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**THE POETRY OF
WILLIAM FORBES OF DISBLAIR (1661-1740)**

William Donaldson

William Forbes of Disblair is a name well-known to students of Scottish vernacular music during the first half of the eighteenth century. The name “Disblair” is not infrequently found in important manuscript collections of the period, and his arrangements of classic Scots airs like “John Anderson, my jo,” “My Dearie an thou die,” and “Willie was a Wanton Wag” have remained in circulation, and in print, down to the present day.¹ From the family circle of William Forbes also came one of the most powerful strands of oral tradition to be recorded during the period. His daughters Liliias and Anne, the “Ladies of Disblair,” were the chief informants of his granddaughter, Anna Gordon (Mrs. Brown of Falkland), easily pre-eminent amongst the named ballad-sources of eighteenth century Britain.²

William Forbes was also a poet, whose social and political satires mark him as one of the most distinctive voices in early eighteenth-century Scotland, yet his literary reputation has received little recognition. Forbes left a significant body of published work, but his poems have hitherto remained uncollected, scattered amongst fugitive prints held only by the greatest libraries. Now that digital collections like ECCO (*Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*) give direct access to scarce and physically-

¹ A number of pieces by “Disblair” are included in the great Macfarlane MS c.1740, compiled by David Young, National Library of Scotland MSS 2084-2085; “William Forbes MSS c.1760,” NLS ADV.MS.5.2.25 also contains a number of his arrangements. For published versions, see David Johnson, ed., *Scottish Fiddle Music in the 18th Century: A music collection and historical study* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1984), 77-79, and the same writer’s “Musical Traditions in the Forbes Family of Disblair, Aberdeenshire,” *Scottish Studies*, 22 (1978), 91-93, which draws attention to the rich blend of oral and written music, of the popular and the learned, in William Forbes’s remarkable family.

² The great ballad scholar Francis James Child declared “No Scottish ballads are superior in kind to those recited in the last century by Mrs Brown, of Falkland”: *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Northfield MN: Loomis House Press 2001, originally published 1883), “Advertisement to Part 1,” xi.

disparate primary sources, we can draw some of his works together and form an estimate of the whole, permitting reassessment.

Forbes was a scion of the Scots landed gentry. His estate, the barony of Disblair, lay on the north bank of the river Don, near the village of Newmachar some ten miles north-west of Aberdeen. He took his original title from the estate of Rubislaw (now well within the boundaries of Aberdeen city) which he received on his marriage in 1689. Later he served as a Baillie, or magistrate, of the city. But although sometimes described later as Baillie Forbes of Rubislaw, contemporaries knew him as “Disblair,” and it would be a mistake to view him as part of a merely burghal élite.

William Forbes was baptized 17th November 1661, the eldest son of a second marriage of John Forbes of Balfluig, which lies near Alford, and, through his mother, a grandson of William, 11th Lord Forbes, making him member of an extended web of Forbes gentry occupying the rolling howes of central Aberdeenshire. Later, he acquired the estate of Disblair, and there his daughters Lilius and Anne, “the Ladies of Disblair,” were raised. In 1689 he married Elizabeth Bateman of Tranthwaite Hall, Westmoreland, a beautiful, high-spirited gentlewoman in somewhat reduced circumstances, with whom he was to have a stormy, if eventually long-term, relationship. She actually divorced him for infidelity in 1704, but they resumed their connection some years later, with issue, Lilius Forbes, mother of Anna Gordon.³

Forbes is identified as author of a number of political satires, acerbic personal attacks, and poems on love and marriage, but there are problems with attribution.⁴ For example, his best-known work, *A Pil for Pork-*

³ The sources for Forbes’s life are scattered. There is currently no entry in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, although there is a brief life in *Literature Online*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2137936166?accountid=12492>. By far the fullest source, from which this account is drawn, is a forthcoming monograph by Ruth Perry, *The Ballad World of Anna Gordon, Mrs. Brown of Falkland*. I am indebted to Professor Perry for access to this material.

⁴ The poems consulted for this article are listed in an Appendix below. The ballad scholar William Walker compiled a check-list of Forbes’s poems in his catalogue of Aberdeen poets, *The Bards of Bon-Accord, 1375-1860* (Aberdeen: Edmond & Spark, 1887), 643, differing in some attributions: Walker omitted *A New-Year’s Gift for the Renegado* (1705), but included two additional items, *Some Remarks upon a Piece called Schema Scarum, with a Comical Dialogue betwixt Ned Wilmot and Dr. Martext* (1712: in Walker’s Forbes list but marked Anon.), and *Allan Ramsay Metamorphosed into a Heather Bloter Poet, in a Pastoral between Aegon and Melibiae* (n.d.). On the latter attribution, cf. Ralston Inglis, *The Dramatic Writers of Scotland* (Glasgow: Mackellar, 1868), 131, and *The Works of Allan*

Eaters, published in 1705 during the height of the Union agitation, has also been ascribed to Alexander Pennecuik, and two additional poems included in the expanded version of the pamphlet, namely “Robert the Third, King of Scotland, his Answer to a Summons sent Him by *Henry* the Fourth of *England*, to do Homage for the Crown of *Scotland*” and “The Englishman’s Grace over his Pock-Pudding,” seem unlikely to be by Forbes.⁵ The actual extent of his repertory is difficult to assess. It was a period when literary works still circulated in manuscript, and Forbes’s papers were dispersed at his death. The printed works linked with his name may as a result be only part of his actual output.

There does, however, seem agreement on a central core of poems, and two pieces on affairs of state, *The True Scots Genius Reviving* of 1704 and *A Pil for Pork-Eaters* of 1705, provide an entrance point to Forbes’s political writings. Fired by intense Scottish patriotism, these poems were both part of the war of words raging over the Darien Expedition and the Treaty of Union of 1707. At the Revolution of 1688-1689 the pillars of the *ancien régime* in Scotland had begun to crumble. The Scottish Parliament, from being essentially a rubber stamp for the Scottish Privy Council through which the country was administered, achieved a voice and a will of its own.⁶ At the same time the mechanisms for press censorship and control—never strong—became significantly weaker. “Disagreement with the crown in print was no longer a capital offence,” and control of the press shifted from national to local level, eventually becoming the responsibility

Ramsay, ed. Burns Martin *et al.*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1951-1974), VI: 194.

⁵ King Robert’s “Answer” takes a stoutly patriotic line not unlike the “Pork-Eaters” poem, arguing that Scottish history has for millennia been marked by the successful defense of freedom, in contrast to that of England which has been a humiliating sequence of foreign conquests by Romans, Saxons, Danes and Normans. However, the poem appears to date from an earlier period than Forbes. “The Englishman’s Grace” was later attributed to Pennecuik. On the three early printings of *Pils*, and attribution issues, see Appendix below. For further information on the publishing context of *Pil*, see D. Wyn Evans, “James Watson of Edinburgh, Printer and Publisher: a Bibliography of Works from his Press, 1695-1722, with an Account of his Life and Career,” *Edinburgh Bibliographical Society Transactions*, 5.2 (1982), 64, 144.

⁶ For a good overview of the fluctuating fortunes of the Scottish parliament in the century before the Union, see John R. Young, “The Scottish Parliament and National Identity from the Union of the Crowns to the Union of the Parliaments, 1603-1707,” in Dauvit Broun, R. J. Finlay, and Michael Lynch, eds, *Image and Identity: The Making and Re-making of Scotland Through the Ages* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1998), 105-142 (esp. 122-130).

of the greater burghs.⁷ There followed an explosion of political print culture in Scotland, sustained by a vigorous popular press.⁸

These were interesting times. The dilemmas faced by the political class in Scotland during the early years of the eighteenth century were of exceptional difficulty. The Union of the Crowns of 1603 under which a Scottish king, James VI and I, succeeded the childless Elizabeth I, last of the English Tudors, resulted in two different legislatures under a single executive. The King of England and the King of Scots were one and the same person but ruled over two different, technically sovereign, states. In the event of a collision, this inherently unstable system could create irreconcilable claims. For example, what would happen if the Scots took a major economic initiative and established a trading entrepôt in the Isthmus of Darien, thus controlling movements of goods between the Atlantic and the Pacific, and this was opposed by English commercial interests? (At one point, for example, the Company of Scotland which promoted the scheme, had as many subscribers as the Bank of England and rather more than the East India Company).⁹ Who would the British executive favour? Unsurprisingly, the King of England trumped the King of Scots. Letters were sent to impede the Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies from raising capital on the Continent, and forbidding English assets in America and the Caribbean to support the venture—dooming it to failure despite the enormous—potentially ruinous—financial commitment from the north.

The divided nature of that executive power also created powerful dilemmas when the succession in the direct Stuart line eventually faltered. The English resolved their difficulties by naming the House of Hanover to the succession; but the Scots were not obliged to follow this decision, and for a time the Union of the Crowns faced the real possibility of dissolution, triggering an acute constitutional crisis. What eventually ensued was a characteristic blend of *raison d'État*, and *grand commerce*. Having first near-bankrupted the Scots, the English staged a hostile take-over bid (it was, after all, the first great age of corporate globalization). Under the

⁷ Alastair J. Mann, *The Scottish Book Trade 1500-1720: Print Commerce and Print Control in Early Modern Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2000), 168-191.

⁸ For further details see Karin Bowie, *Scottish Public Opinion and the Anglo-Scottish Union 1699-1707* (Woodbridge: Royal Historical Society/Boydell, 2007), and W. R. and V. B. McLeod, *Anglo-Scottish Tracts, 1701-1714* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Libraries, 1979).

⁹ Douglas Watt, *The Price of Scotland: Darien, Union and the Wealth of Nations* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2007), p.80. Although my conclusions are different, my account of the Darien scheme and its influence on the Union owes much to this excellent book. We should not forget that there were a lot of English as well as Scottish funds committed to the Company.

terms of the Treaty of Union, monies invested in the Company of Scotland trading to Africa and the Indies were returned to investors in full (plus interest), and in return the Scottish parliament was dismantled to prevent such liabilities occurring in future. This is why an incorporating rather than a federal union was pursued by the power-brokers in the south. And so, on May 1, 1707, the separate states of Scotland and England were dissolved and “Great Britain” came into being. But for all the talk of free and equal partnership, it looked to many very much like *Anschluss*.

Public controversy raged in Scotland, often intemperate enough in tone, but frequently also learned, subtle, and forensically searching, and poetry was an important element in the campaign. In the years since the Revolution of 1688-89, numerous poets had spiced the controversy with metrical argument.¹⁰ Now this reached a new high, and in the forefront of the attack were William Forbes of Disblair’s poems *The True Scots Genius Reviving* and—most famous of all anti-Union satires—*A Pil for Pork-Eaters: or, a Scots Lancet for an English Swelling*, published by James Watson in 1705 and reprinted a number of times thereafter.

The occasion of *The True Scots Genius* was a vote in the Scottish Parliament in 1704 on a motion by the Duke of Hamilton, the leader of the Country Party, “Not to name the Successor till we have a previous treaty with England for regulating our Commerce, and other Concerns with that nation.” Forbes was resolutely opposed to any form of incorporating union with an English state which he viewed as exploitative, disingenuous and implacably hostile to Scottish interests. He considered the issue of sovereignty as paramount, and at the root of the problem, the Union of the Crowns in 1603. Amongst its ill consequences, claimed Forbes, was loss of autonomy, long-term economic decline and the open-ended commitment of Scottish soldiers to England’s seemingly endless Continental wars:

Under the crushing weight, tho’ not the Name,
Of Bondage, *Scotland* groaning did remain,
This hundred Years, with a declining Fame:
Bereav’d of Power, of Riches, and of Trade,
Still slavishly to *England’s* Int’rest ty’d
Which, in return still, with a Mortal Feud
Did all Her brave and wise Designs Elude
While she in spite of multiplied Harms
For them ’gainst Neighb’ring Princes carry’d Arms,
Mistaken Charity! And always Lent
Auxiliaryes their Dangers to prevent
Who, at the honest exit of their Wars,
Still Reap’d the Benefit, and She the Scars....

¹⁰ William Donaldson, *The Jacobite Song: Political Myth and National Identity* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), 24-35.

Witness Ye *Flandrian* Fields so often Dy'd
With *Scotish* Crimson streams and purple Tide (ll.9-25).

Forbes showed Scotland drained to the point of death by English exactions, and he contrasted her previous proud history of warlike independence with her currently crippled state. He likened contemporary English attacks upon the independence of the Scottish crown (which even as he wrote was being branded by southern propagandists as subordinate to that of England) to a ghoulish grave-robbler prizing loose the valuables from the fingers of a corpse. But Forbes shows the spirit of Scotland reviving and stepping forth with spear and shield summon the Scottish lords to avenge her wrongs. In a passage which anticipates that other famous contemporary lament for the Union, "Belhaven's Vision,"¹¹ she cries:

Where is the Off-spring of the Noble Blood,
Which sometimes in the Veins of *Scotsmen* flow'd?
Where are the Sons whose Fathers did of old,
Prefer their Freedom to less worthy Gold?
Still graspt their Liberty with Manly Force,
And look'd on slavery as the greatest Curse: . . .
Where are they now who bear th' Illustrious Names,
O' th' *Hamiltons*, the *Douglasses*, the *Grahams*,
The *Bruce*, the *Hume*, the *Hay*, and many more,
Who still maintain'd My Liberty before? (ll.89-102).

The goddess, *Caledonia*, appeals to the heroic vision of Scottish history summed up in the theme of "Guid Auld Lang Syne," which viewed the Scottish community as stubbornly maintaining its independence in the face of sustained external attacks.¹²

Was it for this I bore the fiercest shock
Of *Roman* Legions? And with Fury brok
Through all the Glittering Squadrons, who amaz'd
To find Me fix them Limits, wondering gaz'd!
The forward Legions with their Thundring train,
Strove oft to leap the Adrian wall in vain;
Were still Repulsed, still beat back again.
In midst of all their Eagles I did Grasp
My Freedom, and retain'd it to the last.
The Fury of the *Goths* here stopt its course:
The Manly Warlike *Saxon* wanted Force
To cut a Passage; and the Martial *Dane*,

¹¹ *ESTC* gives the earliest printing of the "Vision" as 1706. An important poem, it was reprinted again several times during the eighteenth century over a remarkably long period of time.

¹² For more on the heroic national vision which lies behind Forbes's lines, see the chapter "Guid Auld Lang Syne," in Donaldson *Jacobite Song*, 5-15.

His Successor, was oft beat back with Shame.
England's proud Conquerors could never tame
 My Native Fierceness, nor Enthrall my Fame:
 My Ancient Laws and Priv'leges still stood,
 Tho' deeply writ in Characters of Blood.
 To force and Hostile Arms I never bow'd.
 When Treach'ry sometimes had me half Subdu'd:
 But still, in utmost Straits, I could retain
 My Bleeding Freedom, and Secur't again,
 Until this last, to me Inglorious, Age
 In which my Spirits sunk, and Noble Rage
 Decay'd into a Tameness, which did still
 Too faintly Struggle with our Jaylors Will. ...
 Shall you be ever plagued with the Curse
 Of Poverty? And will you (which is worse)
 Be always Drudging Slaves to th' *English* Nation:
 Submissive Fools to th' End of the Creation?
 Forbid it Heavens! (ll.112-145).

These powerful themes, involving memories of heroic resistance, patriotic fire, and dread of betrayal, were to ring down the centuries. For example, they clearly prefigure the nationalistic strain we find Burns's "Parcel of Rogues in a Nation" and "Scots wha hae." They echo still in our own Independence and Brexit times, with the frequently-articulated notion of the Union as oppressive and unequal, a prison rather than a partnership.

William Forbes's best-known political poem, *A Pil for Pork-Eaters*, is prefixed by a prose "Advertisement" tracing the current crisis to the subordinate role of Scotland within the Union of the Crowns. It was a cardinal point of inherited political wisdom that "tho' the Accession to the Crowns of *England* and *Ireland* made King James a much greater King, yet it made *Scotland* a much lesser nation."¹³ The Advertisement says in part:

Old England gives you to know, That you're mightily mistaken to think, that this present, or any other Period or Juncture whatsoever, can afford you any Hopes of a Manumission from the Slavery you've now so patiently bore for these Hundred Years past, since the Union of the Crowns, your Liberties being now forfeited by Prescription.

This being granted, England boldly tells you, and will endeavor to make it good, if she can, That you've no Right to choose a Successor to Her present Majesty [Queen Anne]; Nor the liberty to make good Laws for the Security of your most valuable Interests; Nor to make Reprisals; Or Judge of the Demerits of Englishmens Crimes; Or to hang up their Pirates.

¹³ Quoted in Donaldson, *Jacobite Song*, 11.

I think him indeed a very ill Scotsman, who from any private End or Interest, wou'd endeavour to augment the present Differences betwixt the Two Nations; yet if this be (as I take it) our Case with England, I think, we've but a very scurvy Time on't. How far the Project of an Intire Union, now so much talkt of, may mend the Matter, I shall not presume to determine. A true Union consists, and is founded chiefly, on the Oneness and Sympathy of Tempers, both of Nations and Persons. From what Ground then, we are to hope for such an Union with a Nation, who at once Despise, Hate, and still Fear us, to a great Degree, let considering Men judge: And it were easie to make it appear (considering the present Posture of Affairs) that such an Union is morally impossible (p.4).

It is a sobering reflection that this highly intelligent man, capable of the nuanced skepticism shown here, should ultimately conclude that violence was the only argument the English could understand.

The “pork-eater” trope which gives the poem its name draws a vivid mark of distinction between the English and the Scots. Pork was regarded as unclean in much of the north and lay under partial taboo. Its use in this context is rendered still more powerful by the associated folklore: for example, it was considered very unlucky for a bridal party to encounter a pig, providing a powerful negative link between pork and the idea of Union.¹⁴ The image gains still added force from conventional notions of the Scots as an austere abstemious people in contrast with the English *rosbifs* who were a byword for gluttony throughout Europe.

The immediate occasion of the poem was the publication of a group of English pamphlets scurrilously attacking the independence of the Scottish crown, and the autonomy and impartiality of the Scottish courts, following the execution on Leith Sands on April 11, 1705, of certain English sailors charged with piracy against a Darien Company vessel. Dashed off in the heat of the political moment, yet still apt, metrically neat, and possessing a brutal forensic power, *A Pil for Pork-Eaters* suggests that instead of attacking the Scottish courts, the English would be better to look to their own shortcomings, since it ill became them to fuss about a gang of pirates who “did most justly swing” when they themselves had judicially executed their king, recalling the famous occasion during the Interregnum, when the High Court of Justice under its President, John Bradshaw, had condemned Charles I to death:

Had we pack't Juries, such damn'd hellish Things,
By which you *decently* have Murder'd Kings?
What *England* says, cou'd hardly be withstood;
Nor cou'd we clear our selves from guiltless Blood.

¹⁴ Walter Gregor, *Notes on the Folklore of the North-East of Scotland* (London: Folklore Society, 1881), 129-30.

No, no;
 Here were no Juries of old *Bradshaw's* Spawn,
 Who for Revenge, their Necks and Souls would pawn;
 But strongest Proofs, from sold Grounds, were drawn; (ll.14-21).

Warming to his theme, Forbes presents the affair as just one episode in a longer catalogue of tyranny and imposition:

But *England* Insolent, and Proud like Hell,
 Whose saucie Boldness nought but Blows can quell,
 Dare now our Laws and Sentences canvass,
 And Censures on our justest Pleadings pass;
 Tho' many pregnant Instances declare,
 What's scarce allow'd for bare Presumptions here,
 Wou'd serve to hang a hundred *Scots-men* there (ll.29-35).

Forbes eerily anticipates modern concerns about the overgrown and resource-hungry City of London, seen as the ultimate source of English corruption:

And *London*, thou curs'd *Sodom* o' the Isle,
 Who drains our Wealth, and laughs at us the while;
 Not these Four guilty Cities o' the Plain,
 On which Just Heav'n did Fire and Brimstone rain,
 Cou'd match thy nameless Crimes, who now art grown
 Hell's great Original, thy self alone. (ll.60-65)

Forbes traces all Scotland's ills to the Union of the Crowns in 1603. For redress he appeals to superior martial virtue, urging return of the Scottish forces from the Low Countries to give the English a military drubbing:

... let's boldly claim our Right;
 Let *England* Bully, but let *Scotland* Fight:
 And let another *Bannockburn* redress
 Too long endure'd Affronts and Grievances:...
 Thus did our Great *Forefathers* purchase *Fame*:
 And dare not *We*, their *Off-spring*, do the same?...
 Let us no more be bubbl'd and abus'd,
 Nor with their Shamms of Union more amus'd;
 'Tis nothing but a treacherous Decoy,
 To bring Us to their Measures, then destroy
 The Rights and Just Pretences of our Crown,
 And jeer and laugh at us when they have done.
 To Prophecy, tho' I have no Pretence,
 Yet I'll adventure to Divine for once;
 When Swans grow Black, and Ravens shall grow White
 Proud *England* then with *Scotland* shall unite;
 Unless we purg 'em with some Warlike Pills,
 And tame their Insolence against their Wills.
 Then to our Aid let's call our Forces strait,

Who gave to *England* such Renown of late;
 The *English* were the Conquerors proclaim'd,
 While injur'd *Scots* were to Oblivion damn'd:
 Yet had not Orkney and our Troops been there,
 Who in these Victories claim such a Share:
 Few Trophies then to *England* had been brought,
 Nor *Shellenberg* nor *Blenheim* so well fought. (ll.120-178)

It is often forgotten nowadays that in the latter days of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, in the great Continental wars of King William and Queen Anne, the spearhead of the British army, as at later periods, were the Scots regiments serving under the crown, then under their chief commander, Lieutenant-General (later Field Marshal) George Hamilton, first Earl of Orkney, hero of Steenkirk, Namur, and Blenheim (and later of Ramillies, Oudenarde and Malplaquet), perhaps the ablest of Marlborough's senior commanders.

The poem concludes with a rousing exhortation to patriotic Scots to cast their differences aside, unite, and settle England's hash once and for all:

But let our Chiefs all Factious Broils oppose,
 And join together in our common Cause.
 Insulting *England* to her Cost shall know,
 What Brave united *Scotsmen* then can do,
 When our best Troops are at thy Borders rang'd,
 Then *CALEDONIA*'s wrongs shall be reveng'd:
 Our *Highlanders* thy City-walls shall greet,
 And *Gilliecrankies* rifle *Lombard-street* (ll.192-199).

These lines form a strikingly early appreciation of the growing significance of Highland armies in British political disputes, which was to figure again throughout the wars of the British succession in 1715, 1719 and 1745-6. In a reference to the defeat of government forces by Viscount Dundee at the Battle of Killiecrankie during the 1788-9 Jacobite Rising, "Gilliecrankie" is forged into a metonym for Highlanders in general, a coinage which seems original to Forbes and is unrecorded in either *OED* or *DSL*.

The verse is often rough enough but frequently also animated by a lumbering bear-like power. Indeed, Forbes's political poems are impelled by a visceral hatred that still seems startlingly raw and disturbing centuries later, and it is unsettling to think that the mental world on display here is a mere generation distant from that of his son-in-law, the genial and polished Professor Thomas Gordon of King's College, scion of the Enlightenment, friend of Reid and Beattie, Campbell and Gerard, and father of Anna Gordon, Mrs. Brown of Falkland.

Much of Forbes's social poetry is devoted to private vendettas now wreathed in obscurity.¹⁵ But it is marked throughout by touches of his characteristic verbal energy, as in this flashing image from *The Patriots* (1734), showing ingenious use of the technical terminology of fencing:

... when we're stabb'd, 'tis all a Case,
 Whether it be in Cart or Tierce;
 Or if we're murder'd, much all one,
 Whether it be by Sword or Gun. (ll.72-5)

The most significant of Forbes's non-political poems is probably *Xantippe: or the Scolding Wife*, an extended verse satire of six hundred and sixty lines based on Erasmus's Latin dialogue, *Coniugium*, first published in Basel in 1523.¹⁶ *Coniugium* (i.e. "Marriage") was one of a series Erasmus intended as an aid to developing idiomatic, fluent Latin skills, and the collection as a whole went on to become a Renaissance classic, frequently reprinted and translated into the major European languages over the next two centuries. In it, two young women, Eualia and Xantippe, discuss the woes of marriage and what a wife can do to manage a difficult husband.

In Forbes's version a prose "Argument" sets the scene:

Xantippe and Phebe, two young Ladies lately married, the First a pert, jealous and imperious Wench, reflects much upon her Husband, rates and scolds extremely at him for his pretended Lewdness, and is resolved to part with him, is smartly taken up by her Friend Phebe a smooth, well-temper'd Girl, who endeavours to convince her ... that such Things are impracticable ... Xantippe relates the Prologue of a Battle betwixt her and her Husband, but is seriously advised, by her Friend, to give over such harsh and wild Methods.

This is no simple translation, however, but a substantial creative re-working. The *Coniugium* is yanked from its coolly rationalistic bearings, and instead of pallid debating positions, we get women with agency, real women, feisty, freely-spoken, and crackling with energy. In the original, Eualia (here rendered as Phebe for the sake of the metre) takes the lead and frames her arguments from a wholly patriarchal position. In Forbes's piratical re-making, Xantippe becomes the more powerful speaker, who then vigorously asserts the rights of women. She castigates her husband's meanness which will not allow her to dress well:

O happy you! wou'd it had been my Lot

¹⁵ See Appendix: Poems attributed to William Forbes consulted for this essay.

¹⁶ Craig R. Thompson, trs., *The Colloquies of Erasmus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 114-127.

To wed with any, but that naughty Sot
 My Husband, he a Husband fitter far
 To have been match'd with some she-crony Bear:
 No Wife of Sense but must this Beast abhor,
 And pelt with Tongue and Hand the savage Cur.
 Dost see (Pox rot him) how he lets me go,
 How nasty, tawdry, beggarly and low?
 While others walk abroad in handsome Dress,
 I've scarce a Rag to hang about my A—re;
 Yet this fine Man profusely wastes our Stores
 With his mad drunken Clubs, his Dice and Whores.
 A Nights comes reeling home at Three a Clock,
 And with his nauseous Vomit spoils my Smock.
 'Twou'd make one mad to suffer as I do,
 'Fore God I'll swinge him, if he treats me so (ll.11-26).

Erasmus's sweetly reasonable tone is transformed in a series of racy
 expostulatory couplets:

At first he bawl'd, and hector'd like a Bully,
 Then I reply'd, poor, fond, mistaken Cully,
 That foolish Threatning, if thou'rt wise, forbear,
 Thy empty Jargon's all propost'rous here.
 Weak, silly Craven, dost thou hope to try
 Tongue-war with Women...? (ll.37-42).

Forbes's Xantippe is altogether more violent, dangerous and pungently-
 spoken than her original. Here she expresses a determination to come out
 on top in the marriage-wars, breaking her husband's skull if need be:

Oh Lord!
 This put me past all Sense, so that—G--- damn me,
 I scarce forbare to beat the Rogue to Mummie;
 And was so struck with Madness and Surprize,
 I could have tore out both the Rascal's Eyes. (ll.102-106)

prompting her interlocutor to exclaim

But, why such Oaths? nay, rather keep thy Word
 And knock him down, but do not swear so hard (ll.107-8).

Xantippe relates with a violence and inventiveness that would give any
 thoughtful fellow pause, how in her case marital strife has ended in
 outright physical conflict. Countering Phebe's recommended course of
 smooth man-management behind a facade of seeming submission and
 complaisance, Xantippe launches into a catalogue of the woes of marriage,
 concluding that most husbands are mere wastrels, sunk in gambling and
 debauchery, obstreperous, violent and almost permanently drunk. She
 describes innocent girls trapped in appalling marriages and receiving scant

support from fathers more concerned with imagined patriarchal rights than their injured daughters' wrongs.

Phebe objects that women too often bring such difficulties on themselves by choosing unsuitable partners:

Most Women now do hold it for a Rule,
To love the handsome Outside of a Fool.
They chuse their Men as Children do their Toys,
Some chuse for Paint and Gilding, some for Noise.
They're set agog by the fine strutting Beau,
And caught with senseless Chat and empty Show.
He'll before twenty Men of Parts succeed,
Tho' no more Brains he carries in his Head,
Than wou'd a Chicken, or two Sparrows feed." (ll.585-593)

We learn, without surprise, that Phebe's betrothed had raped her and she was already pregnant when given to him in marriage. She continues, however, to urge artful compliance in the face of irresistible social power. If, as she claims, a pitched battle with the patriarchy cannot be won, and if men are by nature base, then the most rational response is an intelligent seeming-collusion with their otherwise intolerable demands. Forbes's treatment of the women's position is the more remarkable when we consider the prevailing winds of misogyny sweeping through mainstream late-seventeenth and early eighteenth-century British satire which routinely equated femininity with moral distemper and in extreme cases seemed to consider the female principle almost as a perversion of nature.¹⁷ It is doubly ironical that Forbes should have Xantippe deploy the idiom of a roistering bravo to assert an essentially feminist position, appropriating the rhetoric of masculinity to attack its fundamental privileges.

There is much, then, to commend the poetry of William Forbes to our attention: his range is wider, his expression more powerful, and his technique more assured than previous assessments of his work—slight as they are—might lead us to expect. Although his work is uneven, he has an originality of mind and a slashing wit that does not deserve to be forgotten while his contribution to the politics of nation and of gender continues to possess relevance and force. A full reassessment of Forbes's work would include discussion of his music, given his eminence in the field and the importance of the twin arts of music and poetry in a long eighteenth century which contained Robert Burns and James Hogg and saluted the vernacular song as the summit of the Scottish achievement.

¹⁷ Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Brink of All We Hate-English Satires on Women 1660-1750* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 1-42. I am indebted to Prof. Ruth Perry, author of *Novel Relations* (Cambridge, 2004), for insight on Forbes and gender relations throughout this essay.

The writings of William Forbes of Disblair—on occasion disturbingly violent and coarse—offer a fascinating glimpse into the mental world of a cultivated Scottish gentleman at the beginning of the eighteenth century. This glimpse challenges a number of widely-held later assumptions. It is clear, for example, that resistance to English hegemony, often claimed as the main driving force behind Scottish culture in the century following the Union, did not always spring from plebeian or even bourgeois roots as students of Ramsay and Burns may have supposed. The line of orally-transmitted balladry which came down through the Forbes family—although space once again prevents detailed discussion of this—clearly passed through a literate and sophisticated cultural milieu with regard both to music and poetry.¹⁸ Our leading ballad source, Forbes's grand-daughter, Anna, was an educated woman with highly literary tastes and a cultural background in which elements of high culture and low freely intermingled. She seems the antithesis of the typical rustic, plebeian, unlettered folk-informant later pictured by Cecil Sharp and his twentieth-century followers.

If some of William Forbes's personal papers were again to see the light of day (a possibility never to be discounted in Scotland where the great archives have long had more money for acquisition than cataloguing, rendering invisible large areas of our national past as a result) we might have a still greater range of poems from the pen of this fascinating writer, and be able to confirm with greater certainty those at the moment only tentatively attributed to him. The career of William Forbes of Disblair could yet bring us significant further insights.

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¹⁸ See Ruth Perry's forthcoming biography referenced in n. 3 above.

APPENDIX:

Poems attributed to William Forbes

The texts consulted for this essay are available in two subscription-based resources, *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* (Gale/Cengage) and *Literature Online* (ProQuest); the relevant source is noted below.

An Essay Upon Marriage In a Letter Adress'd To a Friend. [Edinburgh?]: [1704?]. ESTC N001571. Foxon F185. ECCO & LitOnline

— Date from Foxon. A reply to this titled *A Satyre on F---s of D---r, by way of return for his essay on marriage*, printed in Edinburgh? 1704?, is attributed by NLS to Allan Pierce; for Forbes's continuing conflict with Pierce, see items below. Pierce has not been identified, though Walker, *Bards of Bon-Accord* (1887), 643, suggests he was Allan Ramsay.

The Renagado Whip't. A Satyre in Answer to A---n's Lybel on the Author of the Essay on Marriage. [Edinburgh?], Printed in the Year 1704. ECCO.

—This pamphlet prompted a further riposte by "Allan" [Allan Pierce?]: *A Curb for a Coxcomb, or, An Answer to The renagado Whip'd, Written by F—s of D—r, in Defence of his Lewd Practices, after he was Devorc'd, and Excommunicated for the Same*, published in Edinburgh 1704.

The True Scots Genius, Reviving. A Poem. Written upon Occasion of the Resolve Past in Parliament, the 17th of July 1704. [Edinburgh]: Printed in the Year 1704. ESTC T083711. Foxon F195. ECCO.

—Dated by ESTC as 1706. Cited in Karin Bowie, "A 1706 Manifesto for an Armed Rising against Incorporating Union", *Scottish Historical Review*, 94.239 (October 2015): 237-267 (259-60), seeing the poem as Jacobite, rather than broadly patriotic.

A Pil for Pork-Eaters: Or, A Scots Lancet for an English Swelling. Edinburgh: Printed by James Watson, in Craig's Closs, 1705. 12 pp. ESTC T072529. Foxon 188. ECCO.

A Pil for Pork-Eaters: Or, A Scots Lancet for an English Swelling. Edinburgh: Printed by James Watson, 1705. 12 pp. (fine paper). ESTC T180126. Foxon 189.

A Pil for Pork-Eaters: Or, A Scots Lancet for an English Swelling. [Edinburgh]: Printed in the Year 1705. 8 pp. ESTC N011818. Foxon 190. ECCO

A Pil for Pork-Eaters: Or, A Scots Lancet for an English Swelling. To which is Added the Englishman's grace over his Pock Pudding, with Robert the Third's answer to Henry the fourth of England. Edinburgh: Printed in the Year MDCCV. ESTC. 10 + 6 + 4 pp. ESTC N019813. Foxon 191. ECCO.

—ESTC and Foxon (F185/191) list various putative authors in addition to Forbes. The later attribution to Alexander Pennecuik (on which cf. NLS catalogue, and the inscription on the Watson title-page in ECCO, was rejected, based on earlier comment by David Laing, in William Brown, "Writings of Alexander Pennicuik, M.D., and Alexander Pennecuik, Merchant," *Edinburgh Bibliographical Society*

Transactions, 6 (1906): 129. Of the two other poems contained along with *Pil* in the expanded pamphlet, “Robert the Third, King of Scotland, his Answer” seems older than the early eighteenth century and on internal grounds unlikely to be by Forbes, although NLS also seems to attribute it to him. The third piece in the pamphlet, “The Englishman’s Grace over his Pock-Pudding,” though slight, could possibly be Forbes’s, but has also been attributed to Pennecuik; in ESTC part 3 is attributed to G. Steel. Despite the imprint date on the expanded version, ESTC dates it [?1730]. The first, third, and fourth versions were described by John Scott, “A Bibliography of Printed Documents and Books Relating to ... the Darien Company,” *Edinburgh Bibliographical Society Transactions*, 6 (1906): 61-62 (items 278, 279, 280). Reprints of the first version include David Laing, ed., *Various Fugitive Pieces of Scottish Poetry*, 2nd ser. (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1853), and *A Pil for Pork-Eaters* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1970).

[*Bang the Bocker, OR*] *Bully Pierce alias A---n the turncoat. A NEW Song.* [Edinburgh]: [1705]. 1 sheet. ESTC T21352. Foxon B54. ECCO & LitOnline.

—This rather unusually prints the tune (a rollicking country-dance type air) in staff notation with treble and bass clefs and marked “*Aiton Sculp.*”

A New-Year's Gift for the Renegado and Hansel to his Whipper. [Edinburgh]: Printed in the year, 1705. 4 pp. ESTC 11114. Foxon N244. ECCO.

—Not included in the checklist of Forbes’s poems in Walker, *Bards of Bon-Accord* (1887), 643.

Mack-Faux The Mock-Moralist or Pierce the Traitor Unmask'd and Hang'd, A Satyre on A---N the Renegado. [Edinburgh?]: Printed in the Year 1705. ESTC T38819. Foxon F186. ECCO & LitOnline.

—Faux is a reference to Guy Fawkes. Forbes, or whoever may have written this piece, presents this pasquil as a patriotic act rather than—what it is—an act of private vengeance. The anti-Scottish sobriquet given to the protagonist “Mac-Faux” could suggest an English production, although various language features seem to indicate a Scots-speaking author: “Some drunken canting *Cummers* of the Town, / Had contributed each for *Pierce* a Crown;” *OED* lists “cummer” as a Scottish term, although it is also current in Cumberland. Note here too the pork motif “Spite of thy Guts, thou wouldst e’en Pork foreswear / Yet rather than thy Darling Food forgoe, / Thou’dst quit the Creed, and both the Test’ments too.”

The Farthingale Reviv’d: or, More Work for the Cooper. A Panegyrick on the Late, but Most Admirable Invention of the Hoop-Petticoat. [Edinburgh]: [1711?]. 4 pp. ESTC T1900768. Foxon F66.

The Farthingale Reviv’d: or, More Work for the Cooper. A Panegyrick on the Late, but Most Admirable Invention of the Hoop-Petticoat: Written at the Bath in the year 1711. 4 pp. [[London]: Sold by John Baker in Paternoster Row, 1711]. ESTC T35405. Foxon F65. LitOnline.

The Hoop-Petticoat. A Poem. Occasioned by the Late Alteration of the Hoop-Petticoats. Dublin: printed in the year, 1736. 8 pp. ESTC T212872. Not in Foxon.

The Rattle-Snake, Or, A Bastonado for a Whigg. London: printed by Richard Gunning, 1712 [1713]. 4 + 18 pp. ESTC T168287. Foxon F192.

The Rattle-Snake, Or, A Bastonado for a Whigg. London: printed by Richard Gunning, and sold by J. Morphew. 1712 [1713]. iv + 18 pp. ESTC N23646. Foxon F193. LitOnline

—This is an attack on the Whig pamphleteer George Ridpath.

Xantippe, or the scolding wife, done from the Conjugium of Erasmus, By W. F. of D. Edinburgh: printed in the year 1724. 2 + 28 pp.. ESTC T179618. Foxon F196. LitOnline.

—Foxon notes that the NLS copy has MS notes questioning Forbes's authorship.

The Patriots, a Satyr, Written On the 12th Of October 1734. London: printed for S. Berkley in Amen Corner, 1734. 22 pp. ESTC T197796. Foxon F187. ECCO & LitOnline.

—Foxon cites a MS note in the NLS copy attributing the poem to Forbes, noting also that the printer's name may be fictitious, or a misprint for "Buckley."