

Rapoport Center Human Rights
Working Paper Series
6/2023

**Ordinary Subjects of Tyranny: Practical Constitutionalism and
Public Judgement in the Political Thought of George Buchanan**

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RAPOPORT CENTER
For Human Rights and Justice
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ISSN 2158-
3161

Published in the United States of
America
The Bernard and Audre Rapoport Center for Human Rights and
Justice at The University of Texas School of Law
727 E. Dean Keeton
St.
Austin, TX
78705

<https://law.utexas.edu/humanrights/>

<https://law.utexas.edu/humanrights/project-type/working-paper-series/>

ABSTRACT

The influence of democratic ideas on the political thought of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe is often considered in relationship to history, theology, and law, but less often in relationship to poetry. For this reason, poetry offers unexplored resources for thinking through the value of public deliberation and judgment, even under decidedly non-democratic constitutions. In this paper, I examine the political thought of the Scottish humanist George Buchanan (1506–82) in the context of his philosophical dialogue *De iure regni* and his Biblical tragedy *Baptistes*. Buchanan's political thought was recognized as radical in its own day for the strong limits it placed on monarchical power and prerogative and the authority it vested in the people to restrain kings and depose tyrants. I argue, however, that what is most interesting for the history of democracy—as well as for political thought today—is Buchanan's development of arguments for the judgment of the common people as a privileged site of political insight and, by extension, for the practical value of public deliberation and transparent government.

KEYWORDS:

Poetry, Buchanan, public discourse, public deliberation, transparent government

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Introduction

From the management of the global economy by private banks to the structuring of public discourse by social media companies, contemporary governance is increasingly characterized by the private management of matters of public concern, with grave consequences for democratic constitutions and cultures of public judgment.¹ But many of the strongest arguments for democratic social reform do not make a case for public judgment and political transparency as goods in themselves; instead, they ground these practices in individual rights and protections. Nadia Urbinati names this tendency the “unpolitical temptation in contemporary democratic theory”: rather than “keeping the process of judgment and will formation open to scrutiny and revision,” defenders of democracy try to avoid antagonism by treating controversial matters of public concern as best decided by experts.² Urbinati argues instead that robust public judgment should transcend public opinion polls or expert analysis; it should be the result of a public deliberative *process*.

If we step back from the present moment, however, the history of democratic political thought offers many unexplored avenues for theorizing the value of opening the “process of judgment” to a wider public. In this paper, I will discuss how the sixteenth-century Scottish humanist George Buchanan developed arguments for this kind of public judgment and put them into practice through the writing of fiction.³ By turning to an unlikely scene—early modern monarchy and the fictional genres in which Buchanan theorizes it—I aim to suggest the rich

¹ See, for instance, Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015).

² Nadia Urbinati, “Unpolitical Democracy,” *Political Theory* 38, no. 1 (February 2010): 68, 85.

³ I use the term *fiction* to refer to the imaginative creation of plausible images or representations in writing. On the history of the term in rhetoric and its reception in the Renaissance, see, for instance, Kathy Eden, *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

resources this history can provide for contemporary politics. Indeed, Buchanan not only argues that public judgment is often superior to expert analysis; he uses the writing of fiction to open up a deliberative process about monarchical governance. Likewise, monarchy remains the form of governance most of us experience in the workplace and elsewhere in the sphere of private management that has increasingly displaced the process of public judgment.⁴

The history of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century constitutional thought might seem an unlikely place to seek democratic arguments: after all, if antipathy to political conflict is strong today, it was even stronger in early modern Europe, where dissent could be seen as symptomatic of an unhealthy commonwealth and monarchies had extensive powers to execute royal decisions.⁵ For this reason, scholarship on this period has generally tried to uncover the origins of contemporary political rights rather than other democratic arguments. Quentin Skinner, for instance, has studied the “resistance theory” of the early modern period—arguments that sanctioned various forms of popular resistance to “tyrannical” abuses of power by appealing to rights derived from national history and divine law.⁶ More recently, Daniel Lee has turned to early modern jurisprudence to understand the emergence of popular sovereignty as an idea in constitutional thought, focusing especially on the sovereign power of the people to constitute

⁴ On this topic, see Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁵ On the nature of political “choice” in early modern England in particular, see Mark A. Kishlansky, *Parliamentary Selection: Social and Political Choice in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁶ Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1978). Howell A. Lloyd defines “constitutionalism” as a system involving “the rule of law, a separation of legislative from executive and from judicial power, and representative institutions to safeguard the individual and collective rights of a people who, while governed, are nevertheless sovereign.” See Lloyd, “Constitutionalism,” in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700*, ed. J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 254. On English constitutionalism, see also Corinne C. Weston and Mark Goldie, “England: Ancient Constitution and Common Law,” in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700*, eds. J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 254–97, 374–411, and Alan Cromartie, *The Constitutionalist Revolution: An Essay on the History of England, 1450–1642* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

legitimate public authority.⁷ While both approaches have uncovered the theoretical prehistory of contemporary democratic constitutionalism, neither has treated the history of pragmatic arguments for democratic reforms, even under monarchy.

In this paper, I consider a single key figure in sixteenth-century constitutional thought—George Buchanan—whose political fictions emphasize the practical value of public judgment. Buchanan is a rare figure who was both hugely influential throughout early modern Europe and an unapologetic proponent of classical democratic thought. Best known today for his far-reaching doctrine of tyrannicide—he argued that any subject has the right to kill a tyrannical ruler—Buchanan also denounced Portuguese imperialism, defended a strongly limited monarchy, and tried, with little success, to instill these principles in his most famous student, James VI of Scotland, later James I of England.⁸ I argue that Buchanan’s political fictions—the philosophical dialogue *De iure regni apud Scotos* [On the Law of Kingship among the Scots] and the political tragedy *Baptistes, sive calumnia* [The Baptist, or Calumny]—enact a kind of practical constitutionalism aiming to educate both rulers and subjects in political judgment. Buchanan’s fictions open up the process of public judgment within monarchy by teaching subjects how to distinguish monarchy from tyranny and pressuring rulers to make decisions in the awareness that they are under constant public scrutiny.

⁷ Lee, *Popular Sovereignty in Early Modern Constitutional Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). See also Richard Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign: The Invention of Modern Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁸ For useful overviews of Buchanan’s political thought, see J. H. Burns, “The Political Ideas of George Buchanan,” *The Scottish Historical Review* 30, no. 109 (1951): 60–68 and Roger A. Mason, “*Rex Stoicus*: George Buchanan, James VI and the Scottish Polity,” in *New Perspectives on the Politics and Culture of Early Modern Scotland*, ed. John Dwyer, Roger A. Mason, and Alexander Murdoch (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1982), 9–33. Buchanan’s views on imperialism are discussed in Arthur H. Williamson, “George Buchanan, Civic Virtue, and Commerce: European Imperialism and Its Sixteenth-Century Critics,” *The Scottish Historical Review* 75, no. 199.1 (April 1996): 20–37. The standard biography of Buchanan is I. D. McFarlane, *Buchanan* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

I employ the term *practical constitutionalism* to suggest an important distinction between early modern theories of limited monarchy and the constitutionalism underpinning modern constitutional democracies. As Lee has argued, early modern constitutional ideas predate the emergence of modern nation-states and thus imagine very different configurations of public power—configurations that do not entirely map onto modern distinctions between a sovereign people and a constituted government.⁹ Furthermore, early modern constitutional ideas were oriented not toward written law but customary practices and institutions, understood in terms of classical, especially Aristotelean, political philosophy. In this context, thinkers were interested in different arrangements of the parts of a polity, the ways that each part related to the whole in different configurations, and how one configuration could be transformed into another. Tyranny, for thinkers like Buchanan, was not simply the rule of an immoral king but a form of constitution in which “to refer everything to the will of a single man and to transfer to him power over all the laws has the same effect as annulling them altogether,” a deterioration of customary institutions to the point that good governance is no longer possible.¹⁰

Theories of education offered a framework for understanding how people can be disposed and organized and were thus indispensable to early modern constitutionalism. The most famous proponent of humanist learning in Northern Europe, Desiderius Erasmus, makes the homology between education and constitution explicit in his treatise *Institutio principis Christiani* [The Education of a Christian Prince], in which he contrasts elective monarchies, such as existed in Poland and the Holy Roman Empire, with hereditary monarchies, such as those in England, France,

⁹ Lee, *Popular Sovereignty*, 5–15.

¹⁰ Buchanan, *A Dialogue on the Law of Kingship among the Scots: A Critical Edition and Translation of George Buchanan's "De Iure Regni apud Scotos Dialogus,"* ed. and trans. Roger A. Mason and Martin S. Smith (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2004), 87. The Latin is as follows: “Ad suum enim unius nutum omnia revocare et omnium vim legum in se transferre eandem vim habet ac si omnes leges abroges” (Buchanan, *De iure*, 86). Subsequent citations of the *De iure*, both in English and Latin, will be given parenthetically by page number in this edition. The original Latin text will be given in the notes.

and Spain. In nations where the prince inherits the office of king rather than being chosen for it, education must take the place of election. As Erasmus writes, “The main hope of getting a good prince hangs on his proper education, which should be managed all the more attentively, so that what has been lost with the right to vote is made up for by the care given to his upbringing.”¹¹ For Erasmus, as for Buchanan, educational texts could be constitutional documents in their own right, personalized attempts to manage kings and reconfigure subjects.

Humanist educational theories especially valorized the reading of poetic fiction as an educational method more accessible to a wider public than the specialized study of theology, history, law, or philosophy. For this reason, forms of practical constitutionalism are at work in philosophical dialogues and tragedies written with an educational aim, like Buchanan’s. As I will show, however, Buchanan also explicitly concerns himself with the weaknesses of constitutional arguments based solely on historical or Scriptural evidence, employing fiction to encourage philosophical reflection on the customary forms of monarchical authority. It is through fiction, I argue, that Buchanan enables subjects of monarchy to recognize tyranny and makes rulers aware that they cannot hide their interests from astute public judgment. By contrast, Buchanan’s fictions show why it is far more practical for a ruler to simply be public.

The historical and political contexts of Buchanan’s thought

George Buchanan’s political fictions emerge out of his career as both a teacher and a political polemicist. Buchanan was widely known in sixteenth-century Europe as a leading Latin

¹¹ *The Education of a Christian Prince*, ed. Lisa Jardine, trans. Neil M. Cheshire and Michael J. Heath, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5. The Latin is as follows: “Caeterum ubi nascitur princeps, non eligitur, . . . ibi praecipua boni principis spes a recta pendet institutione, quam hoc diligentiore etiam adhiberi conveniet, ut quod suffragiorum iuri detractum est, id educandi studio pensetur.” I use the Latin text in Erasmus, *Institutio principis Christiani* 561.27–30, in *Opera omnia* 4.1, ed. O. Herding (Amsterdam: New-Holland Publishing, 1974).

intellectual, a towering Protestant educator, and a fierce political opponent of the Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots. Born in Stirlingshire, Scotland, in 1506, Buchanan studied at St. Andrews and the University of Paris under the philosopher John Mair, whose contention that kings and popes rule by the consent of their subjects proved central to Buchanan's intellectual development.¹² For much of his early career, Buchanan moved among France, Scotland, and Portugal, working as a teacher and developing an international reputation for his Latin poetry. At the same time, Buchanan narrowly escaped charges of heresy on multiple occasions, including a period of imprisonment by the Portuguese Inquisition.¹³ In the latter portion of his career, Buchanan became increasingly involved in political affairs: in particular, he turned his literary talents to support the opponents of Mary Stuart, who was forced to abdicate the Scottish throne in 1567. At the end of his life, Buchanan returned to his role as an educator to support the Protestant cause: he was a tutor to Mary's son and heir, the young King James VI of Scotland, up until his death in 1582.

In line with his career, Buchanan's political writings consistently balance intervention in contemporary public affairs with a future-oriented view of the education of both rulers and subjects. Buchanan's most important work of political theory was his dialogue *De iure regni apud Scotos* [On the Law of Kingship among the Scots], which he wrote in the late 1560s to provide ammunition for Mary's opponents during the crisis around her abdication. Buchanan's political tragedy *Baptistes, sive calumnia* [The Baptist, or Calumny], on the other hand, was written for performance by students at the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux, when Buchanan was employed as an instructor there during the 1540s. Although it was a pedagogical play, *Baptistes* received

¹² On the intellectual legacy of John Mair and his influence on Buchanan, see Francis Oakley, "On the Road from Constance to 1688: The Political Thought of John Major and George Buchanan," *Journal of British Studies* 1, no. 2 (1962): 1–31.

¹³ Despite his imprisonment by the Inquisition, Buchanan did not openly conform to Protestantism until he returned to Scotland around 1560, suggesting that his heresy was political as well as religious.

enough attention for its critique of tyranny that Buchanan had to answer for it to the Inquisition in 1550.¹⁴ The play was printed for the first time by English Protestants in 1577 and again in a 1642 English translation, which Parliamentarian opponents of the English monarchy during the English Civil War titled *Tyrannicall-Government Anatomized*. While both of Buchanan's major political publications were associated with a contemporary critique of tyranny, neither was a political pamphlet or treatise. Instead, Buchanan outlines his constitutional thought in works of fiction concerned with using education to secure the long-term stability of monarchies and the liberties of monarchical subjects.

In the *De iure*, Buchanan develops a theory of monarchy that is recognizable in the context of sixteenth-century accounts of limited monarchy and "monarchical republicanism," although Buchanan's theory goes further than most others in stripping the king of traditional powers.¹⁵ A good king, Buchanan argues, is not significantly different from the executives in a republic—the Venetian *doge* or the Roman consuls—because he is "one of the ordinary people [*uni e multitudine*], who is not greatly superior to others or is perhaps inferior to some of them" (35, 59).¹⁶ For this reason, Buchanan's ideal king is entirely subservient to the laws of the commonwealth; the law should be "yoked to the king to show him the way when he does not know it or to lead him back to it when he wanders from it" (33).¹⁷ As much as possible, Buchanan delegates the legislative and judicial functions of government to the magistracy: he assigns day-

¹⁴ James E. Phillips, "George Buchanan and the Sidney Circle," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (November 1948): 40.

¹⁵ The term "monarchical republicanism" derives from Patrick Collinson, "The Monarchical Republic of Queen Elizabeth I," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 69, no. 2 (1987): 394–424. See also Markku Peltonen, *Classical Humanism and Republicanism in English Political Thought, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁶ "Nam et quem nos Venetorum ducem vocamus, is nihil aliud est quam rex legitimus, et consules primi non modo regum insignia sed imperium etiam retinuerunt" (34); "cum uni e multitudine is honor habetur qui non multo sit aliis excellentior aut etiam quibusdam inferior, periculosam esse liberam istam et solutam legibus licentiam" (58).

¹⁷ "Quamobrem legem ei adiungendam censuerunt homines prudentissimi quae vel ignoranti viam ostendat vel aberrantem in viam reducat" (32).

to-day deliberation to the king's council and argues that legislation should be proposed by a kind of parliament and approved by plebiscite (44–45, 54–55). For the most part, Buchanan assigns legal judgment to jurists and ordinary judges, even when questions of equity are concerned. Further, Buchanan argues strongly against the traditional view that questions of legal interpretation should be referred to the king: permitting the king to interpret laws, Buchanan suggests, is tantamount to unyoking him from the governance of law altogether (56–67). The ideal king, for Buchanan, is an executive with no power to make or interpret the law and no latitude to diverge from it in his judgments and actions.

While Buchanan argues for the rightness of this kind of highly limited monarchy, the fictional form of his political theory belies the treatment of this ideal as a straightforward recommendation. The *De iure* takes the form of a dialogue between Buchanan and Thomas Maitland, a promising young statesman whose modesty makes him both a good student and an overly deferential subject of the Scottish monarchy. Buchanan's dialogue confronts Maitland—and readers like him who are conflicted about their duties as monarchical subjects—with an ideal image of limited monarchy in order to teach him how to recognize the difference between a good monarchy, which should be obeyed, and a tyranny, which should be resisted. Ordinary subjects of monarchy, Buchanan argues, rather than being ignorant of or ill-equipped to make this distinction, are, on the contrary, the only members of the commonwealth capable of this sort of judgment, so long as they receive the proper instruction.

The democratic imagination of the *De iure*

As I have shown, the ideal monarchy depicted in Buchanan's *De iure* represents an extreme form of monarchical republicanism, one that strips the king of most of his powers of legislation,

deliberation, and judgment and that elevates the rule of law above kingly discretion in every circumstance. But there is also a positive democratic strain in the *De iure*, a defense of the practical benefits of popular participation in government. This defense informs both Buchanan's ideal theory and the educational purpose of his dialogue, which seeks to institute popular observation and judgment of the monarchy, even in the absence of widely shared powers of participation in it. Key to this educational aim, in turn, is Buchanan's use of fiction as a supplement to historical, legal, and theological arguments.

Buchanan's ideal monarchy reserves a clear place for popular participation in legislation. New laws, Buchanan argues, should be developed by "selected men from all estates" in council with the king; however, once this body has drawn up a "preliminary resolution," it should be "referred to the judgment of the people" for confirmation (55).¹⁸ The Greek term that Buchanan uses for the bill to be judged by the people—*probouleuma*—suggests that he has the workings of the ancient Athenian democracy in mind, in which the smaller council known as the *boule* prepared proposals for voting by the *ecclesia*, a wider assembly of citizens. The impetus for this procedure is pragmatic: Buchanan says that he wants to avoid the imposition of laws by force, either on subjects or on the king, preferring that, "after consultation with the king in council, a decision should be taken in common in matters which affect the common good of all" (55).¹⁹ The people should participate in legislation, in short, because they will obey common decisions much more readily than commands imposed on them by force.

Buchanan also justifies this procedure by arguing for the superiority of democratic judgment. Maitland rejects Buchanan's proposal in classical antidemocratic terms: he argues that

¹⁸ "ex omnibus ordinibus selecti ad regem in consilium coirent, deinde, ubi apud eos προβουλευμα factum esset, id ad populi iudicium deferretur" (54).

¹⁹ "Neque has leges per vim, ut tu interpretaris, imponi volo, sed communicato cum rege consilio communiter statuendum arbitror quod ad omnium salutem communiter faciat" (54).

the people is a “many-headed monster” whose judgment is too “rash and fickle” to be trusted with any share of decision-making (55).²⁰ If kings cannot be trusted to overcome their passions without the curb of the laws, Maitland asks, why should the judgment of the people be any different? To Maitland’s protests, Buchanan poses an Aristotelean account of democratic judgment: he argues that “summoning a large number of people together, among whom perhaps no one will possess outstanding wisdom” produces a body that is wiser than the sum of its parts.²¹ Buchanan further asserts that

not only do the many see and understand more than any one of them on his own, but they see more even than a single individual who surpasses each of them in intelligence and good sense. As a general rule, a multitude of people is a better judge of all affairs than an individual. (57)²²

The judgment of the multitude is generally superior to the judgment of individuals, Buchanan argues, because the multitude brings the greatest number of possible perspectives to bear on questions, balancing extremes in order to produce moderation. Popular participation in decision-making, Buchanan suggests, produces political stability.

While Buchanan’s ideal monarchy would enjoy the stability emanating from wide participation in law-making, Buchanan himself is careful to draw a clear line between political philosophy and political action. As he cautions late in the dialogue, in response to Maitland’s concerns about his justification of tyrannicide, “I am explaining what legitimately may or should be done; I am not issuing a call to action” (157).²³ Buchanan is careful to emphasize that his

²⁰ “Nosti illud ‘belua multorum capitum.’ Scis, opinor, quanta sit populi temeritas, quanta inconstantia” (54).

²¹ “Primum non omnino verum est quod tu putas, nihil ad rem facere multitudinis advocacionem, quorum e numero nemo fortassis erit excellenti sapientia praeditus” (56). Buchanan’s source for this argument is Aristotle, *Politics* 3.1.

²² “Non enim solum plus vident ac sapiunt multi quam unus quilibet eorum seorsum, sed etiam quam unus qui quemvis eorum ingenio et prudentia praecedat. Nam multitudo fere melius quam singuli de rebus omnibus iudicat” (56).

²³ “quid fieri iure possit aut debeat explico, non ad rem suscipiendum exhortor” (156).

arguments are philosophical; they do not take account of “considerations of time, person, place and everything else involved in carrying out the action” (159).²⁴ Under a monarchy, circumstances are far from ripe for direct popular participation in decision-making, no matter how useful this participation might be, and Buchanan rightly acknowledges this fact.

Nevertheless, I argue that Buchanan uses the fictional form of the Platonic dialogue, with its Socratic method of questioning and refutation, to constitute active subjects of monarchy, even when the rights of those subjects are curtailed. From the beginning, Buchanan frames his dialogue as an attempt to educate the common people [*vulgus*] in the distinction between kings and tyrants—or, more precisely, to teach statesmen like Maitland how to make this distinction effectively in public argument. Buchanan opens the dialogue by recounting the circumstances of his conversation with Maitland: his student has just returned from a trip to France, where he has grown increasingly concerned by the rumors and criticism circulating about the forced abdication of Mary Stuart: “I am unsure how all the nations of Europe, especially those living under royal authority, will react to their deposition of the supreme magistrate and their contempt for the name of king” (9).²⁵ Maitland’s fear, in essence, is that subjects of monarchy throughout Europe will turn against the Scottish nobility, out of customary respect for kings and queens.

In response to Maitland’s fears, Buchanan argues that there are “three main types” in Scotland and elsewhere who condemn Mary’s removal from the throne. The first two types are essentially self-interested: those who “minister to tyrannical lusts” [*tyrannicarum libidinum administri*] are personally implicated in Mary’s reign and can never be convinced to change their ways, while those who “are not troubled by public injustice (as they wish to appear) but by personal

²⁴ “temporibus personis locis ceterisque rei gerendae instrumentis” (158).

²⁵ “Quod autem summum magistratum in ordinem redegerint, nomen regium . . . contempserint, nescio quomodo accepturae sint omnes Europae nationes, illaeque in primis quae sub imperio regio vivunt” (8).

injury” [*non publica (quod videri volunt) iniuria sed damnis anguntur domesticis*] need to learn to subordinate their private interests to the public good. The third type, however, is the “inexperienced multitude” [*imperita multitudo*], which finds fault with “anything new” but can be persuaded otherwise. “Not being influenced by malice, envy or any self-interest,” Buchanan explains, “they generally submit to instruction and allow themselves to be weaned away from error, and in most cases they yield to the force of rational argument” (9–11).²⁶ Because their views are shaped by custom rather than private interest, the common people are reasonable and open to change, if properly instructed. And, because the common people’s instinctive sense of justice leads them to “approve of the murder of tyrants,” Buchanan argues that they might readily change their minds about Mary “if they clearly understood the difference between a tyrant and a king” (13).²⁷ The proper definition of kings and tyrants thus becomes the central question of Buchanan’s conversation with Maitland, as Buchanan sets out to “establish a picture” of both the good king and the tyrant so that the common people can “understand their own duty towards each of them” (15).²⁸

Buchanan prefers to address this question philosophically: he comes to his monarchical-republican definition of kingship by following a complex natural law argument derived from Cicero. Maitland, however, rejects Buchanan’s convincing philosophical arguments that kingship should be limited, admitting that “so great is the strength of age-old custom that for me it has the

²⁶ “Reliqua est imperita multitudo, quae omnia nova miratur, plurima reprehendit, neque quicquam rectum putat nisi quod ipsa aut facit aut fieri videt. . . . Hi, quia non malitia et invidia neque respectu ullo rerum ducuntur, fere doceri et de errore se deduci patiuntur ac plerumque vi rationum convicti sese dedunt” (8–10). “Inexperienced multitude” is my translation of *imperita multitudo*. Mason uses “ignorant mob,” which seems to me both to imply a derogatory sense not necessary in the Latin and to miss the potential for education and improvement present in the word *imperita*.

²⁷ “Vulgus (ut ais) tyrannorum caedem probat, erga regum adversam fortunam commovetur. Nonne igitur, si intelligat plane quod sit inter tyrannum et regem discrimen, posse fieri existimas ut in plerisque sententiam suam mutet?” (12).

²⁸ “Et, imagine utriusque proposita, nonne vulgus etiam intellecturum putas quodnam sit suum erga utrumque officium?” (14).

force of law” (109).²⁹ Leaving the realm of reason behind, Buchanan agrees to give his student historical and theological accounts of kingship as well, but he insists that Maitland apply his own reason to historical stories and Scriptural passages in order to properly understand them. While Buchanan humors Maitland’s desire for a historical inquiry into the rights of kings, for instance, he asks his student to imagine the sorts of questions that the Scottish commons must have asked before granting kings the right of hereditary succession. He prompts Maitland, “So imagine [*finge*] someone from the ranks of an assembly of a free people freely asking the king: ‘What if some king has a stupid son? What if he is mad? Will you establish as our rulers those who cannot rule themselves?’ ” (101).³⁰ If the people once granted kings the right to bequeath sovereignty to their heirs, Buchanan suggests to his student, they can’t reasonably have done so without extracting concessions in return; those who claim absolute power for kings therefore misinterpret the historical record. Just as important as Buchanan’s explicit argument is his method: he assumes that the Scottish people were rational agents and instructs Maitland to recreate what therefore *must* have taken place when they constituted a hereditary kingship, even if this debate appears nowhere in the historical record.

Buchanan uses the same interpretive strategy when he explains to Maitland the apostle Paul’s command that Christians should “be subject to the higher powers” (111).³¹ Buchanan insists that this instruction, seemingly unambiguous in its demand that Christians obey kings without

²⁹ “diuturnae consuetudinis tanta vis est ut apud me legis vigorem obtineat” (108).

³⁰ “Finge ergo aliquem e media contione liberi populi libere regem interrogare: ‘Quid si cui regum filius sit stolidus? Quid si insanus? Eosne nobis constitues rectores qui se ipsos regere non possunt?’ ” (100).

³¹ “At potestatibus sublimioribus omnes vult esse subditos” (110). The three key passages that Buchanan and Maitland discuss are Titus 3:1 (“Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work”); 1 Timothy 2:1–2 (“I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty”); and Romans 13:1–5, where Paul asserts that “whosoever . . . resisteth the power [of kings], resisteth the ordinance of God.” These translations are from the King James Version.

question, must nevertheless be understood contextually: it appears in a letter written to a religious minority under a hostile pagan government, for whom disobedience could mean death and the destruction of the entire Christian faith. Buchanan offers a contemporary thought experiment as a point of comparison:

Imagine [*Finge*] that one of our teachers was writing to Christians living under the Turks, to men, I say, poor in material resources, downcast in spirit, unarmed and few in number, and exposed to every kind of injustice at the hands of all: what other advice would he give, I ask you, than that which Paul gave to the church which then existed at Rome? (123)³²

Buchanan insists that Maitland treat Paul's letters as historical documents and reconstruct his intentions and the circumstances of the people to whom the letters were written, facts which inevitably transform his understanding of Paul's instruction. On this historicist reading, commandments that should have been obeyed by Christian subjects of the Roman Empire might no longer hold for the subjects of Christian monarchies. Buchanan's method demonstrates that assuming the perspective of "men . . . exposed to every kind of injustice at the hands of all" is necessary for understanding why such people might, with good reason, obey even a very oppressive ruler.

At both of these moments in Buchanan's dialogue, it is fiction that enables Maitland to assume the perspective of the common people in order to understand historical and Scriptural evidence regarding kingship correctly. In both cases, Buchanan employs the Latin imperative *finge*—the etymological root of the English word *fiction*—to instruct Maitland to "imagine" a plausible scenario, the kind of thing that *might* have happened or *might* be happening but cannot

³² "Finge ad Christianos qui sub Turcis vivunt aliquem e nostris doctoribus scribere, ad homines, inquam, re tenues, animo demissos, et inermes et paucos et ad omnem omnium iniuriam expositos: quid, rogo, aliud consuleret quam quod Paulus ecclesiae quae tum Romae erat?" (122).

be empirically demonstrated. As these examples indicate, the method of teaching that Buchanan performs in his dialogue with Maitland—and implicitly models for his readers—employs fictional examples to encourage philosophical reflection on customary interpretations of history and Scripture. These fictions emerge out of the assumption that the perspective of “the people” can be a rational supplement to the historical record: if we know the people constituted a hereditary monarchy, they must have had a good reason and taken precautions against foreseeable dangers. Assuming a rational commons with constitutive power, in short, creates a privileged epistemological position from which Buchanan and Maitland can understand the structure of the commonwealth as a whole.

Only a small part of Buchanan’s *De iure*, then, is devoted to the exposition of an ideal theory of monarchy in philosophical terms. While Buchanan argues that institutions limiting monarchical prerogative and increasing popular participation in government would provide much-needed stability to the Scottish monarchy, his primary goal in the dialogue is to expand the sphere of political learning and discussion rather than to advocate an expansion of political rights. By disseminating arguments and modes of teaching that enable the subjects of monarchy to discern whether they are ruled by a king or a tyrant (and to assess their duty to obey or to resist accordingly), Buchanan constitutes an active, “republican” monarchical citizen. To train subjects capable of observing, analyzing, and evaluating their own kings, Buchanan turns to fiction to make philosophical insights widely accessible; in so doing, he not only demonstrates the effectiveness of fiction for teaching but also the impossibility of evaluating monarchy without imagining the perspective of these onlooking subjects. It is this educational and hermeneutic function of fiction that likewise animates Buchanan’s fictional endeavors: most notably, his tragedy *Baptistes*.

The educational method of *Baptistes*

Buchanan's *De iure* makes clear that the imaginative reconstruction of the perspective of monarchical subjects is not just a means of counteracting the "tyranny of custom" and sharpening subjects' understanding of their rulers but also a means of aiding and improving these rulers. Buchanan's most concise image of the good king in his dialogue is the *rex Stoicus*, an image he borrows from the Roman tragedian Seneca. In Seneca's *Thyestes*, the "Stoic king" is "one who has laid aside fear and the torments of an evil conscience," remaining constant and unmoved by ambition, favor, wealth, or harm (163–65).³³ Such a king, Buchanan admits, "can be more readily imagined in the mind [*magis animo informari*] than hoped for some day," but, as compensation, lawmakers, like artists, have crafted laws for the political community by imitating this fictional image of the perfect king that they held in their minds (39–41).³⁴ As a living figuration of the poetic *rex Stoicus*, Buchanan's king must be aware that he always "stands on the world's stage [*in orbis theatro*], set there for all to look upon," and that, like the tyrant of tragedy, not even his most private vices can remain hidden (72–73). If kings are virtuous, however, they can hope not only "for a single day's fame, as with actors when a play has been well acted" but even to enjoy "the prospect of the good will and admiration of their own age, the everlasting esteem of posterity, and honours which are all but divine" (75).³⁵ Buchanan's use of Seneca's image again emphasizes the utility of fiction to provide images against which reality can be compared and judged. In this instance, however, the education of subjects who can discern good from bad rulers complements

³³ "rex est qui posuit metus / et diri mala pectoris" (162–64).

³⁴ "illud principis boni exemplar magis animo informari quam aliquando sperari posset" (38–40).

³⁵ "Quantum autem eorum animos ad virtutem accendere debet quod non unius diei laudem, ut histriones fabula bene acta, sperent, sed aetatis suae benevolentiam et admirationem et perpetuam ad posteros celebritatem et honores divinis proximos sibi paratos esse intelligant?" (74).

the education of rulers who, like actors in a tragedy, know that they are always being watched by the discerning eyes of a public audience.

I argue that it is this complementary education and co-constitution of subjects and rulers that defines the aim of Buchanan's political tragedy *Baptistes*. If the *De iure* shows why imagining the perspective of a rational commons is necessary to a healthy process of political judgment, his *Baptistes* offers an image of tyranny as a constitutional form whose elements reinforce a near-systemic incapacity to take a popular perspective. While his political dialogue distinguishes the king from the tyrant philosophically, historically, and theologically, his tragedy goes one step further, using fiction to represent tyranny itself as a constitution in which different characters surrounding the person of the tyrant play different roles in sustaining a corrupted governmental configuration. In every case, this self-perpetuating misrule is grounded in a contradictory mixture of disdain for and fear of the people's judgment, represented most directly in the play by the tragic Chorus, which constantly observes, intervenes in, and offers insight into the play's action. By means of its anatomy of tyranny, then, *Baptistes* attempts to teach rulers to accommodate themselves to this discerning scrutiny, co-constituting subjects and rulers in a more transparent configuration.³⁶

Buchanan captures the double-sided aim of his tragedy in its dedicatory epistle to the young King James, prefaced to the print edition of the play. Buchanan writes that his tragedy has particular relevance for a prince because it "clearly sets forth the torments of tyrants and their miseries when most they seem to flourish."³⁷ At the same time that he suggests James should learn

³⁶ Jean E. Howard and Paul Strohm have coined the term "imaginary commons" to describe how Renaissance tragedies invoke "the people" as a threat or resource to be managed by effective statecraft. See Jean E. Howard and Paul Strohm, "The Imaginary 'Commons,'" *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 3 (September 2007): 549–77.

³⁷ *A Critical Edition of George Buchanan's "Baptistes" and of Its Anonymous Seventeenth-Century Translation "Tyrannicall-Government Anatomized,"* ed. Steven Berkowitz (New York: Garland, 1992), 351. The Latin is as

by observing the interior life of a tyrant, however, Buchanan also calls attention to the wider public audience who will read his tragedy and hold James' own government up for comparison with its fictional depiction of tyranny. James' subjects, Buchanan suggests, will find in the tragedy

a witness to posterity, that if ever impelled by wicked counsellors, or with the license of royal power overcoming right education, you should do something wrong, it must be imputed as a failing not to your teachers, but to you who did not obey their virtuous warnings.³⁸

In this vaguely threatening admonition, Buchanan urges James to assume the perspective of his own subjects and to imagine how they will read his teacher's tragedy—personified as a witness—if, in the future, the young king should seem not to have taken its lessons to heart. As in the *De iure*, Buchanan's educational method in *Baptistes* employs fiction to provide insight into historical contingency (“if ever . . . you should . . . it must be”), but he also makes clear that this method places new expectations on the king: his subjects know what he knows, and they expect him to live up to it.

What both kings and subjects can find in *Baptistes* is an anatomy of tyranny as a constitution—an image of how a particular arrangement of parts produces a whole. Buchanan's play takes as its matter the Biblical account of John the Baptist's imprisonment and execution by the tyrannical King Herod, paying particular attention to how conspiracy and rumor lead Herod to this decision. The tragedy depicts tyranny by breaking it down into parts: the same parts that Buchanan describes at the beginning of the *De iure*. While the *De iure* does not aim to persuade

follows: “illud autem peculiarius ad te videri potest spectare, quod tyrannorum cruciatus et, cum florere maxime videntur, miserias dilucide exponat” (Buchanan, *Critical Edition*, 350).

³⁸ Buchanan, *Critical Edition*, 351. The Latin is as follows: “volo etiam hunc libellum apud posteros testem fore, si quid aliquando pravis consultoribus impulsus vel regni licentia rectam educationem superante secus committas, non praeceptoribus sed tibi, qui eis recte monentibus non sis obsecutus, id vitio vertendum esse” (Buchanan, *Critical Edition*, 350). I have modified the English translation slightly from Berkowitz's rendering.

those who “minister to tyrannical lusts” or those who feign concern with public injustice to conceal private interests, *Baptistes* shows how both of these groups—the ideological supporters of tyranny and its tacit enablers—play central roles in producing, sustaining, and concealing tyranny. Likewise, while the *De iure* aims to educate the “inexperienced multitude” in discerning when monarchy has deteriorated into tyranny, *Baptistes* dramatizes this insight through the perspective of the Chorus, which, in Buchanan’s play, consists of a group of ordinary Jewish citizens. The Chorus of Buchanan’s tragedy not only fulfills Buchanan’s educational aim in the *De iure*, then, but also parallels the configuration his dedication imagines between the king and a public audience of readers who watch him.

Buchanan’s play opens on a dispute between two magistrates, the conservative Malchus and the moderate Gamaliel, which illustrates the role that private interest, custom, and secret action play in enabling tyranny. The two men debate the proper way to handle the popularity of John the Baptist among the common people and the nature of his teachings about the corruption of the monarchy. Malchus despises both John and the common people, asserting that the prophet has “drawn to himself an army of an attendant mob [*sequacis ille vulgi exercitum / traduxit ad se*]” and “beguiled the simple folk [*vulgus fefellit imperitum*] with the appearance of stern sanctity,” posing a potent threat to customary authority because the people “look up to him alone [*hunc populus unum suspicit*].”³⁹ John is also dangerous as a commoner himself, in whose nature it is to be “ignorant, wrong, rash, inexperienced, blind” and in need of the “curbs” of his superiors (137).⁴⁰ While he justifies his hatred of John in terms of the people’s poor judgment, it is clear that Malchus

³⁹ George Buchanan, *Baptistes, sive calumnia*, in *Tragedies*, ed. and trans. P. Sharratt and P. G. Walsh (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983), 101.90–97, 135–36. Subsequent citations of *Baptistes* in English will be given parenthetically by page number in this edition. The original Latin text will be given in the notes and cited parenthetically by page number and line number in this edition.

⁴⁰ “Quia propria est plebis ignorantia / error temeritas imperitia caecitas” (102.145–46).

fears that his own authority over the people is threatened: he insists that it is the job of a prelate like himself “to lead the commoners, if they stray, back to the path. He must be his own law” (136–37).⁴¹ Malchus claims that his duty is to defend the customs of the monarchy against John’s criticism, but he confuses his own private injury with his public office: it is fear of losing his position over the people that causes him to justify the use of force to “lead” the people.

The substance of Malchus and Gamaliel’s disagreement centers not on whether John’s teaching is right or wrong but on *how* his public criticism of the monarchy should be handled. Gamaliel refutes his companion by arguing that Malchus accords too much weight to customary signs of wisdom—“sceptres, ancestral genealogies, beauty of appearance or royal wealth”—and judges John too rashly for this reason (136–37).⁴² More importantly, Gamaliel insists that Malchus’s public office requires him to confront John publicly if he truly believes his accusations are false; he asks his companion, “If he sins, why not refute [*redarguis*] him openly, why not reveal the light of your talent in that task?” (138).⁴³ Malchus and John must debate in public, Gamaliel argues, so that “each man can draw his conclusion as his mind dictates” (140).⁴⁴ Rather than condemning the judgment of the common people, as Malchus does, Gamaliel suggests that the duty of public men like themselves is precisely to enable public judgment by treating the views of the common people as worthy of argument. By contrast, Gamaliel argues, if Malchus attempts to silence John through secret violence rather than open debate, it is Malchus who will damage customary authority and “be thought an aggressor, using all the violence of tyranny until you could bring down the holy man whom you could not refute by reason” (138).⁴⁵ Unfortunately, this is

⁴¹ “plebs si quid erret, eam reducat in viam. / lex ipse sibi sit” (102.141–42).

⁴² “non scepra spectat, non parentum stemmata, / decusve formae, aut regias opes Deus” (103.154–55).

⁴³ “si peccat ille, quin palam redarguis? / quin lumen ingenii exeris illic tui? / rudem peritus, doctus indoctum, senex / aggredere iuvenem. fors reduces in viam” (103.185–88).

⁴⁴ “Interpraetetur quisque pro ingenio ut lubet” (105.272).

⁴⁵ “quin potius illud assequere, ut omnibus / grassatus esse viribus tyrannidis / credere, sanctum donec opprimeres virum, / ratione quem non potueris convincere” (104.208–11).

precisely what Malchus decides to do: he makes false claims (the *calumny* of the play's subtitle) about John to the tyrant King Herod to fill the king with empty fears and inflame his anger. As a tragic character type, Malchus illustrates how easily public office becomes a tool of tyranny when its holders are themselves governed by the tyranny of custom rather than a commitment to the public good and are driven by private passions to avoid, or even condemn, public judgment.

While Malchus both disdains and fears the opinion of the common people, he ignores their representatives—the Chorus—who observe the debate between the two magistrates and offer their own advice to Malchus as he departs to seek Herod: “In my judgment, Gamaliel’s advice is right; obey his warning” (138).⁴⁶ While the judgment of the Chorus supports Gamaliel’s argument that sustaining public office through the private promises of tyrants is deeply foolish, their subsequent speech also underscores how little Malchus’s show of public concern has fooled them. Indeed, the Chorus condemns the magistrate’s hypocrisy—“an assumed modesty cloaks the shameless; the cover of piety conceals the impious”—and attributes it to a “desire for glory swollen with empty pride,” precisely the motives Malchus hopes to disavow (140).⁴⁷ The Chorus also connects this dissimulation to tyranny specifically: “feigned devotion cloaks the cruelty of tyrants, the fringed robe wicked manners” (141).⁴⁸ Despite Malchus’s fearful desire for secrecy, the Chorus recognizes the private interest behind his actions, and it makes this interest clear to Buchanan’s readers.

While Malchus attempts to maintain a facade of public service even as he serves his private interests, Herod’s queen offers a full-throated defense of tyrannical rule. Like Malchus, the Queen attempts to persuade Herod that John is a dangerous threat who has roused “the madness of the fickle crowd” [*mobilis vulgi furor*], but, unlike Malchus, she is driven by the desire that a subject

⁴⁶ “recte Gamaliel admonet me iudice. / et tu monenti obtempera” (104.217–18).

⁴⁷ “occulit falsus pudor impudentem / impium celat pietatis umbra” (106.285–86); “Cupido / gloriae vano tumefacta fastu” (106.301–2).

⁴⁸ “ficta crudeles pietas tyrannos, / impios mores stola fimbriata / celat” (107.334–36).

like John not be allowed to “impose limits on the royal sceptre” (142, 377).⁴⁹ Moved by a belief that kings should hold absolute power personally, the Queen attempts both to persuade her husband to imprison and kill John and to enlist Malchus’s help to do so. When it becomes clear that Malchus has grown too frightened of the people to conspire further against John, however, the Queen sacrifices her interest to enable John’s execution: she asserts that “[Herod] will be freed of the odium of the murder, and will gladly, I think, divert the hatred of the people on me” (160).⁵⁰ While it is his own false fears and inflamed passions that turn Herod against John, it is the Queen’s willingness to take the blame that enables the tyrant to execute the prophet, a sacrifice that the Queen embraces, saying, “It is base to be accounted a harsh woman, base if it were not baser for princes to go unavenged” (160).⁵¹ As dangerous as self-interested magistrates like Malchus are under tyranny, Buchanan’s tragedy demonstrates that ideologues who embrace public condemnation to serve a tyrant are more dangerous still.

Buchanan’s tyrant, Herod, is highly susceptible to the fears that Malchus and the Queen provoke in him, although he is also skilled at concealing them. Herod is dismissive of the worries that the Queen attempts to stoke in him, asserting that there is nothing to fear from the “unarmed crowd” [*turba inermi*] that flocks to John (108.353, 141). Likewise, Herod attempts to frighten John to his face by claiming that the “hatred of all the common folk seeks you out,” while trying, like Malchus, to maintain a facade of public service by swearing that he is only interested in punishing “injury to the state” [*inuriam publicam*], not personal injury.⁵² Herod even invokes the

⁴⁹ “iam sceptris modum / hic faciet?” (109.399–400).

⁵⁰ “liber invidia necis / in me odia populi vertet, ut reor, libens, / et ego peracta re libenter id feram” (129.1175–77).

⁵¹ “turpe est esse atrocem feminam, / turpe, nisi reges esse inultos turpius / foret” (129.1179–81).

⁵² “namque universae plebis odium te petit, / et ad luendas flagitat poenas reum” (109.412–13); “tu, teste populo, intelliges iniuriam / negligere propriam, persequi me publicam” (110.453–54).

presence of the onlooking Chorus as he speaks, offering his oath to John “with the people as witness” [*teste populo*] (144).

As they watch Herod lie to John, however, the Chorus pierces the tyrant’s rhetorical smoothness for readers, interrupting to observe that “he who thinks that he can penetrate the secret thoughts of a king’s mind from his words should surely know that he is trusting in a distorting mirror” (145).⁵³ Herod’s private speech, which only the Chorus observes, reveals his fears: despite his scoffing at the “unarmed crowd,” Herod believes that he is constantly in danger from the people, noting that “the common folk despises a moderate prince, and hates a harsh one.”⁵⁴ Likewise, while Herod claims in public to confront John over an *inuriam publicam*, he privately fumes at John’s impunity in daring “to censure me for an unchaste marriage before my face.”⁵⁵ Like Malchus, Herod fears the people and balks at public criticism; like the Queen, he scoffs at Malchus’s concern for custom, asserting that the only thing the people need to “know” is that “this one law is to be observed: to believe that for me anything contrary to the laws can be lawful” (146).⁵⁶ As the Choral speech that follows (a prayer to God for liberation from tyrants) implies, however, the Jewish people will not be so willing to obey the tyrant as he believes.

By presenting the characters of the tyrant, the minister to tyranny, and the self-interested magistrate as a mutually reinforcing triad, Buchanan’s *Baptistes* provides readers not just with a glimpse into the inner passions of the tyrant but with insight into how tyranny as a system of government maintains and conceals itself as well. By confusing matters of public concern and private injuries, or by actively conflating the two, tyranny permits secret fictions and fear of the

⁵³ “qui de tyranni oratione se autumat / perspicere mentis posse sensus abditos, / ne turbido se credere speculo sciat” (112.519–21).

⁵⁴ “spernit modestum principem plebs: asperum / odere” (112.539–40).

⁵⁵ “ausus est videlicet / mihi impudicas exprobrare nuptias, / in os” (113.553–55).

⁵⁶ “modo populus unam hanc sciat / legem tenendam, praeter ut leges mihi / licere quidvis esse legitimum putet” (113.570–72). I have modified the English translation slightly.

people to replace public judgment as the grounds of royal decision-making. If this anatomy was not already clear, the Chorus makes it so, as they astutely summarize the political situation for John in an attempt to warn him of the danger he is in: “The rabbi Malchus secretly directs his wiles, and the queen bereft of any plan rages. The court fawns on the king, the king conceals his opinion; the rest fear to speak the truth. The time of the final danger is now at hand” (156).⁵⁷ John, however, responds to the Chorus’ warning with a long Stoic speech praising the freedom from tyranny offered by death, and the Chorus, unlike Malchus, the Queen, or Herod, responds to John’s teaching with appropriate self-reflection: “How blessed are you by reason of this stability of heart! How wretched are we, for sluggish fear of mind deprives us of this partnership in happiness!” (158).⁵⁸

By their final speech, the Chorus has taken up John’s prophetic message after his death, in both its religious and its political dimensions: railing against the injustices of the “Kingdom of David, towers of Jerusalem, citadels of wealthy Solomon,” they foresee that “the judge of heaven, sea and land, who restrains arrogant pride, gazes from on high and remembers both the tears of the folk [*plebis*] and their sad prayers; and with avenging hand he will demand imminent punishment for this atrocious crime” (162–63).⁵⁹ By the tragedy’s conclusion, Buchanan’s Chorus has not only revealed to readers the concealed operations of tyranny behind the play’s tragic action but has also offered a potent warning for kings about the ultimate futility of power that attempts to hide from public judgment.

⁵⁷ “rabinus Malchus intentat dolos / occulte. inops regina consilii furit, / blanditur aula. rex suam sententiam / dissimulat. alii vera mussant dicere. / Iam tempus instat ultimi discriminis” (124.1003–7).

⁵⁸ “o te beatum hac pectoris constantia! / o nos misellos, quos iners animi metus, / felicitatis privat hoc consortio!” (127.1105–7).

⁵⁹ “Davidis regnum, Solymaeque turres, / et locupletis Solomonis arces / unde tam dirus furor in prophetas?” (131.1264–66); “namque qui fastus premit insolentes, / arbiter caeli, maris atque terrae, / spectat ex alto lacrimasque plebis / et preces tristes meminit, manuque / vindice infandi sceleris propinquas / exiget poenas” (132.1289–94). I have modified the second translation slightly.

Conclusion

George Buchanan's political fictions *De iure regni* and *Baptistes* are remarkable documents, not least because they apply ideas derived from classical democratic thought to the wildly different context of sixteenth-century monarchy. In this context, the power of public judgment to temper monarchical excess and discern the common good was not instantiated in any governmental institution; poets like Buchanan, however, remedied this instability by sharpening public judgment and by making appeals—at times pragmatic, at times coercive—to monarchs to recognize and respect this judgment. Buchanan's dialogue and tragedy offer the subjects of monarchy a poetic education, empowering them to recognize when constitutions have deteriorated and must be replaced, when kings have become tyrants and must no longer be obeyed, and when configurations of rulers, counselors, and magistrates have ceased to prevent abuses of power and have begun, instead, to produce them. In turn, by triangulating the positions of its two audiences, rulers and subjects, Buchanan's political writings also confront kings with the capacity of the people to recognize and condemn tyranny, no matter how secret. Buchanan's fictions suggest that public reasoning about matters of public concern is an inescapable fact of political life: rulers who cannot draw on the judgment of a wider public in making their decisions will find their governance weakened as a result. Poetry, in turn, offers both rulers and subjects training in extending their political imaginations beyond customary forms of authority. It also constitutes an arena of public judgment in itself, in which subjects judge rulers and rulers learn to respond prudently to their subjects' judgment. In this way, Buchanan's political fictions not only offer pragmatic arguments for the value of public judgment, a powerful resource for defenders of democracy today; they also demonstrate why fiction, rather than expert analysis or data-driven insight, remains essential to political debate, deliberation, and decision-making.

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