

## HOW TO LOSE FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE: JOHN DRYDEN AND THE ART OF INSULTING OTHER PEOPLE'S TRANSLATIONS

KATHERINE HEAVEY

Certainly, a severe Critique is the greatest help to a good Wit; he does the Office of a Friend, while he designs that of an Enemy; and his malice keeps a Poet within those bounds, which the Luxuriancy of his Fancy would tempt him to overleap.

John Dryden (*Defence of the Epilogue X2<sup>v</sup>*)

In his frequent and enthusiastic criticism of early modern classical translation, and of his literary competitors, John Dryden is reacting to the early modern interest in English translations of the ancient classics, which first became popular in the mid–sixteenth century. Works that sought to comment on early modern translation were produced in the sixteenth century by authors including George Puttenham — *The Arte of English Poesie* — and Philip Sidney — *The Defence of Poetry*. However, unlike Dryden's writings on such matters, they are very often effusive in their praise of early modern classical translations, such as Golding's 1567 *Metamorphoses*, or Thomas Phaer's sixteenth-century translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, which has now fallen into some obscurity, but which Puttenham esteems as 'excellently well translated' (Puttenham 60).

By contrast, when he comes to discuss English versions of the classics, in the last decades of the seventeenth century, Dryden is critical even of some of the most famous Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline translations. These include George Chapman's English translation of Homer's *Iliad*, which first appeared in its entirety in 1611. Although it is now criticised for its reliance on imperfect Latin versions of Homer's Greek, in its day this English translation of Homer was hugely significant. Seven books of Chapman's *Iliad* appeared in 1598, and are widely thought to have exerted an influence on Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (Martin 16–17). Likewise, in the seventeenth century, Dryden's friends Edmund Waller and the Earl of Mulgrave, both authors and translators in their own right, admired Chapman's effort to translate Homer, but their endorsements appear to have done little to impress

Dryden. Writing of his friends' praise in 1693, he opines: 'This admiration must needs proceed from the author himself, for the translator has thrown him down as low as harsh numbers, improper English, and a monstrous length of verse could carry him' (*PEP* 374).

Here, then, Dryden is more than willing to praise Homer, but takes issue with Chapman's choice of metre and syntax, despite the fact that, as Robin Sowerby notes, he was later to take some cues from Chapman in his own translation of Book One of the *Iliad* (42). Perhaps predictably, he could muster no more enthusiasm for Chapman's original works. Speaking of Chapman's tragedy *Bussy D'Ambois*, he admits to being amazed by the play in production, but on reading it, he terms it:

A dwarfish thought dress'd up in gigantick words,  
repetition in abundance, looseness of expression, and  
gross Hyperboles; the Sense of one line expanded  
prodigiously into ten: and, to sum up all, uncorrect  
English, and a hideous mingle of false Poetry and true  
Nonsense; or, at best, a scantling of wit which lay  
gasping for life, and groaning beneath a Heap of  
Rubbish. (*Dedication to 'The Spanish Fryar' A2<sup>v</sup>*)

Such scathing criticisms of even the most important earlier translators are common in Dryden's writings. Taking George Sandys — whose translation of the *Metamorphoses* first appeared in 1626 — as an example, Dryden criticises those translators working in the first half of the seventeenth century by complaining, 'they were Scholars, 'tis true, but they were Pedants. And for a just Reward of their Pedantick pains, all their Translations want to be Translated, into English' (*PEP* 370). To the modern reader, such criticisms may often seem unjust — Sandys' translation in particular, though rather old-fashioned, resists flowery embellishments to Ovid's Latin, and in fact sticks closely to its original, like many modern translations.

However, to understand Dryden's passionate dislike of such efforts, the modern reader must appreciate his preferred methods of translation, and specifically, that it was precisely such painstaking subservience to an original text that so riled him. In the *Preface to Ovid's Epistles*, the translation of Ovid's *Heroides* that he commissioned and contributed to, and which appeared in 1680, Dryden had set out his own theory of translation. He explained that the three types were close literal translation (metaphrase), paraphrase, which he termed 'Translation with Latitude', and imitation, in which the author takes only 'some general hints from the Original', and otherwise takes the work in his own

direction (*POE* 114–5). In Dryden’s opinion, the best translators used the method of paraphrase. Thus, the translations he admires are those that may seem to us to stray rather far from their Greek or Latin originals. For example, his collected *Heroides* includes a translation of the epistle of Oenone to Paris by Aphra Behn, which Dryden singles out for praise. However, as Jessica Munns has noted, Behn alters her original extensively. She makes frequent additions, which speak to contemporary political concerns, such as the libidinous reputations of both Charles II and his illegitimate son and would-be successor, James Duke of Monmouth, in a way that may seem to us to be anachronistic or inappropriate in a translation (Heavey). For Dryden, though, for an author to test the flexibility of his or her source text with new and surprising additions was desirable, and entirely justifiable, and what he abhorred above all else was close, careful, accurate translation of the words on the page, even if it was attempted by some of the early modern period’s most popular or celebrated writers. Lamenting John Donne’s conservative approach to adapting the Roman poet Horace’s *Satires*, Dryden asks:

Wou’d not *Donn*’s *Satires*, which abound with so much Wit, appear more Charming, if he had taken care of his Words, and of his Numbers? But he follow’d *Horace* so very close, that of necessity he must fall with him: And I may safely say it of this present Age, That if we are not so great Wits as *Donn*, yet, certainly, we are better Poets. (*Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis* x1vii)

There is irony in Dryden’s use of Horace as an example of a classical writer whose works are used too conservatively, for it is the Roman poet’s own *Art of Poetry*, the *Ars Poetica*, which contains the clearest caution to those who wish to revisit established themes or writings in their works. Horace cautioned his readers against becoming a *fidus interpres* (‘slavish translator’), and his advice, that translators should add some originality without misrepresenting their classical characters, was much cited by seventeenth century authors, including Dryden.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, Dryden finds close translation ‘slavish’, and of little value. So he dismisses Thomas Hobbes’ extremely close translation of the *Iliad*, published in 1675 when the great philosopher was 87, as ‘bald’, accuses Hobbes of ‘studying Poetry as he did Mathematicks, when it was too late’, and concludes that his rival ‘begins the Praise of Homer where he should have ended it’ (*FAM* A2<sup>v</sup>). Dryden himself

translated Book One of the *Iliad*, and published it in 1700 as part of his collection *Fables Ancient and Modern*. He intended to translate the entire epic, though he died before he could realise this ambition. However, the existence of Book One means that it is possible to compare Dryden's and Hobbes's *Iliads* directly. In Book One, the goddess Thetis appeals to Zeus to look kindly on her son, the Greek warrior Achilles. Hobbes's *Iliad* describes her approach thus:

Twelve times the Sun had risen now and set,  
The Gods t' *Olympus* all returned were;  
*Thetis* her Sons complaints did not forget,  
But up she carried them to *Jupiter*. (C')

Dryden's version is as follows:

Now, when twelve Days compleat had run their Race,  
The Gods bethought them of the Cares belonging to their place.  
*Jove* at their Head ascending from the Sea,  
A shoal of puny Pow'rs attend his way.  
Then *Thetis* not unmindful of her Son  
Emerging from the Deep; to beg her Boon,  
Pursu'd their Track; and waken'd from his rest,  
Before the Sovereign stood a Morning Guest. (*FAM* 214)

Neither translation is entirely successful: Dryden had spoken of the 'inconvenience of Rhyme' in the closing remarks of his translation of Virgil, and he seems to find it no less of a trial here (Dryden, *Works of Virgil*). Indeed, the difficulty of turning Homer's words into English verse is evidenced by the fact that most modern translations of the Greek and Latin epics will be in prose, or at least in unrhymed verse. A.S. Kline's modern reading of the line is:

At dawn on the twelfth day, the company of immortal gods,  
led by Zeus, returned to Olympus. Thetis had not forgotten  
her promise to her son, and at morning, emerging from the  
waves, she rose to the broad sky and Olympus. (Kline, *Iliad*)

By comparing the two seventeenth century translations, we may discern firstly what Dryden dislikes in a translation, and secondly, that he himself is not immune to some error. In the *Preface to Ovid's Epistles*, Dryden compares literal translation to 'dancing on Ropes with fetter'd Leggs: A man may shun a fall by using Caution, but the gracefulness of

Motion is not to be expected' (*POE* 116). However, this extract from his *Iliad* demonstrates that expanding on one's classical author is not free from the risk of a fall, and that a paraphrase as much as a metaphrase may be entirely free from 'gracefulness of Motion'. Dryden may condemn Hobbes's *Iliad* as 'bald', but if there is an unhappier couplet in any early modern Homer than 'Now, when twelve Days compleat had run their Race, / The Gods bethought them of the Cares belonging to their place', then I have not been able to find it.

Thus, it seems that Dryden is not immune from making unwise choices in his own translations, and, moreover, may begin to seem mean-spirited or high-handed in his frequent criticisms of others. It should be noted, however, that Dryden could and did esteem his fellow translators, even when they were less than slavish in their admiration of his own efforts. He admired Sir John Denham, who translated portions of Virgil's *Aeneid* in 1636 and published a partial rendering of Book Two in 1656, for his attitude to translation, which accorded with Dryden's own — although Denham recommended imitation rather than paraphrase. Dryden also praises the translations of Joseph Addison and William Congreve, in the case of the latter, even graciously accepting his corrections to Dryden's *Aeneid*, and remarking 'I shall never be ashamed to own, that this excellent young man has shewed me many faults, which I have endeavoured to correct' (*COD* 34). He also recommends Abraham Cowley, translator of Pindar's *Odes* and another follower of the imitative method of translation. In the *Preface to Ovid's Epistles*, Dryden confesses that he had thought the Greek poet untranslatable, but that 'a genius so elevated and unconfined as Mr Cowley's, was but necessary to make Pindar speak English, and that was to be performed by no other way than imitation' (37).

Moreover, even when they were at their most negative, Dryden's opinions of an author were not necessarily fixed. Anne Doyle notes that Dryden had written the *Epilogue* for Elkanah Settle's play *Cambyzes*, which appeared in 1671 (423). However, Settle's *The Empress of Morocco* (1673) had gone on to poke fun at what Doyle terms 'the impudent fawning of Settle's fellow playwrights' and Dryden had taken his criticism personally (421). In his *Notes and Observations on the 'Empress of Morocco'*, written with Thomas Shadwell and John Crowne, and published in 1674, Dryden is at his most vicious. Settle is 'this upstart illiterate Scribler' (A2<sup>r</sup>), and Dryden exclaims 'Never did I see such a confus'd heap of false Grammar, improper English, strain'd Hyperboles, and downright Bulls' (A2<sup>v</sup>). Dryden goes on:

He's an Animal of a most deplor'd understanding,  
 without Reading & Conversation: his being is in a  
 twilight of Sence, and some glimmering of thought,  
 which he can never fashion either into Wit or English.  
 His Stile is Boisterous and Rough Hewen: his Rhyme  
 incorrigibly lewd, and his numbers perpetually harsh  
 and ill sounding. (NAO)

Reading such vitriol, it is with some surprise that we learn that, six years later, Settle contributed the epistle of Hypsipyle to Jason to Dryden's collected *Heroides*. It seems bizarre either that Dryden would have him, or that Settle would agree for his translation to be included, particularly since we know that Settle read Dryden's *Notes and Observations on 'The Empress of Morocco'*, for he responded to them in the same year, angrily rejecting Dryden's criticisms, and suggesting that his refutation of Dryden's notes should be printed alongside one of Dryden's best-known plays, *The Conquest of Granada*.

Settle dryly notes that the attack on *The Empress* that he read was unsigned, but he that he has investigated the criticisms closely, '*And thereupon with very little Conjunction, by those three remarkable Qualities of R[a]jiling, Boasting and Thieving I fo[u]nd a Dryden in the Frontispiece'* (NAO, A<sup>1</sup>). Dismissing Dryden's fellow critics Crowne and Shadwell as unworthy of his attention, Settle goes on to attack Dryden as a 'Rude, unmannerly, ill-bred, sawcy and over-grown Rayler' (A<sup>V</sup>), and picks his criticisms apart line by line, seldom passing up the opportunity for a personal insult when he feels Dryden has misunderstood his play. Drawing attention to one such instance, he remarks:

The poorest Freshman in the University would be  
 sconced for half so great a *blunder*, but Mr. *Dryden* is  
 a great *professor* of Learning, if you'l believe himself  
 or his flatterers, and so cannot sin. (Settle 11)

Why, then, did Settle contribute to Dryden's collected Ovid in 1680, given that he was clearly deeply affronted by the attack on the *Empress*? Roswell G. Ham acknowledges that 'from 1673 to 1681 there was supposedly a truce', before 1682, when Dryden lampooned Settle in the second part of *Absalom and Achitophel*, and Settle's response, *Absalom Senior, or Achitophel Transposed*, reignited the rivalry (Ham 409). Such a truce would explain Settle's contribution to the *Epistles* in 1680 (though any peace would have had to begin after 1674, and the fall-out over the *Empress of Morocco*). Ham argues for a far shorter period of truce, but

does acknowledge that he can find no evidence of bad feeling between the men between the publication of *The Tryal of the Poets for the Bays* (1677), which he ascribes to Settle, and Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (1682).<sup>2</sup> This gap would have given Settle time to contribute to the *Epistles*, before returning to the offensive in 1682. Unfortunately for us, Dryden does not pick Settle out for particular discussion in his *Preface*, as he does with Aphra Behn. It can only be surmised either that Settle had (temporarily) considered that he and Dryden were even or, perhaps, that he could not resist the opportunity to be involved with such an august collection, whatever his personal opinion of the Poet Laureate. Certainly, both men's relationships with their fellow authors were highly changeable, for by 1682 Thomas Shadwell, one of Dryden's co-authors in the attack on the *Empress*, would also find himself one of the targets of *Absalom and Achitophel*.

Elsewhere, Dryden was not above admitting publicly when his opinions of an author had changed for the better. In a private letter of 1682, he is withering in his criticism of Thomas Creech's celebrated translation of Lucretius' *De Rerum Naturae*, writing to his correspondent:

I have considered the verses...and find the Author of them to have notoriously bungled: that he has plac'd the words as confus'dly, as if he had studied to do so.  
(COD 38)

Once again, Creech's crime is not only an infelicitous use of English, but a dogged insistence on translating the words on the page into their English equivalents, and he is enthusiastically punished for his errors. However, time was to lead Dryden to revise his opinion. Three years later, Dryden had attempted the same translation himself, and apparently found it difficult.<sup>3</sup> His is a freer translation, in accordance with his preferred method, but in a preface published in 1685, he gives way to Creech, comparing their translations and admitting 'The preference...is justly his' (COD 39). Indeed, by 1692, we find him referring to 'my learned friend, Mr Creech' and his 'excellent version of Lucretius' (COD 39), and Hermann J. Real notes that relations became so cordial that Creech contributed *Satire 13* to Dryden's collected translations of Juvenal, published in the following year.

However, it should be observed that such generosity on Dryden's part is rare, and in this case, may be motivated by the fact that Creech had somewhat fallen from grace by the time Dryden revised his opinion, as a result of a much derided translation of Horace, published in 1684. In

fact, Dryden is usually at his most acerbic when he is condemning translations of the same classical texts he himself has attempted. So he rubbishes Hobbes' *Iliad* and Sandys' *Metamorphoses* for sticking too closely and pedantically to their classical originals, and it is no coincidence that he translated portions of both of these texts, and published them in his collection *Fables Ancient and Modern*. The classical text which seems to have inspired Dryden's most ferocious territorialism, however, is Virgil's *Aeneid* — Dryden's translation of which appeared in 1697 alongside his renderings of the *Georgics* and *Eclogues*. Dryden's publication of the works of Virgil provoked the Restoration poet and clergyman Luke Milbourne, who had translated Book One of the *Aeneid* in 1688, to offer up a series of notes on Dryden's translation, published the next year, in 1698. Because of their willingness to engage so contentiously with one of the greatest works of such a celebrated writer, it can justifiably be said that today, Milbourne's *Notes on Dryden's Virgil* are far more famous than he is, and they constitute fascinating evidence of the ire that Dryden continued to rouse in his fellow authors.

While Dryden targets those translations that he feels are overly literal, Milbourne complains that Dryden has paraphrased too freely, and has created:

a *Virgil* of another Stamp, of a courser Allay; a silly, impertinent, nonsensical *Writer*, of a various and uncertain Style...who could never have been known again in the Translation, if the *Name of Virgil* had not been bestow'd upon him in *large Characters* in the *Frontispiece* and in the *Running Title*. (Milbourne, *Notes B2*)

Although most of his notes are concerned with the *Georgics* and *Eclogues*, Milbourne's attack also reflects an exceptionally close and critical reading of the *Aeneid*, and he frequently quotes snatches of Dryden's Virgil before tearing them apart. This can be done very briefly: when Dryden's Diomedes praises Aeneas, and wonders what would have been if Troy had possessed 'two more, his Match in Might' (Dryden, *Works of Virgil* 551), Milbourne dismisses the lines with a terse 'Is false Grammar' (Milbourne 15). Taking issue with the Drydenic Diomedes's exclamation 'With what a whirling force his Lance he toss'd' (551), Milbourne exclaims:

Did ever any one talk so before? Tossing intimates no extraordinary Violence in a thing which is aim'd at a Mark, as a Lance is in Battel. *Tossing in a blanket*, which the Translator deserves, indeed is somewhat a *violent Motion* upward, but...Tossing and Hurling, are very different, one infers force and Rapidity, the other only a looser and more careless Impulse. (*Notes* 15)

Elsewhere, he singles out a couplet from the first book of the *Aeneid*, which describes the Trojans' long and weary voyage before their arrival in Carthage. Once again, Dryden's lines can be compared to another early modern translation, and one that Milbourne (grudgingly) identifies as superior.<sup>4</sup> In his translation of 1649, John Ogilby's lines describe the Trojans' wanderings thus:

...round the vast seas  
They wandered long inforc'd by various chance.  
(Ogilby B<sup>v</sup>)

A 2002 verse translation by A. S. Kline is strikingly similar, though obviously modernised: the Trojans 'wandered for many years, driven by fate over all the seas' (Kline, *Aeneid*). By contrast, Dryden describes the Trojans' voyage as follows:

And sev'n long Years th' unhappy wand'ring Train,  
Were toss'd by Storms, and scatter'd through the Main.  
(Aa2<sup>f</sup>)

In his *Notes*, Milbourne bluntly dismisses these lines, and particularly the final phrase, as 'but *Nonsense*' (25), and evidence of his assertion that 'Mr D. himself is not the *smoothest of poets*' (C4<sup>v</sup>). He himself renders the lines 'Long they with seas, and long with Tempests strove', and links the mention of Fate specifically to the anger of Juno: 'So far Jove's mighty Queen forc'd bending Fate!' (B2<sup>f</sup>). It should be noted that though Milbourne complains about Dryden's 'scatter'd through the Main', he does not appear to be averse to the poetical 'Main', so much as to the author using it: he employs 'foaming Main' (B2<sup>f</sup>) himself, four lines later than Dryden.

Certainly, Dryden's lines substantially embellish Virgil, both with specific details that are not to be found in the Latin, and with rhetorical flourishes that are also present in his *Iliad*, and when confronted with two such different seventeenth century translations, Dryden's and

Ogilby's, it is only natural that any commentator would prefer one or the other. It should also be noted that modern critics have been similarly discomfited by some of Dryden's elaborations: Robert Fitzgerald points to the famous episode in Book Two, when the Trojan horse is struck by the spear of the suspicious Laocoön. Virgil's Latin, and Ogilby's translation, both have the horse groaning itself, while Dryden's translation specifically mentions 'Groans of *Greeks*' (*Works of Virgil* 236). This is a troublesome addition, which Fitzgerald calls 'misrepresentation to the point of farce', for, as he notes, 'If any Greeks had been heard groaning, the horse would have had a short career' (27).

However, in Milbourne's case it seems very likely that there is more than concern about such misrepresented meanings at stake when he writes in disparagement of Dryden's effort. Sarah Annes Brown notes that Milbourne's feathers were probably ruffled by the fact that his own translation of the first book of the *Aeneid* had been somewhat overlooked, and certainly was not greeted with the same fanfare as Dryden's Virgil.<sup>5</sup> Milbourne makes no mention of his own translation in his notes on Dryden's Virgil, but if he wanted greater attention for his own effort at Virgil, criticising Dryden's version certainly achieved that, although probably not in the way he had hoped. Dryden responds to Milbourne's criticisms in 1700, in the *Preface to Fables Ancient and Modern*, and he is on magnificent form. Having previously dismissed Ogilby's translation, in his *Notes on Dryden's Virgil*, Milbourne had remarked acidly 'This is now Mr D.'s *Great Success*, Mr Ogilby's must appear much better to an *Impartial Reader*' (16). Dryden responds:

If (as they say, he has declar'd in Print) he prefers the version of Ogilby to mine, the World has made him the same Compliment: For 'tis agreed on all hands, that he writes even below Ogilby: That, you will say, is not easily to be done; but what cannot M[ilbourne] bring about? (*FAM* 45)

Dryden goes on to declare that there is no need to make detailed response to Milbourne's complaints about his *Aeneid*, for 'his own translations of Virgil have answered his criticisms on mine' (45). Annes Brown suggests that the rivalry between Milbourne and Dryden was unusually personal, because Dryden had accused Milbourne of mistreating his parishioners, and this hypothesis is convincing, for Milbourne ends his assessment of the *Aeneid* by asserting that he was driven to pen the *Notes*, for 'I cannot with Patience see either Priests or Poets Abus'd or vilify'd' (43).

Nevertheless, it is surely no coincidence that Milbourne attacks a translation of a text that he himself has attempted, even though he does not mention this fact. Of course, the same degree of petty professional jealousy may be discerned in many of Dryden's own criticisms. As I have shown, he was particularly quick to rubbish other writers who had the temerity to attempt translations of Homer, Ovid and Virgil. Moreover, Abigail Williams suggests that the spleen he directs at Settle's *Empress of Morocco* was in part motivated by the play's massive popularity (Williams). Likewise, Hermann J. Real points to the huge success of Thomas Creech's translation of Lucretius, and even quotes the eighteenth-century critic Colley Cibber, who writes that Creech's Lucretius was so celebrated, there were some who 'ventured to prefer him to Mr. Dryden, in point of genius' (Real). Dryden would certainly not be the first or last writer to respond to such a slight with a bitter attack on his rival, whether or not this was grounded in any real dislike of the translation. His reactions to Creech and Settle, however, are particularly interesting, because of the way that time and circumstances were to lead him to revise these opinions. His literary exchanges with Settle and Milbourne, meanwhile, constitute some of the most lively and entertaining evidence of seventeenth century literary rivalry.

Clearly, Dryden saw it as something of a pleasure to correct or attack the efforts of other translators. However, in Dryden's defence we should note that he sees such criticisms as a duty, as well as a pleasure. Dryden sought to educate as well as rubbish, and saw it as his duty to guide translators away from overly-literal translation, and from the inadequate examples set by earlier writers such as Sandys and Chapman. Despite Dryden's censures against careful literal translation, and despite the long-lasting influence of his views, he was not able to turn the tide entirely against close, conservative translations of the classics. However, it is undeniable that many of those he criticises, such as Ogilby and Milbourne, are not now well-known, and it is tempting to theorise that it was Dryden's criticisms, as much as any deficiencies in their verses, that prompted their fall into relative obscurity. Though he was not able to achieve his aim of entirely stamping out literal translation, Dryden's attacks on his fellow translators remain highly readable. They are also valuable as evidence of the fiercely contested question of early modern literary translation, and of the fascinatingly cut-throat world of seventeenth-century literary criticism.

## NOTES

## Abbreviations

PEP	<i>Preface to Examen Poeticum, Being the Third Part of Miscellany Poems</i>
POE	<i>Preface to Ovid's Epistles</i>
FAM	<i>Fables Ancient and Modern; Translated into Verse, from Homer, Ovid, Boccace, &amp; Chaucer: With Original Poems</i>
NAO	<i>Notes and Observations on the 'Empress of Morocco'</i>
COD	<i>The Critical Opinions of John Dryden</i>

<sup>1</sup> For his warning, see Horace 131–35.

<sup>2</sup> *Tryal* is usually ascribed to the Earl of Rochester. See Wilson.

<sup>3</sup> For an assessment of Dryden's effort see Gallagher.

<sup>4</sup> In the *Preface* to his own translation, he had lamented how Ogilby, among others, "had murder'd the most absolute of Poets" (Milbourne, *Aeneis* A2<sup>r-v</sup>).

<sup>5</sup> For the huge success of Dryden's Virgil see Fitzgerald 20–22.

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