from the heights of the castle in Almada.

However, the translator's descriptive capacity is constrained by the erotic portrait of Venus, the protecting goddess of the Portuguese. Mickle, in contrast to Camões, tries to dampen the inherent eroticism of Venus' physical beauty, to such an extent that in Canto II, namely in stanzas 37 and 42, there are verses which are not translated in the English version. Due to their greater erotic content and their challenge to Christian morality and chastity, both of these passages are omitted by the translator, not to mention various other passages in Canto IX — the Isle of Love.

In search of a reason behind these alterations, we cannot disregard Voltaire's essay on *Os Lusíadas*, which Mickle criticises so bitterly in his *Introduction*. One of the aspects that didn't please Voltaire was the fact that Venus, a pagan divinity, was entrusted with leading the defenders of the Christian faith to the East. Mickle tries to cancel out such a contradiction, based on an allegorical interpretation of Camões's mythology, by showing that it is the presence of celestial Venus, who presides over the love of wisdom and virtue, and not earthly Venus, responsible for the blossoming of sensual pleasures.

Whether because of Voltaire's criticisms, or because of Mickle's religious and moral upbringing — the same religiousness which compels him to support the spirit of the Crusades which brings to life the Portuguese in their struggle against the Moors — we are forced to conclude, as Eustace Taylor¹⁷ suggests, that the shortcomings of the translator at times benefit the poet. In other

¹⁷ See Sister Eustace Taylor, *William Julius Mickle (1734-1788). A Critical Study* (Washington, Times and News Publishing Co. Gettysburg, PA., 1937).

words, although not faithful to the original text, Mickle was a translator faithful to the aim he set himself — that of breathing life into a Poem which was able to live in the English language.

And this is so true that, for example, in the 19th century, after Camões's tercentenary (1880) — a period marked by the prestigious translation of Sir Richard Burton¹⁸ — there are still orientalist and British historians, like Sir William Hunter, who in order to illustrate their reasoning turn to Mickle's verses: "the curse of the weird prophet of the *Lusiad*, amid whose maledictions Da Gama departed, in the end came true — 'the prize a shadow or a rainbow blaze'."¹⁹ These last words are Mickle's. And Sir William Hunter lets us know in a footnote that he used Mickle's translation "for the spirit not the letter."²⁰ So it is this very spirit that has managed to outlive other English translations of *Os Lusíadas* that makes Mickle's translation particularly interesting and worthwhile.

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¹⁸ Sir Richard Francis Burton, *Os Lusíadas (The Lusiads)*. Edited by His Wife, Isabel Burton, 2 vols. (London, Berbard Quaritch, 1884).

¹⁹ Sir William Hunter, *A History of British India*, vol. I (London, Longmans, Green & Co., 1899), p. 90.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

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