AN EDITION AND TRANSLATION OF LOUIS ROU'S
"A PROSPECT OF CHESS-PLAY AND CHESS-PLAYERS"

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In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle describes how virtues and vices are not, as commonly believed, opposite ends of the same spectrum (Books III and IV). Rather, each virtue is flanked by a pair of vices—one an excess of the virtue, the other a deficiency in it. For example, the virtue of generosity can degenerate into prodigality (too much of the good thing) or stinginess (too little of it). In his mid-1730s Neo-Latin poem, "A Prospect of Chess-Play and Chess-Players, at the Coffeehouse, New York," Reverend Louis Rou playfully dramatizes the ease in which he and his circle fall prey to such extremes during their favorite pastime, chess. In the process, the poet both captures the uniquely communal dimensions of Neo-Latin verse in British America while marking a special place in history as the first extant mention of chess in American literature.

The Poet, Louis Rou (1684-1759)
The poem is contained in the appendix to a Scottish manuscript of Poems on Several Occasions by Archibald Home (c.1705-1744), who served as the secretary of New Jersey. The poems probably were collected at his death by Abigail Street's Cose of Brenton and circulated as a manuscript book (Shields 264). Home, a younger son of Sir John Home, baronet of Berwick, came to New York in the early 1730s. The earliest poems of the manuscript, including Rou's "Prospect," date from the mid-1730s when Home was frequenting the taverns and coffeehouses of New York City and began gathering around him a very cosmopolitan circle who shared an interest in belles lettres (Shields 264). As Shields argues in Civil Tongues, colonial coffeehouses and the literature they produced possessed a sophistication unique to such public venues due both to their being frequented by men of the commercial and propertied classes as well as their immediate access to the latest news from abroad brought in by merchant ships (59-61). Home's group, for example, included the aforementioned Cose, merchant Moses Franks (who appears in lines 49-51 of the poem), Brenton's sheriff David Martin, Attorney General Joseph Warren, New Jersey Chief Justice Robert Hunter Morris, and Louis Rou, the minister of the French Church in New York City.
Such a literary group, in turn, is a polite society in which "the blessings of culture and civilization can be enjoyed without intrusion of the most troublesome problems of the age." (Mourges 115). As described by Shields, the "humanism" of the coffeehouse culture in America corresponds perfectly to the social milieu that these critics argue featured most American Neo-Latin versification (59).

However, unlike most Neo-Latin poetry from both sides of the Atlantic that tends to have quite specific (and quite classical) models upon which it is based, Rou's poem displays a rather distinctive, albeit lively, Latinity. Indeed, the unevenly clipped verses and jaunty rhyme seem to be more kindred in spirit—though clearly not a direct descendant—of medieval Gothic lyric poetry than any traditional Golden or Silver Age poets, with whom Rou's sermons demonstrate a great familiarity (Maynard 124). The uniqueness of his versifying is even more evident in the fact that, due to the unfamiliar terminology used, the poet himself finds it necessary to offer immediate glosses for his Latin renderings of "backgammon" (35) and "giving check" (34). And it is the unconventionality of Rou's poem that highlights one of the major differences in Neo-Latin in the British colonies from its predecessor in the Old World: an eagier invitation to participate—or at least to watch.

While it is true that most, if not all, of American Neo-Latin poets were college graduates, and that it was during their college years that many of them "underwent an intense internalization and identification with the classical tradition" (Fadie 37), it is equally true that exclusivity in their verse (in either design or performance) seems far from intentional. Far contrary to the depiction of early American Neo-Latin as a langue spéciale, which by definition is exclusionary (Rosenwald 314-315), most American Neo-Latin poetry, due to its circula-

tion history and occasional character, seems open to wider diffusion and often displays a distinct eagerness for public participation. For while all Neo-Latin verse, with its allusive dimension, displays the tendency toward evoking the reader's participation to some degree, only the Anglo-American variety (supplied by a decided preference for manuscript circulation and/or immediate publication in broadsides and newspapers together with the almost complete avoidance of more elaborate anthologies) manifests the attribute so thoroughly.

Admittedly not everyone would be willing (or even able) to read, much less write, the Neo-Latin verse circulating in the colonies, which is the origin of the coterie criticism. Rou's well-known erudition, after all, benefited from his owning "the best preserved and most complete library in New York" (Maynard 126). Nonetheless, due to the prominence of Neo-Latin verse in all of the popular American periodicals of the day (not infrequently placed on the first page of a newspaper just below the banner, for example), and, more importantly, the regular calls for translation (or, as in Rou's poem, the instantaneous glosses by the poet himself), there is every indication that a very different aesthetic is being invoked here, one quite unlike what Lawrence Rosenwald has termed a "thieves' argot" (314). Not appealing to only those educated few, as in Europe, who would purchase a bound anthology of Neo-Latin verse, this poetry, by being scattered amidst the news of the day (or aimed at capturing the boisterous activity in their milieu) actively engages.

The poem, according to the title, is a prospect poem, which, in the tradition of Denham's "Cooper's Hill" and Gray's "Ode on the Distant Prospect of Eton College," usually suggests a view from above. At the same time, however, far from depicting the traditional solitary observer of a landscape, Rou's couplets acknowledge the presence of several audiences throughout. The reader, thus welcomed to look over the poet's shoulder, as it were, are directed to look not only at how the players play—and how at times, they seem crowded each other (99-51)—but also at our noisy noses as we watch those same players play (15-15). We thus become the observers and the observed simultaneously—a literal inextricably together with the players (60).

Even granting such peculiarities (or, more harshly, such weaknesses), the glimpse that the Haugwitz minister's poem offers of the animated nature of both American Neo-Latin verse in major colonial cities (Signew 294) and of the colonial coffeehouse scene makes it a more than worthy of a full edition and translation.

Yet there is another reason. The "Prospect of Chess-Play and Chess-Players," at a Coffeehouse, New York," composed by Rou circa 1735, seems to rewrite a small piece of literary history by becoming the earliest known literary mention of chess in America, a distinction previously granted to none other than Franklin (Maynard 126). Franklin's place in chess history has traditionally been linked to his "The Morals of Chess" published in 1786 or several chess references, dating back to 1724, in his Autobiography—which he only began writing in 1771 and which remained unfinished at his death in 1790 (Hagedorn 50). This poem, composed by Rou circa 1735, thus predates Franklin by no fewer than thirty-five years.

More significant, if not ironic, is Louis Rou's already being rather famous, in certain circles, for a 1734 "lost manuscript" on chess that, should it ever be discovered, already has been hailed "the earliest composition on chess in America" (Klair, "Revived" 75). While this poem could never have been mistaken for the "Critical Remarks upon the Letter to the Craftsman on the Game of Chess," which has been described as "a thin quarto of twenty-four closely printed pages and divided into seventeen short, numbered chapters or sections" (Fiske, "Lost" 9), the poem's existence certainly adds weight to the argument that, if anyone at the time could and would have written such an essay, it must have been Louis Rou. Considering all of the discussion concerning the historical significance of the lost essay, it is surprising that Rou's poem about his acquaintance with chess has been mentioned. The present edition happily fills the gap.
A PROSPECT OF CHESS-PLAY AND CHESS-PLAYERS, AT THE COFFEEHOUSE NEW YORK
By the Revd Mr. Louis Row, Minister of the French Church

All abundance transitions to vice
because our sufferings have as their source
both "too little" and "too much." 26

Concerning The Places, The Coffeehouse
5 Too many spectators
Too few strangers.

Another on the Same
Too much noise
Too little praise. 27

10 Another
Too much phlegm
too little earnestness.

The Spectators
Too much discussion
Too little power.

The Players
Too much substitution
Too little preparation.

Conquering the Game
20 "Too much speed"
"Too little joy."

The Author
Too much knowledge
Too little patience.

Another on the Same
25 Too much reputation
Too little application.

And thus
Through this final abundance and lack
may we often be our audience's hosts.

Many are troublesome, others only less.
But throughout this wave and great excess
There was, is, and always will be our silly game of Chess.

The End
Notes

1 That Ron was well-versed in the Greek philosophers (and a wide array of other ancient authors) can be deduced readily from the abundant and detailed analogies and quotations from them in his treatises (Marlowe 124).

2 Maynard places the coffeehouse at a location "on Broadway, near the present High" (137).

3 Such familiarity with Latin poetry also suggests that Ron's occasional lapses in grammar or vocabulary are due to more than idiosyncratic position than any lack of appreciation for the subtleties of Latin sensibility.

4 I am indebted to David Shanks, Professor of American Literature at The Citadel, for very generously sharing the microfilm reproduction of the manuscript with me and for supplying, where possible, the identities of the people mentioned in the poems. I could not have completed the project without his invaluable assistance. Many thanks are also due to the Reverend Nigel Maury of the Francis Church of Saint George in New York City, to Anne Guthrie of the United States Chess Federation in New York, and to Eric Burt, the archivist at the Huguenot Historical Society in New York. During his insightful discussion of the place of coffeehouses and games in the creation and circulation of eighteenth-century colonial American literature, I was greatly aided by the generosity of Dick H. C. Hegler, Rutgers University.

5 Charles seems to have collaborated with Archibald.

6 Mr. Mares Franks, who would become one of the great merchants of the British Empire, also contributed two preliminary poems for Home's Poems for Several Occasions.

7 This couplet is problematic in its vagueness. Socially, it literally means "a small place, coffee, or beer." In the poem it can, however, mean "pairs." Ron's choice, literally "good eyes," has no apparent idiosyncratic meaning.

8 I represent the third different Latin spelling of chies or a chess-established word in the poem. This corresponds well, however, to the incorrect orthography in a variety of New York texts on chess: Jacobus de Candia's De ludis schachorum, Marco Cortesio Vido de ludis schachorum, and Thomas Hyck's Mundus schachii, among others.

9 The poet emphasizes the characteristic features of the coffeehouse by modifying both nouns (a large room) and person (is an insufficient amount, too much), these words that in themselves denote excessive abundance and lack, respectively, with words (unbeknownst, an excess amount, too much), the resulting couplet has been rendered by the very extreme "too much..."

10 While the Latin part reveals throughout the poem a decided preference for phonetic doublets, something not inappropriate in the theme of the poem, the translation has aimed at caution in the rendering. The translation also attempts to reflect the very occasional dactylic and half-verse of the original.

Works Cited


