Francis Peck’s jubilant proclamation of John Milton’s right to a place among the ancient Latin and Greek poets owes to a colossal mistake. Upon discovering a “small piece, published … in 1642,” and determining “to peep a little into the book,” Peck excitedly – if somewhat carelessly – “threw aside … for the moment, a great heap of other old pamphlets which I had just then picked up & sat me down.” Peck was thrilled by his discovery of what he took to be “the Sixth of Mr. John Milton’s Nine most celebrated poems, & one of the hitherto unknown pieces of his.”

Instead of a new work by Milton, Peck had actually found an English translation (by an unknown author) from the Latin drama of George Buchanan (1506-1582). A Scot of modest means predominantly educated in Paris, Buchanan had, by the final quarter of the sixteenth-century, gained a reputation as one of Europe’s foremost intellects, serving as tutor to Michel de Montaigne, Mary Queen of Scots, and James VI and authoring several key works of political theory. Buchanan also wrote importantly for the non-commercial stage of the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux where he taught for several years in the 1540s. He authored four plays for performance by his students
there, all either translated from – or strongly influenced by – the tragedies of
Euripides: Medea (1544), Jephthes (1554), Alcestis (1556) and Baptistes (1577).³

Roger Ascham commends Buchanan in his The Scholemaster (1570) as one of
the “Few men, in writing of Tragedies in our dayes” that have successfully followed
Greek tragic precedent, showing “the trew touch of Aristotles precepts” and imitating
“Euripides examples.”⁴ This chapter will show the profound depth of this important
humanist’s engagement with Euripides, charting the particular rhetorical and political
inheritance of the tragedian and the tradition he embodied in early modern Europe,
which Buchanan seeks to reanimate in his own plays. Taking as our starting point
Peck’s eighteenth-century rediscovery of a mid-seventeenth-century drama, which
turns out to be the work of a sixteenth-century author interpolating texts from the
fifth-century BCE, we will argue for a strongly diachronic sense of what “local”
reading can be. Since each of these local contexts transforms Buchanan’s plays, our
interpretation of his dramatic work is not synchronically limited to the historical
moment in which they were written, but rather attends to how specific contexts
invoke or imagine the past in order to fully historicize them. This diachronic approach
reaches back to the social and political circumstances that inform Euripides’ tragedies,
as well as forward into the reception of his own texts. The strongly synchronic
predisposition of recent historicism has limited the kinds of “context” usually
considered relevant to Buchanan’s drama. By contrast, our chapter will argue that
Euripides’ tragedies are themselves shaped by concerns that remain relevant in the
early modern period.⁵

The text Peck had rediscovered was an English version of Baptistes, subtitled
by Peck “A Sacred Dramatic Poem, in Defence of Liberty.” Peck’s subtitle hints at a
point of connection between Milton and Buchanan, casting the tragedy as a rhetorical
work striving for political effect. The two authors shared a commitment to the
deployed potential of rhetoric, also evident in the Euripidean tragedies that so
powerfully shaped both writers. The skilled use of words—particularly their
capability to soothe, flatter, and deceive—was of vital importance in early modern
Europe, just as it had been in ancient Athens, a "society dominated institutionally by
the assembly and the lawcourts," Simon Goldhill writes, in which "the discussion of
the best way to use language (persuasion, argumentation, rhetoric) is an issue of
considerable social and political importance." Goldhill's words pertain equally to
Buchanan’s own moment—and indeed to Milton’s. In the wake of the Reformation,
and with the rise of print culture, the relationship between words and actions was once
more a pressing social and political question in Europe.

Recent critics have worked to show how this rhetorical aspect of Euripidean
drama relates to what Goldhill identifies as a fifth-century BCE “linguistic turn,”
during which “the role of language in the production of meaning, in the development
of thought, in the uncertainties of reference,” was debated “not only at the level of
philosophical enquiry or literary self-consciousness but also in the more general
awareness of the possibilities and dangers of the tricks and powers of words.”

Matthew Wright documents the influence on Euripides of language philosophers
including Parmenides, Leucippus and Democritus—"thinkers [who] had also been
questioning the relationship between reality and language." Wright also notes the
importance of the ancient Greek rhetorician and sophist Gorgias’ lost treatise, On
What is Not, to Euripides’ interest in “the relationship between reality and various
forms of illusion or delusion.” Gorgias made a notorious visit to Athens during 427
BCE when Euripides was at the height of his dramatic powers, prompting a long-
standing association between the tragedian’s rhetorical style and that of the sophists,
whose highly performative oratory was attacked by Plato as mere artifice with little
relation to truth. The dramatist Aristophanes was instrumental in establishing the
view Plato articulates; *Frogs* repeatedly compares the old style of Aeschylus and the
newer rhetoric of Euripides, connecting the latter with “glib chatter and overrefined
logic”: “chattering *[lalia]* and glibness *[stōmulia]*” (I.1069). At one point in the play, the two tragedians’ respective words are weighed in a gigantic set of scales;
Aeschylus’s are found to be satisfyingly weighty (*mega*), while Euripides’ are light (*koufos*) (I.1378-1410).

From antiquity onwards, then, Euripides was associated not only with
rhetorical skill, but also with the political utility of such powers. This leads Quintilian
and Dio Chrysostomos to recommend his writings to anyone seeking a rhetorical
training for political ends. Euripides’ *plays contain* canny manipulations of rhetoric
for ends ethical and political as well as dramatic. Observing that “rhetoric is intrinsic
to Euripides’ conception of tragedy and that it is often the source of ‘tragic’ effects, in
the sense that it exposes to scrutiny the contingency of values and illusory quality of
human skills,” Donald Mastronarde hints at Euripides’ frequent tragic evocations of
highly trained rhetoricians in society, and the often problematic nature of such
“illusory” powers. The potential for rhetorical sophistication to elide true intentions
(onstage or, more dangerously, in the political sphere) is a recurring source of disquiet
in Euripides’ tragedies perhaps most famously in Hippolytus’ exclamation that “My
tongue swore, but my mind is not on oath” (I.612). The suggestive gap between the
work of the tongue and that of the mind, or heart, is here ripe for dramatic
exploitation of a kind that many critics have characterized as a particularly Euripidean
brand of irony. This aspect of his tragedies seemingly appeals to early modern readers
and writers, who are themselves particularly alert to such tensions between rhetoric and action.¹⁵

Buchanan’s plays newly reinvigorate Euripides’ concern with how language relates to action, a preoccupation lent additional urgency by the performance of drama and by the performativity of rhetoric in the sophistic model that was both so influential and so disturbing to fifth-century sensibilities. At worst, rhetoric loses all relation to the world it functions in, words become disconnected from deeds, and oratorical power tips over into hypocrisy and even tyranny. At best, this protean power allows the language of the past to speak to the later audiences of the unimagined future. The present chapter argues that the preoccupation with the relationship between words and deeds that Buchanan derives from Euripides takes on highly localized political dimensions in early modern Bordeaux, Reformation Europe, and the English Civil War (as it had in ancient Athens). Buchanan transforms the rhetoric of ancient Greek tragedy for the early modern academic stage. Moreover, Buchanan’s own drama is itself transformed by different contexts: in performance or in print; in France, in Portugal or in England; in pedagogical, political or religious spheres.

This chapter first sets out the importance of rhetoric in the most immediately local context for Buchanan’s plays, the educational system of early modern Bordeaux. Drawing on Buchanan’s translation of Medea, the first of his tragedies to be published, we show how Euripides was associated with a particular emphasis upon language as an agent of moral action. We then chart Buchanan’s rigorous scepticism about the disconnection between words and deeds, a separation that undermines the vows that underpin both Jephthes and Alcestis, and show that this scepticism traces back to Euripides’ tragedies and, especially, his critique of the Greek rhetorical tradition of
sophistry. Finally, we explore the political afterlife of Buchanan’s *Baptistes* in more detail than our introduction to this essay affords, revealing how mid-seventeenth-century republican rhetoric identifies rhetorical hypocrisy as a key feature of tyranny - an idea central to Euripides, Buchanan and the reception of their respective tragedies.

**Rhetoric: *Medea***

So-called ‘academic drama’ was not entirely novel in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries, but the practice of staging plays (sometimes with biblical themes, often written in Latin) was reformed by humanist educators across Europe during that time. It was expected that the performance of Roman comedies in their original Latin, ancient Greek tragedies translated into Latin, or new Latin plays would encourage a deeper engagement with the language, its various stylistic registers, and the practicalities of rhetorical delivery. In addition, drama was believed to be uniquely effective in allowing – and eliciting – serious consideration of a range of emotional responses to moral and political questions, and thus informing the behavior of the future statesmen (and, very occasionally, women) of Europe. Staged performances of Latin plays (and a few in ancient Greek) begin to be enshrined in the statutes of schools and colleges during the sixteenth-century, both in England and across the continent. Buchanan refers to such a “custom” in Bordeaux by way of explaining how he came to write drama in the first place. Propriety was a key motivation for the composition of many new Latin plays, with classical texts (particularly by Plautus) often considered immoral (“base stuffe”). Some secular plays shared enough values with Christian morality to be considered morally edifying, however, or had instructive epilogues to guide listeners towards a clear ethical purpose.
In keeping with such Christian humanist aims Buchanan’s tragedies owe to Euripides an insistence that rhetoric is not merely a technical skill but something that determines – and sometimes contravenes – moral action, particularly in the political sphere. In his preface to Alcestis, Buchanan identifies Euripides’ “delightful” (suavis) sweetness as what makes the drama a useful pedagogical tool. His plays, particularly the translations from Greek, foreground discussions about the use of rhetoric itself, exploring the capacity for words to prompt, or subvert, deeds. This aspect of the dramas reflects Euripides’ early modern reputation for rhetorical sophistication. As already noted above, such associations seem to date from a depiction of Euripides as a character in a number of Aristophanes’ plays, especially Frogs, where his rhetorical skill is contrasted with that of Aeschylus: “So it makes sense to expect that this one [Euripides] will say something sophisticated and finely honed, while that one [Aeschylus] will launch his attack with arguments torn up by the roots,” (ll.900-3). In the early modern period, in which Aristophanes was a ubiquitous presence on school curricula (along with the Roman writers he had influenced such as Horace), this characterization was firmly entrenched. Gasparus Stiblinus’ important sixteenth-century edition of Euripides’ works contained commentary upon the rhetorical ingenuity of certain speeches, for instance.

The agency of rhetoric is central to the plot of Medea, which is structured around the protagonist’s encounters with three different male interlocutors. Abandoned by Jason (who has remarried the daughter of the local king of Corinth, Creon), and seeking her revenge, Medea must persuade each of these figures of something: she begs Creon for a one-day stay of exile; she seeks a promise of asylum from Aegeus, Athens’ king; she must persuade Jason to allow their children to deliver a wedding gift to his new wife – a gift that she has laced with poison. In contrast to
Seneca’s *Medea*, where the heroine is markedly a powerful manipulator of supernatural forces and the gods, Euripides’ – and Buchanan’s – Medea has only her wits, words and persuasive skills with which to negotiate her way out of a desperate situation. The audience is repeatedly invited to appreciate Medea’s exceptional rhetorical skill: replying to her first suit for mercy, the king notes how her words are “ornate” (*speciosa*) and “alluring” (*blanda*, l.340) but says that her too-obvious attempts to persuade have backfired and made him trust her even less (l.342).

Buchanan’s *Medea* both debates and deploys rhetoric, encompassing ethical lessons about the purposes of oratory while simultaneously offering an exemplary performance of oratorial skill. Buchanan’s Medea uses her rhetorical prowess to manipulate other characters into perceiving her actions as emotionally-driven, when they are in fact strategically planned. As Medea feigns residual spousal affection for Jason, Buchanan’s translation brings out her disgust at such dissimulation more strongly than Euripides’ Greek. After Creon’s exit, Buchanan’s Medea sneers: “Do you think I would have been able to fawn on the tyrant, if there had been no hope of reward or of some new plan?” (ll.392-3). Medea confides her self-consciously rhetorical strategy to the Chorus: she will make a very flattering speech (*blandior oratio*) to convince Jason to acquiesce to her new plan (l.819). Medea’s body might betray her into weeping at the thought of the *infanticide* she intends — Jason asks “But why are your cheeks wet with tears?” (ll. 967-8) — but she retains mastery of her rhetoric, deploying the ambiguity of dramatic irony (“It’s nothing. The memory of the children came suddenly to mind” [l.970]) and performatively playing on Jason’s expectations of her gender (“Truly I am a woman; a gender born for tears” [ll.972-3]).

Euripides’ play productively illuminates the distance between words and deeds, an aspect of his writing that is heightened in performance, particularly in the
local context of the Collège de Guyenne. Striking moments of collapse between the world “on stage” and the world of the Bordeaux schoolroom are not uncommon, and serve to foreground the artifice of the performance. For example, early in the play the statement that “a boy’s mind is not open to serious concern at all” (ll.50-2) invites wry self-reflection among pupils and teachers alike, sharpening the relevance of what will follow to all those on stage and in the audience. Equally ironic, in the schoolroom context, are statements concerning the use and dangers of learning: “Whoever is endowed with true wisdom (prudentia), let them not instruct their children in more education than reasonable, nor teach them to know too much. For besides the indolent idleness that comes with education, students also face the concomitant envy (obliquus livor) of the citizens” (ll. 315-9). Directly at odds with the pedagogical commitments of both pupils and teachers, such lines must have struck a chord during Medea’s first performance. But at a time when scholars and tutors had recently been tried and even put to the stake for what they were teaching (as had been the case during Buchanan’s stay in a politically restive Paris in the 1530s) the dangers of education were all too obvious to the Bordeaux academic community. In this combustible political environment Buchanan had direct experience of exploiting rhetorical artifice to mask true intentions; having fled from Scotland shortly after the manuscript circulation of his incendiary and satirical Franciscanus, he let it be known he was thinking of travelling to Germany, before secretly returning in safety to Paris in the autumn of 1534. As in Euripides’ plays, where a particular kind of irony is generated by the disconnect between words and deeds, Buchanan is likewise aware of the productive duplicity of language, an insight he deploys throughout his own drama.

Scepticism: Jepthes and Alcestis

The scepticism with which vows are treated in Buchanan’s academic drama
illustrates his interest in exploring the particular form of linguistic duplicity with which Euripides was identified in the early modern period. This dilemma is perhaps most explicitly staged in two plays that are not usually read together by modern critics but which are intimately connected, having been printed together in a Strasbourg edition of 1567. Jepthes and Alcestis were written around the same time and published within two years of one another; both texts share thematic concerns, including a sense of radical disconnection between words and deeds, which derive from Euripidean precedent but also speak to a series of local contexts relevant to the plays’ first audiences and (later) readers. Both explore rash promises and the horror of being made to act on these ill-conceived vows – the compulsion, that is, to put rhetoric into action and make words – however misguided – into deeds. Moving beyond the local context of their first performance in Bordeaux, we can see how the unstable connection between word and deed shapes the reception of these two plays in post-Reformation Europe.

The binding power of vows – and the problems that ensue from acting on a morally dubious promise – forms the central tenet of the Old Testament-derived plot of Jepthes. In gratitude to his “one true God” for protecting his land and people during war, Jephtha swears that “The first thing to encounter me on my safe return at my house will be your welcome victim and will steep your altar with its blood” (ll.486-7, p.73). Greek tragic precedent is evoked when it becomes clear that Jephtha will be required to sacrifice his own daughter, Iphis, a development that recalls Agamemnon’s fate in Euripides’ Iphigenia at Aulis (Buchanan reinforces this point by playing upon the names of these two wretched girls). Jephtha of course immediately regrets his promise – “If only I had been wiser and more cautious in the terms of my vow!” (ll.722-3, p.78) – but, despite the entreaties of the other characters in a series of
conversations that make up the main action of the play, he concludes that he must turn his words into actions, instigating the drama’s tragic denouement.

Many interpretations of Jephthes have attempted to elide such diachronic resonances with Euripidean precedents by elaborating the religious and, latterly, the political contexts in which the play was written.28 Jephtha’s soon-regretted promise has frequently been read with reference to an ongoing sixteenth-century preoccupation with the legitimacy of clerical vows and particularly an exchange of pamphlets between Bartholomew Latomus and Martin Bucer in 1543-1544, in which they debate the issue of whether a morally questionable vow should still be implemented.29 Buchanan himself gives some grounds for such readings in his First Defence, in which he explicitly links Jephthes to this context.30 This dilemma obtains also in the final scene of Alcestis, in which Admetus, who has promised his wife never to remarry when she agrees to sacrifice her own life to the god Apollo in his stead, reneges on this vow (“Fine, you win, although your request is most unwelcome” l.1185). This synchronous local reading elicits caution, however, not least because much of the relevant polemic was published too late to have influenced the initial composition of the play.31 Furthermore, such allegorical interpretation is unlikely to have found favor with Buchanan himself, who expressed his “hope that by acting in such plays” as he was himself writing, “the youth of Bordeaux might be weaned from the allegories then so very popular in France.”32 Local reading here requires focusing less on synchronous authorial intent than on considering the plays’ diachronic transformation by the different circumstances in which they were first performed and then read. The plays’ resonances with Reformation theology would have seemed quite different for their early academic audiences at Bordeaux and for those reading Jephthes and Alcestis in their first printed editions in Paris or even London, at a time
when the Latomus-Bucer debate was much more live and its implications more readily accessible. Local contexts impact reading as these texts are transformed and activated by the different worlds they inhabit at different points in their existence.

A diachronic sense of local context also alerts us to the susceptibility of Buchanan’s dramatic language to change its meaning over time or be subject to promiscuous interpretation. Inconstancy is the driving force behind Jephthes. The fickleness of fortune represents the play’s prime inheritance from the Greek tragic drama: “Alas for the transformation of swift-moving fate!” declares the Chorus (l.746, p.79). Where vows depend upon linguistic stability and exact correspondence between the language of promise and the actions that fulfill it, Jephthes invokes the possibility of words diverging from their original meanings. Lamenting the “treacherous fickleness of fate,” for instance, the Chorus gives us an image a life in which “If any joy dawns, it swiftly flies away on the hastening breeze like the vanishing light of a fleeting flame in dry straw. Then columns of enduring grief approach, joined in unbroken chains” (ll.833-41, p.81). The “hastening breeze” that quickly dispatches any prospect of joy is also the “dry straw” upon which a “fleeting flame” flickers; Buchanan’s series of metaphors here evokes the changeability thematically central to the play at the level of its language. Such linguistic flights of fancy prompt us to be suspicious of words’ capacity to accurately represent deeds, and the distance the play opens up between language and meaning are part of its deeply cynical effect.

The sense of instability fostered by Buchanan’s dramatic writing is further emphasized by the clash it stages between classical and biblical worlds and their vastly differing moral codes. Buchanan highlights the sometimes uncomfortable intersection of these two very different traditions, never more so than in a central
scene where Jephtha seeks (and rejects) the advice of a priest on his terrible dilemma: “God ordered Abraham to slay his son,” he says there, to which the priest replies “And having commanded this, he also forbade him to kill” (ll.920-1, p.83). The awkward juxtaposition of Jephtha’s situation with that of both his biblical precursor, whom God does not require to complete the sacrifice initially demanded, and Greek tragic precedent, in which Iphigenia escapes her fate at the last moment when Artemis snatches her up and taking her across the Black Sea to Tauris, stages the difficulties of reconciling the moral universes of pagan and Christian, ancient and (early) modern.

**Hypocrisy: Baptistes**

Scepticism towards rhetoric, and particularly its workings in the political sphere, is one of the most Euripidean aspects of Buchanan’s plays. We have begun to see how his dramatic works follow Euripides’ tragedies in revealing the distance between rhetoric and action, opening up the ironic disconnect between words and deeds to lay bare the fundamental instability of language. In the “Prologus” attached to Buchanan’s other “original” play, Baptistes, he at once attacks would-be critics of the play for inconstancy and simultaneously exhibits a rhetorical bravado of which the sophists would have been proud. Baptistes tells the story of John the Baptist and his what is presented as his persecution at the hands of King Herod and especially his wife Herodias and daughter, whose request “Give me the severed head of the Baptist in this dish” (l.1196, p.160) will ultimately be granted in the final moments of the tragedy. In this prologue Buchanan fascinatingly combines his own situation as a playwright attempting to remake biblical narrative in dramatic form (and indeed to remake pagan Greek tragedy in Christian form) with the dilemma facing his protagonist; both Buchanan and the Baptist must delicately negotiate between innovation and tradition as they seek to transform literary genres and religio-political
Comparing would-be critics of his play to Proteus, who emblematizes inconstancy, Buchanan writes that “If anyone produces an ancient plot, they make annoying interruptions, they cough and retch. But if anyone introduces a new one, they at once demand and approve and praise and love the old” (ll.15-8, p.134). Consciously emulating the defensive prologues of Terence’s plays, Buchanan tries to escape such willfully perverse censure by claiming for his play status both innovative and traditional, “a new play, or rather an old story refurbished” (ll.37-8, p.134).

*Baptistes* is similarly Protean in its form: a deliberate remodeling of Aristotelian tragic form (expanded from five acts to six) to fit scriptural narrative. As with *Jephthes*, Greek tragedy is ubiquitous in *Baptistes*. Its omnipresent chorus and their odes contextualizing and complicating the play’s central concepts of pride and tyranny, its deployment of typically Euripidean sophisticated rhetoric, and its multiple duels of words all allude to its Euripidean inheritance.

Buchanan’s attempts to transform the genre in which he writes by creating an Aristotelian *via media* between Old-Testament and Greek tragic models accords with a rhetoric of moderation that is espoused throughout *Baptistes* as one of its key values. Extremism repeatedly comes under scrutiny, whether Herod’s apparent tyranny or the Baptist’s unwillingness to flex in his moral commitments. From the beginning of the play, when Gamaliel derides Malchus’ lack of “moderation” ([modestia], l.239, p.139) in the (false) charges he levels against the Baptist, to the extremist beheading that Herod’s daughter demands, Buchanan probes the limits of what can be reasonably justified. Just as moderation served as a key term in debates about rhetoric, so too *Baptistes* tests out various definitions of the word. Herod opposes the “moderate” (*modestus*) prince to “a harsh one” (*asper*) as he ponders how he should treat the Baptist, noting that the people despise both kinds of ruler (ll.539-40, p.146).
Reflecting Buchanan’s point from the prologue about Protean critical tastes, Herod here raises the problem of pleasing no one by seeking to please everyone - a fear that Malchus also conjures as indecision in the face of a divinely bestowed freedom of choice. “Kings must be feared; they need not be loved,” his daughter entreats him (ll.1214-5, p.161). By the latter stages of the drama Herod has indeed adopted the more decisive position urged upon him by his wife and daughter, embracing a kind of rule that has little room for moderation. “The king by his command can make just what was earlier unjust,” his daughter remarks with chilling clarity; “I shall now ensure that the headstrong people learns, even at its own cost, to speak of its kings with moderation,” Herodias vows, “and whether kings enjoin just or unjust commands, the people must believe that they are all to be borne without resentment” (ll.1204-5, 1260-3, pp.161, 162).

The hypocrisy of demanding “moderation” in the behavior of the people towards their ruler while the same ruler shows none towards them goes to the heart of the play’s concern with the troubled relationship between action and language, between deeds and mere sophistry. Ethan Shagan has powerfully shown how a rhetoric of moderation in fact served as “a profoundly coercive tool of social, religious and political power,” in the early modern period, requiring “government, with no firm boundary between the ethical governance of the self and the political governance of others.”35 The term took on particular significance in debates about the reform of religious ritual, staged here in the play’s opening discussion between two theologically-opposed priests. Gamaliel shares the Baptist’s view that “God does not look to scepters, ancestral geologies, beauty of appearance or royal wealth, but to hearts stained with no infection of cruelty, deceit and lust” (ll.154-7, p.137); Malchus denounces such reforming views and loathes the Baptist for espousing them: “Can
you persuade me that the man who despises laws, promotes new sects and new rites, attacks with abuse the teachers of the people, and disparages the priests is good?" (ll.126-9, p.136). John himself insists that his religious practice represents no innovation but rather a return to “our ancient rites and customs” (ll.486-7, p.144) rituals that have been neglected by the hypocritical clergy who abandon their congregations’ spiritual education and fail to protect them from the dangers of sin.

With equally breathtaking hypocrisy Herod repeatedly bemoans the state of kings, subject as they are to the will of their people: “The condition of kings is wretched if it fears the wretched,” he says (l.367, p.142); “one must act the people’s servant to preserve kingly power” (ll.546-8, p.146). To ignore the will of the people is something that Herod clearly brands tyrannical early in the play, when he observes that the difference between kings and tyrants is that “the king keeps watch on enemies, whereas the tyrant is the enemy of the citizens” (ll.371-2, p.142). But by the latter stages he has become the tyrant he earlier denounced, acknowledging that his reputation will be determined by his decision to execute the Baptist: “Rumor will brand me as a tyrant, not as king” (l.1211, p.161). The key distinction between these two kinds of ruler lies in the precise nature of the power of the law to regulate the relationship between the wills of the people and of their monarch. When Herod reminds his daughter that “the law enjoins a limit to the king’s commanding,” she replies that “If the law is what the prince has decreed, the law does not limit kings, but the king the laws” (ll.1207-8, p.161).

Buchanan here evokes a recurring critique of rhetoric – and of tragedy – in ancient Greece, which often questioned the moral force of speech, particularly political oratory. Gorgias’ sophistic Encomium of Helen uses the same word, “apatē” to signify both “persuasion” and “deceit.” Jeroen Bons argues that sophists discerned
a parallel between the kind of illusion created in theatres and the performative (even deliberately misleading) rhetoric of the lawcourts and the Assembly; “The connecting element between tragedy and rhetoric is *apatē* [‘deceit’].”^{37} The king’s claim to be subject to the law (as a sanctioned embodiment of the will of the people) while he usurps the authority of the law to his own ends is a defining moment of hypocrisy in *Baptistes*. In this, the play simultaneously seems to prefigure the worst possible outcome of James VI’s rule (of Scotland and later of England too) and at the same time to anticipate the charges many would level against Charles I by the time *A Tyrannical Government Anatomiz’d* was printed some sixty years after Buchanan’s death.

Somewhat ironically, given Buchanan’s denunciation of Protean changeability in its prologue and the critique of inconstancy staged within the play itself, *Baptistes* provides a particularly compelling example of a play transformed by its various early modern contexts *with which to conclude this chapter*. Originally written at a moment in Bordeaux’s history when religious persecution of Protestants (with whom Buchanan, heavily versed in Erasmian evangelical humanism, may have had some sympathy) was on the rise, the play’s concerns with a conflict between entrenched religious practices and attempts to modernize theological doctrine would have been sharply felt by its first audience at the Collège de Guyenne in 1542.^{38} In his later trial before the Portuguese Inquisition, Buchanan contradicted his earlier opposition to allegory in the interests of self-preservation, encouraging such interpretations by suggesting that the play allegorically represents the clash between Thomas More and Henry VIII and thus avoiding any more dangerously local readings.^{39} By 1577, however, when the play was eventually published, its significance had again been transformed. Buchanan himself wrote a preface dedicating the work to the Scottish
King James VI (for whom he had once acted as a tutor) and portraying the tragedy as a warning to the future monarch or Great Britain (as James would style himself) against tyranny: “when they [tyrants] seem to prosper the most, it [the play] exposes distinctly their wretchedness” (Preface to Baptistes, ll.12-13). The anonymous English translation of 1642 (mistakenly attributed to Milton by Peck) was once more transformed by the local context in which it appeared: the tragedy’s efforts to distinguish between properly circumscribed kingship and unmitigated, immoderately tyrannical rule resonated strongly with the ongoing debate about the behaviour of Charles I that would eventually lead to full-blown Civil War and the King’s execution in 1649.40 Baptistes has been diachronically transformed by its readers, who impose a variety of interpretations according to the local political and polemical demands of each moment of encounter. Buchanan’s words have been placed in a variety of contexts and made to act upon the behalf of a disparate series of causes. Their moral flexibility attests to both the rhetorical sophistication of Buchanan’s Baptistes and to the insights apparent in Euripides’ own plays about the disconnect between the synchronic moment in which words become fixed upon utterance and the diachronic workings of the worlds they inhabit, via performance, literary reception and critical interpretation. Our reading of Buchanan’s dramatic words has shown how recognising this strongly diachronic aspect of his texts and the Euripidean tradition they draw upon can enable us to rethink our sense of the “local”.

**FURTHER READING**


Erskine, Caroline and Roger Mason, eds., *George Buchanan: Political Thought in Early Modern Britain and Europe*, ed. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012)

McFarlane, I. D., Buchanan (London: Duckworth, 1981)


6 Milton did in fact know Buchanan’s work and esteemed him as both one of the foremost political thinkers of an earlier generation and as an important poet whose efforts to fuse Christian theology with Greek tragedy offer a key precursor to his own Samson Agonistes. J.T.T. Brown, “An English Translation of George Buchanan’s Baptistes Attributed to Milton,” George Buchanan: Glasgow Quatercentenary Studies (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1907): 61-173 (pp.72-4). See also Hannah Crawforth, “The Politics of Greek Tragedy in Samson Agonistes,” The Seventeenth Century 31.2 (2016): 239-60. [ADD CROSS-REFERENCE HERE TO JENNY MANN ESSAY IN THIS VOLUME…]


Ibid. p.207.


Alcestis. Preface ll.17-20. All references to the text of Buchanan’s dramas are given both with line numbers corresponding to the Latin text and, for *Jephthes* and *Baptistes*, the page numbers in Sharratt & Walsh’s translation.


Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides*, p.10. Stiblinus’ Argument to the third act of *Andromache* commends the elegant speeches of Peleus and Menelaus, for example, see *Euripides Poeta: Tragicorum princeps in Latinum sermonem conversus, ajiecto e regione textu Graeco. Cum Annationibus et Praefationibus in omnes eius Tragoedias: autore Gasparo Stiblino &c*. (Basle, 1562).


*George Buchanan: Tragedies*, p.15; McFarlane, *Buchanan*, p.197.

Aitken, *Trial*, p.xxi

ll.1169-72 p.159; l.1198 p.160; ll.1251-4 p.162; l.1325 p.163.


Bons, ‘Gorgias the Sophist,’ pp.43-44.

On Buchanan’s ‘evangelical humanism’, see McFarlane, *Buchanan*, p.16.

While there are reasons to treat this claim sceptically the interpretation has persisted, see George Buchanan: *Tragedies*, p.11; Sharratt & Walsh are quoting Aitken, *The Trial*, p.24; McFarlane, *Buchanan*, pp.383-5.

For an account of a civil war soldier who despises the play for enflaming republicanism, see Clare Jackson, “Buchanan in Hell: Sir James Turner and Civil War Royalism,” in *George Buchanan: Political Thought*, ed. Erskine and Roger Mason, pp.205-228.