

The Optics of Octonaires

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Abstract

Josuah Sylvester's translation of Antoine de la Roche Chandieu's *Octonaires* (1583) is worth pausing over as a contribution to Anglo-French Protestant poetics. Sylvester's version (first printed 1621) re-titles Chandieu's collection of eight-line verses *Spectacles*, which recalls Jean Calvin's image of the spectacles of Scripture (in the first book of the *Institutes*). It also includes a distinctive woodcut image of the eyeglasses themselves. The new imagery stresses how Chandieu's poems distill a Calvinist way of viewing the world, one which attunes minds to perceive the world's transience, and denigrates human perception to insist on the need for the Protestant imagination to interpret the world around us.

Key words: Protestant poetics, vision, emblems, word and image.

Josuah Sylvester (1562/3-1618) was surely the most prolific translator of French verse in seventeenth-century England. He found fame through his English version of Guillaume de Saluste Du Bartas' *Semaines*, but also translated works by Pierre Matthieu; Guy de Faur, Seigneur de Pibrac; Jean Bertaut and other French poets. The posthumous folio edition of Sylvester's works (1621, with further editions in 1633 and 1641) contained material not found in any earlier surviving edition. One of these new items was *Spectacles*, a translation of *Cinquante octonaires, sur la vanité et inconstance du monde* by the Reformed pastor Antoine de la Roche Chandieu (1534-1591), though Sylvester's source is nowhere mentioned.¹ Instead, the poems are introduced with a woodcut image of a pair of glasses with text written across them (see Figure 1). The two lenses read: 'Perspective SPECTACLES of Especial Use, | To discern THE WORLDS Vanitie, Levitie, and Brevitie' (5H6v). 'New-New-Polished' appears on the nosepiece. Beneath the spectacles is a couplet: 'These Glasses in indifferent lights | Serve Old, and yong, and midle Sights.'

The title and woodcut, which have no known source and could be either Sylvester's idea or an editorial insertion, offer a novel interpretation of the *Octonaires*' significance. An octonaire is a moralizing huitain, i.e. an eight-line rhymed poem. The French term had been associated with the eight-

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verse sections of Psalm 119 for several decades before Chandieu began using it.² The first known edition of Chandieu's octonaires that contains the whole series of fifty poems was printed in 1583.³ There are various internal groupings and traces of an overarching structure that unite the octonaires: the first eleven meditate on heavenly bodies, elements and seasons; then most of the next thirteen contemplate human characteristics; the central poem, the twenty-sixth, is the only one to address the religious turmoil in France; and several adjacent poems in the second half chime with each other, as with the poems on a tree (xxxiii) and a garden (xxxiv), or death (xliii) and sleep (xliv).⁴ Shifts between subjects, tones of voice, addressees and metres reflect the vicissitudes of the world, as numerous critics and even the poet himself note: 'Change et rechange, ô poete, et accorde | Ores sur l'une, ores sur l'autre chorde [...] | Representant par ta varieté | Le changement du Monde perissable' (xlix.1-2, 5-6).⁵



Figure 1. Josuah Sylvester (trans.), *Du Bartas His Devine Weekes and Workes* (1641), 3F4v (detail). Photo courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago. Call number: Case Y D762.D834.

Olivier Millet emphasizes that the poems were steps to devotion:

En fait, les *Octonaires* proposent aux lecteurs (et aux chanteurs) une méditation propédeutique à la dévotion, sans s'engager directement dans celle-ci, et s'ils présupposent, de la part de son

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auteur, la théologie et la spiritualité protestantes, ils ne les imposent pas à leurs lecteurs/utilisateurs.⁶

The poems' versatility helped them to fulfil this purpose. Early editions of the octonaires were printed with Paschal de L'Estocart's musical arrangement of twenty-six octonaires (1582), after Chandieu's meditations on Psalms 32 (in 1583) and in Étienne de Maisonfleur's *Cantiques*, an anthology of sacred poems (printed from 1586).⁷ Two manuscript copies survive, one that was once owned by François Rasse des Nœux and the other, now held at the Houghton Library, Harvard, containing a set of twenty-three octonaires dedicated to Marguerite de France, Duchess of Savoy and Berry (who died in 1574) in verses that prioritize the poems' pedagogical function: 'Pour t'enseigner, Lecteur, à mespriser le monde | Et aspirer au bien qui nous attend es Cieux'.⁸ As well as L'Estocart's and Claude Le Jeune's polyphonic vocal settings, the poems were given visual accompaniments when they served as mottoes for eighteen emblematic plates by Étienne Delaune in an 1580 edition printed in Strasbourg.⁹

The emblematic tradition evidently (if only, perhaps, indirectly) inspired both the form and content of the spectacles image that accompanies Sylvester's translation. Indeed, the next item in Sylvester's *Devine Weekes and Workes* gives the title *Mottoes* to a translation of twenty-four later octonaires, modelled on Chandieu's, written by Simon Goulart and Jean Le Chesne.¹⁰ Perhaps Sylvester was using a now-lost French edition that presented the octonaires as emblematic mottoes: given that Goulart's and Le Chesne's octonaires only survive today in a sixteenth-century part-book, it is likely that Sylvester had another source, one possibly acquired via the French Huguenot community in southern England. Yet some of Sylvester's other translations also took original titles – Du Bartas' *Judit* became *Bethulian's Rescue*, Girolamo Fracastoro's *Joseph* became *The Maiden's Blush* – and there is a good possibility that he read Chandieu's octonaires in an edition of Maisonfleur's *Cantiques*; the 1592, 1602 and 1613 editions of this anthology contain two other works that Sylvester translated, namely Pibrac's *Quatrains* and Pierre Duval's *Psaume de la Puissance* (translated as *Little Bartas*), but no imagery or other associations between octonaires and emblems.¹¹

Neither Maisonfleur's nor any other French edition (including the 1591 text with Jean Jacquemot's Latin translation) provides a precedent for the

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other original feature of Sylvester's translation: the short Latin phrases that introduce each octonaire in numbered headings, such as '6 *Dies*', '18 *Ambitio, Luxus, Avaritia*' and '41 *Bellum cum vitiis*'.¹² These titles, which follow a roughly similar format and typesetting to those in the previous item in the 1621 edition (*A Brief Catechism*), specify which aspect of the world is being considered in each poem. The thirtieth octonaire, which describes a bowl crafted by a goldsmith (but made of silver in the English), acquires the title '*Emblema*' in the English text; the engraved motto on that symbolic bowl – '*Thus roules the World (the Idol of Mankinde) | Whose Fruit is Fiction; whose Foundation, Winde*' (5I3v) – was marked as a sententious couplet and, decades later, was quoted in two collections of moralizing distichs.¹³ This poem is an exception: most of the titles identify subjects that are commonly-occurring manifestations of vanity and inconstancy, not symbolic representations of them.

In this way, the titles reinforce the spectacles as a governing metaphor by stating which worldly object is being viewed in each poem. The French poems referred to eyes and sight in order to reflect on how Protestants ought to look at the world, e.g.:

Qui ne s'esbahira levant en haut ses yeux
Voyant l'ordre arresté de la course des cieux
Et regardant en bas la terre ferme et stable
N'avoir rien qui ne soit inconstant et muable? (ii.1-4)
Who will not wonder, looking-up, to see
The moving Heav'ns set, certain, Constancy;
When, looking-down, in Earth unmov'd and stable,
Hee nothing findes but vainly variable?(Sylvester, 5H6v)

The sixth octonaire, to take another example, instructs the reader that at sunrise, 'Je remets en ma pensee | Le beau jour d'Eternité' (vi.5-6, with a more didactic emphasis in Sylvester's English: 'That (mee thinks) should make us think | On that true eternall Morning' [5I1r]). A later octonaire on sleep begins with a moment of insight: 'J'ai veu, j'ai veu que le Monde est un songe' (xliv.1, 'I sawe, Isawe, the World was but a Dream'[5I5r]).

The French and English versions share an interest in how Reformed Protestantism sharpens our ability to apprehend the true nature of the world. It is tempting to assume that the spectacles image in Sylvester's text owes some debt to 1 Corinthians 13:12 ('For now we see through a glass,

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darkly'), as it may do, for example, when Thomas Adams referred to how we 'can see through the spectacles of faith, in the glasse of the Scriptures' in a publication from 1619.¹⁴ Yet the biblical reference makes a point about God's imperceptibility that is compatible with but distinct from the octonaires' concern with what is visible in the world when seen through the lens of spiritual insight.

A closer and more suggestive English analogue is found in the penultimate chapter of George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), which argues that poets should strive to make their art seem more natural. Puttenham argues that, just as it would be laughable 'for one that can see well inough, to use a paire of spectacles' so artists should follow natural instincts rather than artifice if they can.¹⁵ Puttenham goes on, however, to acknowledge the need for artificial aids to assist our natural faculties:

And yet I am not ignorant that there be artes and methodes both to speake and to perswade and also to dispute, and by which the naturall is in some sorte relieved, as th'eye by his spectacle, I say relieved in his imperfection, but not made more perfit then the naturall, in which respect I call those artes of Grammer, *Logicke*, and *Rhetorick* not bare imitations, as the painter or kervers craft and worke in a forraine subject viz. a lively purtraite in his table of wood, but by long and studious observation rather a repetition or reminiscens naturall, reduced into perfection, and made prompt by use and exercise.¹⁶

This passage distinguishes between how spectacles and other forms of artifice create sharper images of the world (or 'bare imitations'), and how they sharpen perception: as Rayna Kalas writes of this passage, 'the spectacle relieves not only "the naturall" world but the natural eye: not only the things observed but the organ of observation.'¹⁷ Just as the trivium trained young humanists to speak in a persuasively natural manner, so poetry teaches us how to recognize the world for what it is. In Kalas's reading, Puttenham argues that '[a] poem distills nature – the natural material world as well as ordinary language – and at the same time distills the nature of thinking;' the art of poetry 'imitates the sensual perception of the external world and fashions, in turn, poetic projections of the material imagination that are no more or less than sense perceptions in reverse.'¹⁸

As in Puttenham's treatise, the optometric imagery in Sylvester's *Spectacles* prioritizes poetry's function as an artificial instrument that

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assists the act of perception (rather than being an art that presents static pictures of the world). Remember that the ‘especial use’ of Sylvester’s translation is to show readers how ‘[t]o discern THE WORLDS Vanitie, Levitie, and Brevitie’ (5H6v). This pair of spectacles is not merely an artificial apparatus to support weak eyesight, though. It offers a superior way to perceive the world that may be artificial (as all human attempts to explain the world are) but, once fitted to our eyes, allows us to perceive things more naturally. The poetics of these octonaires is more pessimistic about the poet’s capacity to perceive the world’s divine order and more committed to the exclusive truth of Calvinistic doctrine than Philip Sidney is in claiming that ‘Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done [...]: her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden’.¹⁹ Sylvester’s and Chandieu’s poems do not make the world seem golden: the best that they can do is make the world appear to us in its natural state.

The octonaires denigrate human perception in order to insist on the need for the Protestant imagination to interpret sensory data: ‘All under Sense thus vain, Thou hast no sense | of Vanity, which so besots thy Senses’ (5I1v; ‘Ce que tu sens est vain, et ne sens toutesfois | Cette grand’ vanité qui tous tes sens abuse’ [xii.7-8]). The title and imagery of *Spectacles*, then, emphasize that Chandieu’s poems distill a Calvinist mode of thinking in a way that attunes minds to perceive the world’s transience. The octonaires are true in what they describe, and, more significantly, present a way of approaching the world that is true in provoking detachment from the limitations of mortal existence. The simplicity of Chandieu’s diction and the familiarity of his imagery made it easier to fit the poems’ way of thinking to each reader and listener’s experience. These qualities also made the octonaires suitable for musical and visual adaptation, for translation and for re-titling.

In this reading, the spectacles image points to a Protestant poetics in which the poet aspires to perceive the world with sharper vision. In its principles and style, Sylvester’s *Spectacles* is, unsurprisingly, compatible with his translation of Du Bartas. In various places Sylvester’s octonaires recall his version of the *Semaines*: such as in the third octonaire’s re-arranging of the names of the four elements and uses of the noun ‘All’ (‘As pleas’d th’ All-Maker in This All dispose’ 5I1r, ‘L’Eternel a voulu ce bas

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Monde ainsi faire' [iii.3]); the anaphoric 'Hows' in the twelfth octonaire; and the metaphor 'The World's a Tree (in my Conceit)' (514r; 'C'est un arbre que le Monde' [xxxiii.1]) as a variation on 'The World's a Book,' a phrase from Sylvester's 'First Week' which expresses an emblematical world-view. At such moments, Sylvester's translation shows how the octonaires commit their readers and listeners to a vision of the world compatible with Du Bartas' descriptive account of creation and world history. Both Du Bartas' and Chandieu's poems show how Christian history and belief make the true moral nature of the world visible. The beginning of the First Day of the First Week of Sylvester's translation even avers that 'he that wears the spectacles of *Faith*' can perceive 'all these needfull Notions' (C3r) about how God sustains the world.

An arguable omission from Du Bartas' poetics, though, was that they presented a Protestant description of history without offering a model to reflect on or derive spiritual benefit from it. Du Bartas held that poets should only write about themes taken from Scripture and the Book of Nature, and should reject all forms of fictional writing. This poetics reduces the disruptive effect of readers' own perceptions – clouded as they may be with fictions and falsifications – but also limits scope for fruitful meditation. Francis Quarles addressed this problem by placing verse meditations after each section of his scriptural paraphrases in works like *A Feast for Wormes* (1620, based on the book of Jonah). In sharing many topics with Du Bartas' poetry (e.g. day and night, the four monarchies, the present state of France) but being more acutely moralizing, *Spectacles* also offers a response about how reading divine poetry facilitates moral formation.

Sylvester's *Spectacles* confirmed the value of Chandieu's octonaires as popular Reformed devotional poetry. The metaphor of the spectacles was a visually striking addition to the printed text that symbolized how Protestant readers should view the world and is unlike anything else in the volume. The best measure of its success is that the image would be ironized two decades later on the title-page of an anti-royalist tract called *A New Invention; or, A Paire of Cristall Spectacles* (7 June 1644; see Figure 2). A different image of spectacles is used (one which would be recycled in three more tracts over the next five years), but the same couplet is quoted on the title-page: 'These Glasses in indifferent lights, | Serve old and yong, and

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middle sights'.²⁰ The quotation advertises the strength of the satirical lens used to review the present state of society and the abuses of Charles I's reign, quite possibly in a conscious inversion of the royalism of Sylvester's translation (which was prominently dedicated to James VI and I).

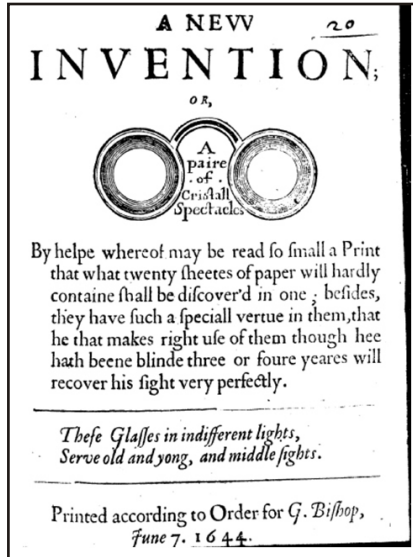


Figure 2. *A New Invention; or, A Paire of Cristall Spectacles*, title page. (c) The British Library Board (C.59.g.20.[20.]).

The couplet would be quoted once more over a hundred and fifty years later as an introduction to the issue of the astrological almanac *Vox Stellarum* for 1775.²¹ Almanacs had often included symbolic imagery and pious or topical poetry and in the seventeenth century, Sylvester's translation was the most widely quoted literary source in such works: '[t]he moral tone and astrological themes fitted ideally the almanac's purpose'.²² So too did the first six octonaires, which meditated on the sun and stars, the heavens and earth, the four elements, the seas and rivers, and the day. They are quoted in *Vox Stellarum* beneath a new replica of the spectacles woodcut, without any mention of the English or French sources. Chandieu's octonaires were evidently still valuable to English

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Protestant readers who believed that their faith enabled them to perceive the world in a way that is more consistent with its true, inconstant nature.

Endnotes :

- 1 Josuah Sylvester (trans.), *Du Bartas His Devine Weekes, and Workes* (London, 1621; STC 21653), 5H6v-5I5v. All quotations from Sylvester's translation are from this edition, and page references are given in the body text. u/v and i/j spellings are modernized, and ampersands converted to 'and', in all quotations from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts.
- 2 Florence Mauger, 'Les *Octonaires*... d 'Antoine de Chandieu: Archéologie d'un titre,' *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 99 (1999): 975-88.
- 3 For the early publication history, see *Octonaires sur la vanité et inconstance du monde / Antoine de Chandieu*, ed. Françoise Bonali-Fiquet (Geneva: Droz, 1979), p. 38. All quotations from Chandieu's *Octonaires* are taken from this edition, and line references are given in the body text.
- 4 For a fuller overview of the whole sequence, see Olivier Millet, 'Théologie, encyclopédisme et rhétorique : la composition des cinquante *Octonaires de la vanité et inconstance du monde* 'Antoine de la Roche Chandieu,' *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte* 40 (2016): 17-34 and S. K. Barker, *Protestantism, Poetry and Protest* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 225-41.
- 5 See, e.g., Marina Hertrampf, 'La Réforme et la réforme poétique : les « *Octonaires sur la vanité et inconstance du monde* » d'Antoine de la Roche de Chandieu,' *Romanische Studien* 2 (2015): 159-78. Available at: <<http://www.romanischestudien.de/index.php/rst/article/view/36/275>>. Accessed 14 September 2016.
- 6 Millet, 'Théologie, encyclopédisme et rhétorique,' 22.
- 7 Bonali-Fiquet (ed.), pp. 13-16.
- 8 François Rouget, 'Manuscripts, éditions et transformations : Les *Octonaires sur la Vanité et Inconstance du Monde*'Antoine de Chandieu,' *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 152 (2006): 565-82 (571, 574). For more on Marguerite de France's literary connections, see Rosanna Gorris Camos, '« Fétus que le vent chasse » : constellations poétiques autour de Marguerite de France, duchesse de Savoie', *Albineana, Cahiers d'Aubigné* 22 (2010): 421-79 (458, n. 103). Available at <http://www.persee.fr/doc/albin_1154-5852_2010_num_22_1_1159>. Accessed on 14 September, 2016.
- 9 Florence Mauger, 'Antoine de Chandieu et Etienne Delaune : Les *Octonaires sur la vanité et inconstance du monde*. Un recueil d'emblèmes?', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 58 (1996):

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- 611-29. The sole known copy of this edition was once in Samuel Aston Thompson Yates's collection, and was sold at a Chiswick Auctions sale on 17 June 2015 (see *Antiques Trade Gazette* 2206 (5 September 2015), p. 44).
- 10 Sylvester, *Devine Weekes, and Workes*, 516r-5K4r. On these poems as 'mottoes', see Peter Auger, 'The Octonaire in Thomas Smith's *Self-Portrait*,' forthcoming in *Huntington Library Quarterly*.
 - 11 On the editions of Maisonfleur's *Cantiques*, see S. K. Barker, 'Face to Face and Side by Side: Printing Cross-Confessional Poetry in Late XVIth and Early XVIIth century France,' *Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture* 4 (2013). Available at: <<http://www.erudit.org/revue/memoires/2013/v4/n2/1016739ar.html>>. Accessed 14 September, 2016.
 - 12 On Jacquemot's translation, see Bonali-Fiquet (ed.), pp. 21-22.
 - 13 Thomas Ollyffe, *Miscellaneous Sentences in Prose and Verse* (London, 1719), G4v, quoting an adapted form that begins 'Vain vexing World' found in Thomas Lye, *Reading and Spelling English Made Easie* (London, 1673; Wing L3542), H3r (Ollyffe also borrows from Lye on F3r ['Keep not o f Dayes']) and H1r ['*Xerxes* did vainly lash']). Lye appears to have sought a couplet beginning with V (both collections are arranged alphabetically), chose vanity as a topic and then modified Sylvester's couplet for his purpose: '*V*-ain, vexing World, thou Idol of Mankind; | Thy fruit is fiction; thy foundation, wind.
 - 14 Thomas Adams, *The Happines of the Church* (London, 1619; STC 121), 2B1v.
 - 15 George Puttenham, *Arte of English Poesie* (London, 1589; STC 20519.5), 2L2r.
 - 16 George Puttenham, *Arte of English Poesie.*, 2L2v.
 - 17 Rayna Kalas, *Frame, Glass, Verse: The Technology of Poetic Invention in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 142.
 - 18 Rayna Kalas, *Frame, Glass, Verse.*, pp. 143-44.
 - 19 Sidney's 'The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism, ed. Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 9.
 - 20 The woodcut of 'cristall spectacles' is also found in *A Paire of Cristall Spectacles* (London, 18 December 1648; Wing S2088), *A New Paire of Spectacles of the Old Fashion* (London, 5 March 1649; Wing N696) and *Mercurius Heliconicus* (London, 3 February 1650).
 - 21 Francis Moore (b. 1657), *Vox Stellarum* (London, 1775), A2r-v.
 - 22 Bernard Capp, *English Almanacs 1500-1800* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 227.