

**THE SACRED DRAMAS OF  
GEORGE BUCHANAN,  
TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH  
VERSE BY ARCHIBALD BROWN**

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George Buchanan

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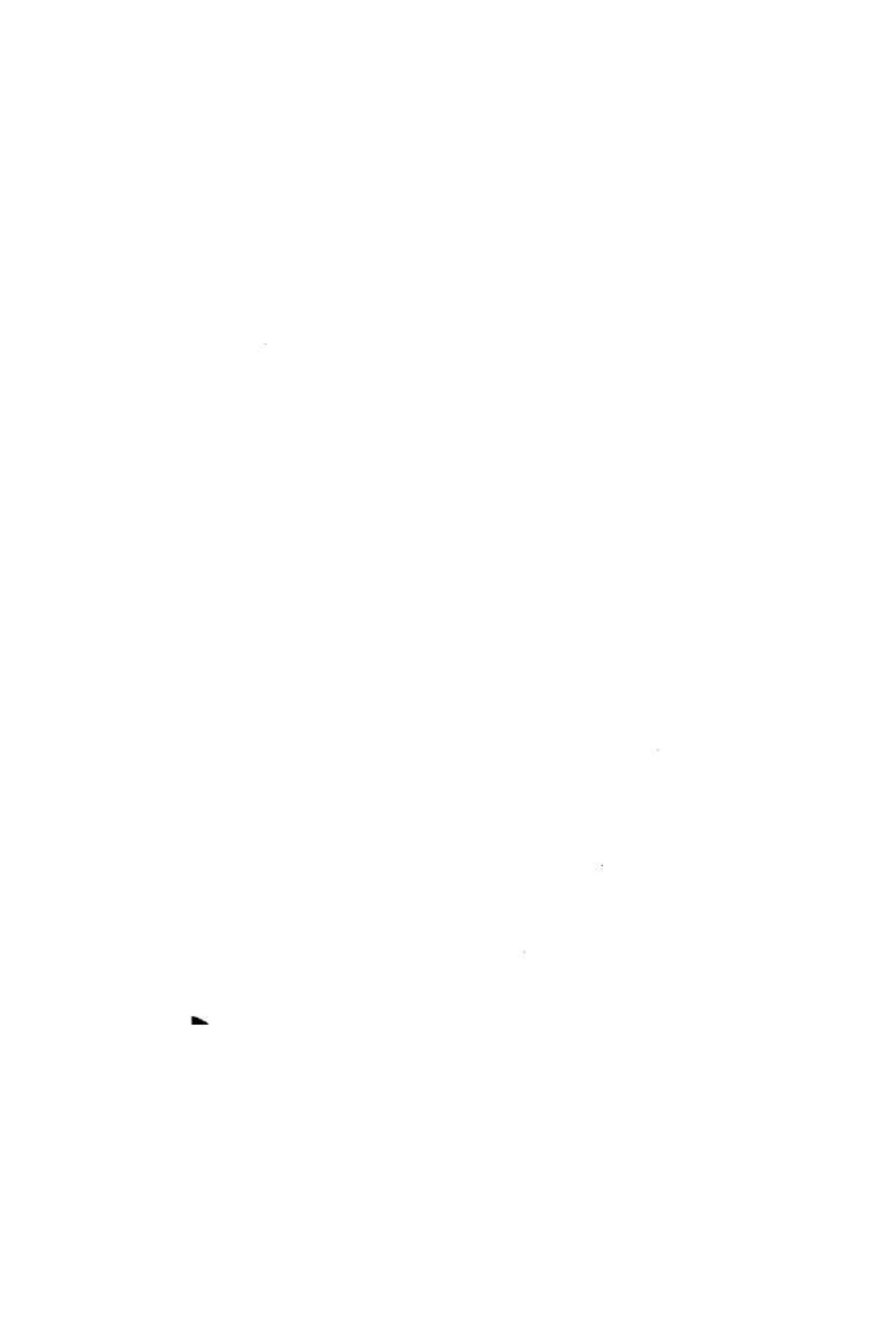
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Translated into English Verse

BY

ARCHIBALD BROWN

*Minister of the Parish of Legerwood*

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## P R E F A C E

IN making this translation I have had before me only two editions of the Latin text, viz., that of 1615 (Andro Hart, Edinburgh), and that of 1687 (H. Wetstein, Amsterdam). Both give the bare text without note or comment; and, apart from typographical errors, they are in complete accord.

Two metrical translations of these Dramas are known to me to have appeared; one of them in 1870 (Moodie Miller, Edinburgh), and the other a few years ago (Gardner, Paisley). Of the latter I cannot speak, never having seen it, and having indeed avoided seeing it, my own translation being by that time practically complete.

The earlier version is a careful and creditable piece of work; but as a poetic rendering it suffers from its rigid literalism. The translator has shown great self-restraint in adhering resolutely and at all costs to his text, and in firmly refusing to round off a thought, or place it in a setting somewhat more in unison with the genius or idiom of the English tongue.

It humbly seems to me that literalism carried so far

as this defeats its own purpose, and that the resultant version, instead of being rigorously faithful, may sometimes be the very reverse. Take, *e.g.*, the adjuration *per Deum!* (meaning, *in God's name!*); represent it, bluntly and *tout court*, by the two corresponding English words; and what have you? You have a rendering true to the letter, false to the sense; and what is in your text a solemn adjuration becomes in your hands a profane expletive. The instance is not imaginary; but it is probably an extreme one, and may be singular of its kind. The moral is, that a translator requires to move with reasonable freedom, and is likely to do greater justice both to his author and to himself by not tying himself too tightly to the literal word.

To give word for word, or phrase for phrase, or line for line, has not been my aim. What I have honestly tried to do is to give the force and tone and spirit of the original, without departing from the written text more than might allowably be done. If I may venture so to speak, I have teased out Buchanan's web, and woven up the wool again as best I could. The material is essentially his; the texture, the colouring, and the effect, so far as I could reproduce them, are his also.

To what extent I have succeeded or failed in this attempt, I must leave to others to decide. No one can be more sensible than I am of its imperfections—failures to hit off the precise shades of meaning—failures, if not to compress, at least not to aggravate the undeniable *longueurs* that are but too frequent in the speeches—

failures, in the Choral Odes, to repress the occasional indulgence in an archaic word or in words which if not obsolete are obsolescent. For many of these faults—and the list might no doubt be enlarged—there is, I fear, no defence; but let me say, at least of some of them:—

Sunt delicta tamen quibus ignovisse velimus:  
Nam neque chorda sonum reddit quem vult manus et mens,  
Poscentique gravem persæpe remittit acutum,  
Nec semper feriet quodcumque minabitur arcus.

The neglect into which Buchanan has fallen among his countrymen of the present day—Quatercentenary Celebrations notwithstanding—is surprising; but it is beyond dispute. A richly endowed man of genius, one of the foremost scholars and admittedly the greatest poet of his time, his hold upon the affection and the admiration of his country might have been supposed to be assured. But it has not been so. A dark eclipse rests upon his name; so all but total, one cannot think of it without feeling that a great injustice has been done. Worse fate could hardly have befallen him, unless it be the grotesque distortion of him long current among the peasantry of his own country, with whom he passed familiarly for a rough jester and Court Fool.

This shameful caricature of him probably exists no longer; and one may hope with some degree of confidence that the eclipse which rests upon him, now perhaps at its darkest, will to a large extent pass away and permit the real lustre of his name to shine out again.