

HISTORY IN MOTION: TRANSLATION AND THE POLITICAL AFTERLIVES OF THE PAST IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Adrián Izquierdo*
Universidad Rey Juan Carlos

ABSTRACT: This article examines the relationship between translation and life-writing in early modern European historiography through two political biographies by the French historiographer Pierre Matthieu (1563–1621). It argues that translation in Matthieu’s historical writing operates on two levels: as a temporal reinterpretation of the past and as a linguistic transfer across languages. In works such as his biographies of Sejanus and Philippa the Catanian, Matthieu uses historical exempla to criticize the political influence of royal favorites in contemporary France, including Concino Concini and Leonora Galigai. Drawing on classical and medieval sources, these narratives were translated into Italian, Spanish, and English, where they were adapted to comment on influential figures such as the Duke of Lerma, the Count-Duke of Olivares, and the Duke of Buckingham. The article contends that Renaissance historiography was inherently translational, with historians acting as mediators who transferred meaning both vertically from past to present and horizontally across languages and political contexts, ensuring the continued relevance of historical narratives.

KEYWORDS: Pierre Matthieu, Biography, History, Translation, Early Modern

1. History writing and translation in early modernity

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the recovery of ancient historians was central to the revival of classical learning and the reform of contemporary culture.¹ Humanist scholars intensely engaged with the works of Greek historians (Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plutarch) and their Roman counterparts (Caesar, Livy, Tacitus, and Suetonius). Editions and translations of their works into Latin (when written in Greek) and vernacular languages (mostly from Latin) flooded the presses and many were fundamental in the development of great historical vernacular prose, such as Jacques Amyot’s *Vies parallèles* and Thomas North’s *Lives*, both translations of Plutarch’s collections of ancient Greek and Roman lives. As vernacular languages matured into robust literary vehicles, translation played a key role in the development of classical genres, with biography² emerging as one of the most prominent and enduring forms.

Humanists such as Leonardo Bruni, Lorenzo Valla, and later Desiderius Erasmus, Beatus Rhenanus and Justus Lipsius translated Greek and Latin histories into elegant, accessible prose, but also edited them according to emerging philological standards. History writing was a branch of rhetoric, and historians shaped narratives to persuade and instruct, blending fact with eloquence in line with humanist ideals of moral and civic

* adrian.izquierdo@urjc.es

¹ The reception of these ancient historians in early modernity, as studied by Peter Burke (1966), shifted according to the needs and tastes in history.

² The vernacular terms ‘biografía’, ‘biographie’ and ‘biography’ appeared in the second half of the seventeenth century or the beginning of the eighteenth (Mayer and Woolf, 1995, pp. 1-37). For the development of biography as a genre, see Momigliano (1971).

education. Their work involved comparing manuscripts, correcting textual corruptions, and producing critical editions of authors such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, Seneca and Tacitus. Within the historiographical genre, interest in life writing grew steadily, and while biographies of prominent historical figures remained the most prevalent, there was a growing and sustained focus on charting the lives and character of painters, philosophers, physicians, or poets, both ancient and modern (Mayer and Woolf, 1995; Weiss, 2010).

Since Plutarch, life writing relied on the selection and interpretation of events to reconstruct the narrative of a past life. In early modern Europe, this often involved transposing a life lived into words and ideas, and engaging in interlingual translation — often from Greek and Latin into the vernaculars, or between vernaculars themselves.³ Several decades ago, George Steiner conceptualized the reading and interpretation of historical texts as translational acts, characterized by repetition, transformation, and renewal. From an epistemological perspective, Steiner argued that what separates ancient texts from their modern representations is both temporal distance (the gap between their original context and their later interpretation) and linguistic distance (whether between distinct languages or within the evolution of a single language). Writing of the past may thus be understood as a translational enterprise, simultaneously linguistic and cultural, that mediates between past and present (Steiner, 1975, pp. 29-31, p. 352).⁴ This view resonates with the power-oriented approaches that emerged in Translation Studies from the late twentieth century onward. The so-called ‘power turn’ recontextualizes translation as a historically situated practice conditioned by ideology and power (Gentzler & Tymoczko, 2002). From this perspective, historiography itself may be seen as a form of translation operating under comparable constraints.

As Peter Burke notes, in early modernity “even the most monoglot of historians is a translator,” since they “mediate between the present and the past and face the same dilemmas...attempting to reconcile fidelity to the original with intelligibility to their readers” (Burke, 2007a, p. 7). Moreover, Burke emphasizes that “the interlingual translation of historians was at the same time a form of cultural translation, in other words, an adaptation to the needs, interests, prejudices and ways of reading the target culture, or at least of some groups within it” (Burke, 2007b, p. 133). Historians then served as cultural mediators, interpreting the past through the lens of the present and engaging in translation across both linguistic and historical boundaries (Burke, 2013). Hayden White’s narrativist theory further intensifies this translational understanding of historiography by foregrounding its poetic and rhetorical dimensions. For White, historians, like poets, weave stories. The underlying poetic structures that condition these configurations beyond the level of narrative content constitute what White (1978a, 1987) calls ‘metahistory.’ In order

³ It is worth reminding here that Jakobson (2004, p. 139) distinguishes three types of translation: interlingual (between different languages), intralingual (reformulation within the same language), and semiotic (the transmutation of signs).

⁴ For history writing understood as a translation of the past, see the excellent collection edited by Alonzi (2023), which offers further bibliography and illuminating case studies. See also Vidal Claramonte (2018).

to compose their narratives, historians must resort to rhetorical elements, and this interconnection between history and literature is exemplified by White in these words: “Historians may not like to think of their works as translations of facts into fictions; but this is one of the effects of their work” (1978b, p. 92).⁵

In light of the above, this article examines the translational dynamics of early modern historiography through the works of French poet and historian Pierre Matthieu (1563–1621). It argues that Matthieu’s French texts, shaped by classical and medieval precedents, offer a mode of political interpretation that is taken up and reworked in their Spanish and English translations. These translations transmit content but also adapt Matthieu’s exemplary mode of reading and writing history across different cultural contexts, establishing a chain of interconnected texts grounded in a shared humanist historiographical framework but responsive to different political circumstances. Matthieu’s biographical narratives exemplify the dual translation process mentioned above: cultural (transmitting historical meaning from the past to the present) and interlingual (translating material from diverse multilingual sources into French and then into other vernacular languages). They work as a form of political commentary on current events, and their Spanish and English translations, in turn, replicate the mirroring process at work in the original, activating contemporary anxieties about over-influent favorites in their respective contexts.

Widely read and imitated, French historian Matthieu achieved great renown in the world of royal historiography and politics throughout the seventeenth century.⁶ Both his monumental *Histoires of France*⁷ and his biographical sketches were immensely popular within the European communities of readers, and his books became a fixture on the most important libraries of the time. Matthieu was appointed royal historiographer when French King Henry IV initiated a program to restore the monarchy’s authority after decades of civil wars that had devastated the nation and posed a challenge to the very nature of kingship. As an official historian, he ultimately produced an official history designed to legitimize the consolidation of power for both Henry and his successor, Louis XIII.

Matthieu’s narratives, much like those of his contemporaries, were rooted in the Ciceronian dictum of *historia magistra vitae*—the idea that history serves as the ‘mistress of life’—and the Polybian principle of *similitudo temporum*,⁸ which holds that the past

⁵ Given our emphasis on biography as a historical genre, it is worth recalling Bourdieu’s insights into the process of selecting the meaningful elements of a life, which then biographers articulate in the form of a sequenced narrative, thereby generating the illusion of a coherent development through the construction of an artificial sense of life (1986, p.70).

⁶ For an overview of Matthieu’s works, see Izquierdo (2019).

⁷ For example: the *Histoire des derniers troubles de France, sous les règnes des Roys Très Chrestiens Henry III, Roy de France de et de Pologne, et Henry IIII, Roy de France et de Navarre* (1594-1606) (Republished with new chapters several times); the *Histoire de France & des choses mémorables aduenues aux Prouinces estrangeres durant sept années de paix dv règne de Henry IIII, Roy de France & de Nauarre* (1605) ; and the *Histoire De Louys XI, Roy de France et des choses mémorables aduenues en l'Europe durant vingt & deux années de son règne* (1610).

⁸ For an overview of Renaissance historiography, see Grafton (2007).

illuminates both present and future. In Matthieu's times, history writing did not aim primarily to reconstruct the past, but to reinterpret it as a means of instructing the present—drawing on Neostoicism, Machiavellian prudence, and Tacitist insights. Deeply influenced by Justus Lipsius, Matthieu's historiography reflects the humanist tradition of extracting political and moral *sententiae* from the past.⁹ An eloquent and persuasive historian, Matthieu structured his narratives around the *exemplum*, both as a rhetorical device and a tool of moral imitation. In his elegant prose, hyperbole, parallelism, digression, *sententiae*, and *apophthegmata* abound. His concise style—much admired by contemporaries¹⁰—offered a penetrating reflection on human motives and political action in times of uncertainty, as he dissected the passions to reveal the inner lives of princes, royal favorites, and Machiavellian schemers, shedding light on the motivations of famous or infamous historical figures. These biographies were purportedly conceived to move their readers to a better course of action, that is, to have them act virtuously, or at least not to act badly.¹¹ In general, they recount the lives—and reversals of fortune—of celebrated and notorious figures alike: Sejanus, Tiberius' favorite; Philippa the Catanian, minister of Queen Joan of Naples; the French statesman Marquis of Villeroy; and French monarchs such as Louis XI and Henry IV. Matthieu's biographies of Sejanus and Philippa,¹² together with the panegyric *Histoire de la mort déplorable de Henry IV, roi de France et de Navarre* (1611) and the political sketch of the *Remarques d'Estat et d'histoire sur la vie et les services de Monsieur de Villeroy* (1618),¹³ became his most translated books.

In what follows, we will focus on two of Matthieu's most widely read works, published in Paris in 1617: *Aelius Sejanus. Histoire romaine recueillie de divers auteurs* and *Histoire des prosperitez malheureuses d'une femme Cathenoise, grande seneschalle de Naples*. These biographies recount the rise and fall of Sejanus, Tiberius' infamous favorite in the first century A.D, and Philippa, a fourteenth-century washerwoman who became the trusted minister of Queen Joan of Naples. Both historical figures stood as enduring symbols of the fallen royal favorite, achieving extraordinary popularity across Europe and securing a lasting place in the continent's collective imagination in the seventeenth century.

⁹ Lipsius, a central figure in the Neostoic revival, sought to reconcile ancient Stoicism with Christian doctrine. His critical editions of Tacitus and Seneca, together with treatises such as *De Constantia* and *Politicorum*, became influential across Europe and emphasized emotional self-control and constancy in the face of political turmoil, essentially for monarchs and ministers. For Lipsius, see Morford (1991).

¹⁰ For Matthieu's European fame in the seventeenth century, see Lafond (1981) and Izquierdo (2019), particularly Chapters I and II.

¹¹ Matthieu articulates the didactic purpose of historical writing as follows: "La première & plus importante fin de l'Histoire est de rendre les mauvais bons, les bons meilleurs," *Histoire de France et des choses mémorables*, Advertissement.

¹² *Aelius Sejanus, Histoire romaine recueillie de divers auteurs* (1617); *Histoire des prosperitez malheureuses d'une femme cathenoise, grande seneschalle de Naples* (1617).

¹³ *Histoire de la mort déplorable de Henry III, Roy de France et de Navarre: ensemble un poème, un panégyrique et un discours funèbre: dressé à sa mémoire immortelle* (1611); *Remarques d'estat et d'Histoire sur la vie et les services de Monsieur de Villeroy* (1618).

2. Life of Sejanus

In 1617, after the young king Louis XIII asserted his royal authority by ordering the assassination of the Queen's favorite, Concino Concini, Matthieu wrote a biography of Sejanus, Tiberius's powerful minister, using it as a framework to narrate Concini's rise and fall. That same year, taking as a model one of Boccaccio's cases from *De casibus virorum illustrium*, he produced a biography of Philippa the Catanian as a blueprint to reflect on the excesses of Concini's wife, Leonora Dori Galigai.¹⁴ In both cases, using a translativ historiographical method, Matthieu treated past lives and events as templates (*exempla*) for present-day commentary and historical meaning. Translating from Latin sources into French, and then from French into other vernacular languages, became the material channel through which these new historical reconfigurations were mobilized in new settings, traveling not only across languages, but across time, place, and political contexts.

Concino Concini, an Italian who arrived at the French court with Marie de Medici, quickly rose to power. Through his wife, Leonora Dori—better known as Galigai—who was the queen's intimate confidante, the couple gained enormous influence over royal affairs. Their rapid ascent, wealth, and foreign origins caused widespread resentment among the French nobility. After Henry IV's death in 1610, Concini effectively controlled the regency. He was soon created Marquis d'Ancre, and, in 1613, appointed Marshal of France. But his unprecedented authority during Marie de Medici's regency, his arrogance and unpopularity led to his downfall: he was assassinated in 1617 on the orders of the young Louis XIII, and Galigai was executed shortly after on charges of witchcraft. In Matthieu's interpretative framework, the dramatic rise and fall of Sejanus and Philippa mirrored the abuses of Concini and Galigai, with Concini cast in the role of Sejanus and Galigai as a modern-day Philippa—both wielding unchecked power under a monarch's favor, both destined to fall.

As for how Matthieu put together his biographical narrative, his history of Sejanus, as the title indicates, was a 'Histoire romaine recueillie de divers auteurs' (Roman story compiled from different authors). His principal sources were Books III and IV of Tacitus' *Annals*, supplemented by accounts from Suetonius, Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, Velleius Paterculus' *Historiae Romanae*, as well as ethical exempla and commentary selectively drawn from Seneca and Juvenal—particularly Satire X, among other sources. Needless to say, compiling and translating classical texts (Tacitus, Suetonius, etc.) into French also meant reshaping the source material to reflect contemporary circumstances. Early modern historians like Matthieu found in Tacitus's account of Tiberius's reign, where the Roman attributes the emperor's disastrous shift in behavior to the corrupting influence of Sejanus, the guiding lines to craft the lives of the French royal favorites, prompted by the situation unraveling under his eyes in the Parisian Louvre after Henri VI's assassination:

The Capitol began and the Louvre hath revived this History, which I present to Your Majesty amidst the public applause for the happiness of your Monarchy It is a mirror that flatters not,

¹⁴ For Concini and his wife, Leonora Dori, known as Galigai, see Duccini (1991).

but rather a pure and crystalline water which, at the same instant it shows the stain, taketh it away. You (Sir) shall therein behold that a prince ought to be very careful to conserve his authority entire. Great ones here may learn it is not good to play with the generous lion, though he suffer it, and that favours are precipices for such as abuse them (Matthieu, 1632, 'To the King')¹⁵.

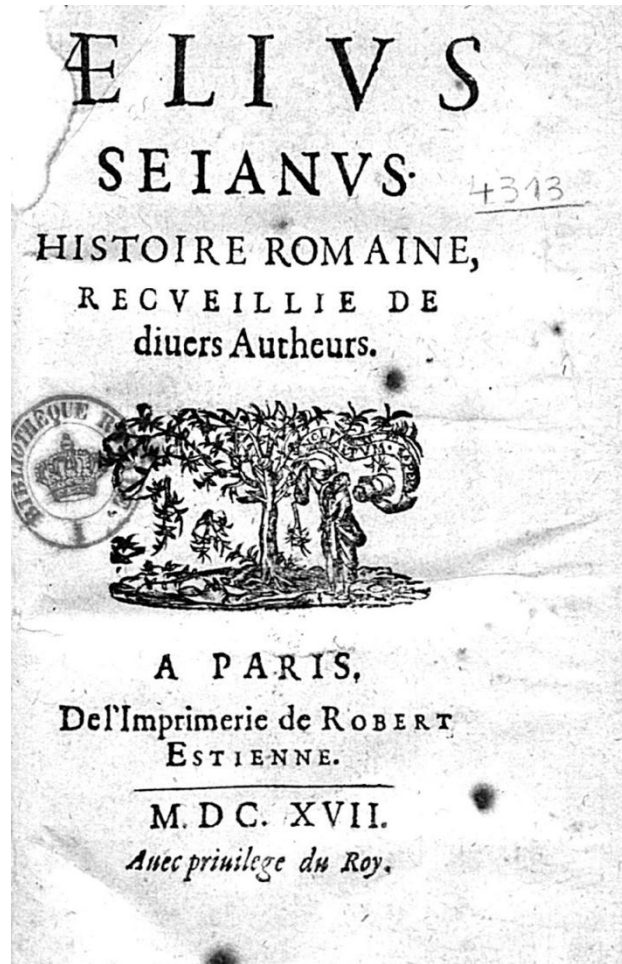


Figure 1. First page of Matthieu's biography of *Sejanus* published in Paris in 1617.
Courtesy of the Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library, Antwerp.

Matthieu's original dedication to the French king was largely retained in most translations into Spanish, English and Italian. Its persistence suggests that translators understood its role in shaping how the text should be read, encouraging readers to connect the historical narrative with contemporary political concerns. His deliberate juxtaposition of the Roman Capitol and the Parisian Louvre functions symbolically, constructing a rhetorical bridge between ancient Rome and contemporary France. Although the passage above (in the original and the English translation) is brief, it exemplifies Matthieu's elegant

¹⁵ « Le Capitole à veu naistre, & le Louvre a renouvelé ceste Histoire, que je presente à vostre Majesté dans les publiques acclamations du jour de sa Monarchie. C'est un miroir qui ne flatte point, mais plustot une eau pure & claire, qui au mesme temps qu'il le monstre la tâche, donne de quoy l'effacer. Vous y verrez, SIRE, que le Prince doit estre grandement jaloux de conserver entiere son AUTHORITE: les Grands y apprendront qu'il ne se faut joüer au Lyon genereux, quoy qu'il le souffre, & que les faveurs sont des precipices à ceux qui en abusent ('Au Roy') ». All quotations are drawn from Hawkins's 1632 English translation; punctuation and spelling have been modernized.

and concise style, intended to make history accessible and politically effective. Matthieu universalized a timeless lesson: the recurring cycle of favoritism, ambition, and political downfall transcends eras and empires in which Rome served as the historical precedent and Paris as its modern echo. By linking the two, he warns the French king that even though centuries have passed, the moral dangers of entrusting power to corrupt favorites remain unchanged.

From the very first line of the biography, Matthieu emphasizes Tiberius's central mistake: an "excess of favor" (1632, p. 1) on Sejanus, and opens with a universal reflection on the nature of a monarch's love for his subjects that frames the entire narrative:

Although princes do sovereignly dispose of their own hearts, impressing love and hatred on whom, or how they list, yet ought we to wish their affections towards particular men may be very just and regular; for if any disorder happen therein, it introduceth public ruins, rendreth them odious, and their favorites miserable (Matthieu, 1632, p. 1).¹⁶

[...]

The Heavens, incensed against the Roman Empire, permitted this exorbitance in the soul of Tiberius through the excess of favour he conferred on Aelius Sejanus, uniting in his person those charges which ought to have been distributed amongst many, and making him so great that he had much ado to unmake him. In the end, the ruin of the State, which was the foundation of his greatness, was also the cause of his fall (Matthieu, 1632, p. 2).¹⁷

The life of Sejanus repeatedly underscores the fraught relationship between the monarch and his favorite, portraying the king as increasingly dependent and the minister as driven by unchecked ambition: "In all his designs he found so much facility and affection in Tiberius that he had little else to do but to ask and give thanks. He denied him nothing, oft times preventing his suits and protesting he deserved much more ..." (1632, pp. 6-7).¹⁸

Matthieu's interpretation of the historical Sejanus resonated across Europe, as historians and translators adapted it to new contexts as a warning against the dangers of favoritism in absolute monarchies. The political machinations of Matthieu's Sejanus in the Roman Capitol spread beyond the Louvre to the courts of Madrid and London.

The first Spanish translation of Matthieu's *Sejanus* was produced by a Genoese banker living in Madrid, Vincenzo Squarzafigo, who translated it indirectly from the Italian in 1621:¹⁹ *Vida de Elio Seyano*. As a banker to the Crown, Squarzafigo was well connected to

¹⁶ « Encores que les Princes disposent souverainement de leurs cœurs, qu'ils y forment l'amour & la haine pour qui & comme ils veulent, si est-ce qu'il faut desirer que leurs affections envers des particuliers soient justes & bien réglées, car s'il y a du desordre, il ameine les ruines publiques, rend les Princes odieux, & les favoris misérables » (Matthieu, 1617, p. 1).

¹⁷ « Le Ciel irrité sur l'Empire Romain, permit ce d'euoyement en l'ame de Tibere, par l'excez de la faveur qu'il porta à Ælius Sejanus, unissant en sa personne les charges qui devoient estre departies à plusieurs, & le faisant si grand qu'il eust peine de le desfaire. A la fin la ruine de l'Estat qui fut le fondement de sa grandeur, fut aussi la cause de sa cheute » (Matthieu, 1617, p. 2).

¹⁸ « En tous ses desseins, il trouva en Tibere tant de facilite & d'affection, qu'il n'avoit peine qu'à demander & remercier : il ne luy refusoit rien, prevenant souvent ses demandes, & advouant qu'il meritoit encores d'avantage... » (Matthieu, 1617, p. 9).

¹⁹ Although Squarzafigo's motivations for the translation remain unclear, the Italian vogue for Matthieu's works and the banker's close ties to elite circles suggest an early Italian route for their reception. Another of Matthieu's texts to enter Spain via an Italian version was *Remarques d'estat et d'Histoire sur la vie et les*

Madrid's circles of power, and his version offers an early testimony to the growing interest in Matthieu's historical writing in Spain. The year 1621, marked by the death of Philip III and the rise to the throne of his successor, was a moment of intense political turmoil. A few years earlier, in 1618, the fall of the Duke of Lerma, Philip III's powerful favorite, marked one of the most striking political downfalls of early seventeenth-century Europe. For two decades, Francisco Gómez de Sandoval y Rojas, Duke of Lerma, effectively governed the monarchy, controlling royal appointments, finances, and foreign policy, and eclipsing the authority of the monarch. Contemporary sources, for instance, recount how Concino Concini was at times referred to as "the Duke de Lerma of the Queen" (Aricò, 2007, p. 186), stressing his association with the Spanish favorite and the nature of Marie de Medici's dependence on him. Lerma's vast accumulation of wealth and privileges, coupled with widespread corruption at court, fueled resentment among nobles and reform-minded clergy.²⁰

This climate of discontent formed the background to the rise of his successor, the Count of Olivares. To any observer in 1625, it was obvious that Olivares' methods for securing royal favor differed little from those of his predecessor. During the early years of his ascendancy (1620–1625), Olivares became synonymous with the growing excesses and corruption at the court of Philip IV. The new administration was marked by lavish spending, favoritism, and the consolidation of power within a tight circle of relatives and friends of the all-powerful minister, individuals who benefited from lucrative appointments and royal patronage. All these practices became increasingly visible, and the accusations of graft, influence-peddling, and manipulation of royal justice proliferated.²¹ In this context, a second Spanish translation appeared in Madrid in 1625: *La vida del dichoso desdichado* (Life of the fortunate unfortunate man), translated by political writer Juan Pablo Mártir Rizo. If Squarzafigo's version was read as a reflection of the relationship between Philip III and the Duke of Lerma, by 1625 Sejanus' life was likely interpreted not only in relation to Lerma's excesses and fall but also to Olivares' grip on the political affairs of the Crown.

Mártir Rizo retitled his translation *Vida del dichoso desdichado* (Life of the fortunate unfortunate man), a characteristically Baroque formulation that underscores the tension between fortune and ruin in the career of the royal counselor. The translation follows the original closely, though it is largely mediated through its paratexts. Alongside the required approvals, one of which describes the work as '...a history worthy of being known,

services de Monsieur de Villeroy, translated into Spanish by the political writer Fernando Alvia de Castro and also published in 1621 (*Observaciones de Estado y de Historia sobre la vida y servicios del Señor de Villeroy*, Lisbon: Pedro Craesbeeck). Squarzafigo's Sejanus shows no significant textual or paratextual traces of the Italian mediation.

²⁰ As is known, although the Duke of Lerma fell from political grace, he managed to secure a cardinal's hat, which offered him the protection of the Church at a critical moment. See, for example, Feros, 2006, pp. 241-260.

²¹ For Olivares' rise to power, see Elliot (1986).

especially by those who are close to kings or occupy high positions’²²—Mártir Rizo’s Advertisement to the reader opens by presenting “the example of a most dissimulating prince and of a cunning and daring man, whose actions shook the very foundations of the Roman Empire.”²³

If for Matthieu translation operated on two distinct levels —as a cultural translation or temporal reinterpretation of the world Sejanus and Tiberius in light of the political situation in the Louvre, and a linguistic operation involving the interlingual translation of various sources, particularly Latin ones, into French— in Squarzafigo and Mártir Rizo’s case the scope of the translational endeavors is further expanded. Their versions transfer meaning not only from the Roman past to their own present, but also across languages and political contexts, where both Roman and French realities illuminated the political situation in Madrid.

But this dynamic was not unique to Spain. Across the English Channel as well, translation became a form of political mediation: the English rendering of Matthieu’s *Sejanus* exemplifies how a text could be reshaped into a veiled commentary on the fraught relationship between King James I and the Duke of Buckingham. The early decades of the seventeenth century saw a marked interest in Sejanus-themed texts in England, reflected in historical narratives, theatrical productions, and translations where the figure of the Roman favorite was a coded symbol of the corrupt minister or royal favorite. In 1603, Ben Jonson staged a tragedy titled *Sejanus, His Fall*, in which he imitated passages from Juvenal’s Satire X on the corruption of power and greed. Tiberius’s favorite is also the central character in the anonymous tragedy *The Tragedy of Claudius Tiberius Nero*, published in 1607.

Interestingly, Matthieu’s *Sejanus* was only translated into English in 1628, shortly after the assassination of the Duke of Buckingham in August of that year. The stated imprint (‘Printed at Paris’) is most likely false, since the book was probably printed in London. No name is given for a translator, and the volume contains no prefatory material. The timing of this first English translation, together with the spurious printing place, and the nameless translator, reinforces the contemporary association between Sejanus and corrupt fallen favorites like Buckingham. The 1632 version was written by Sir Thomas Hawkins, who also rendered into English Giovanni Battista Manzini’s *Della peripetia di fortuna, overo sopra la caduta di Seiano* (Political observations upon the fall of Sejanus). Hawkins’s translation did not appear independently, but was issued with another of Matthieu’s popular works under the title *Unhappy Prosperitie Expressed in the Histories of Aelius Sejanus and Phlipa the Catanian*. The shift from the anonymous version to Hawkins’ translation reflects not only differing publication strategies but also political positioning. Hawkins dedicated the volume

²² “...Historia digna de ser sabida, y más de aquellos que están cerca de los reyes u ocupan lugares altos,” Matthieu, *Vida del dichoso desdichado*, translated by M. Rizo, ‘Aprobación’ de Gil González Dávila. My translation.

²³ “Comunico un ejemplo del príncipe más disimulado y de un hombre industrioso, atrevido, por quien titubeó la máquina del Imperio Romano...,” Matthieu, *Vida del dichoso desdichado*, translated by M. Rizo, ‘Advertencia’. My translation.

to William Cecil (1591–1668), 2nd Earl of Salisbury, a prominent courtier who served as a member of the Privy Council under James I and Charles I and as Lord Treasurer since 1626. Hawkins notes that the earl showed “particular affection” (Matthieu, 1632, p. A1r) to the original, which implies prior familiarity with Matthieu’s work in French, and presents his translation as a response to both to Salisbury’s interest and to the “noble favours” (p. A1r) he had received. Hawkins also stresses the work’s utility for a political reader as the earl, describing its content as “important, the observations prudent, maxims of state useful, and sentences weighty” (1632, p. A1r). Salisbury emerges a fitting dedicatee for Matthieu’s two texts on the fall of a corrupt favorite. As a loyal courtier frequently “affected by Buckingham’s machinations,” (Bird, 2013, p. 7) he faced significant obstacles in securing court office due to Buckingham’s dominance. In this context, the dedication of the *Unhappy Prosperitie Expressed in the Histories of Aelius Sejanus and Phlipa the Catanian* to a figure politically marginalized by Buckingham suggests that the translation carried a pointed resonance within the English political milieu.²⁴

In sum, both English versions of Matthieu’s *Sejanus*, published in 1628 and 1632, sit within the same lineage as Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus, His Fall*, Manzini’s *Peripetia di Fortuna*, and other works that reframe Roman history to comment on the political crises of early modern monarchies, from Paris to Madrid to London.

2.1 Life of Philippa the Catanian

Favor raised this Catanian from dust to glory, and pride threw her headlong from glory into dust again. I present this History to your Majesty, as of a monster of fortune, which you may peruse for curiosity, others for instruction: For (verily) it is a model, which figures the shipwreck of those who strike not sail to decline the Tempest (Matthieu, 1632, ‘To the King’, p. 217).²⁵

With this dedication to the king, Matthieu introduces the story of Philippa the Catanian as a cautionary tale about the perils of fortune and pride. Described as a “monster of fortune,” (1632, p. 217) she is elevated from obscurity to power by royal favor, only to be brought down by ambition. This short passage also highlights Matthieu’s characteristic style, which exploits the rhetoric of opposition and parallel structures to illustrate how historical truth can expose the downfall of states. If as a historian Matthieu drew inspiration from Tacitus’ *Annals* to write his *Sejanus*, here he turned to Boccaccio’s *De casibus illustrium virorum*, which included the history of Philippa, to reflect on contemporary

²⁴ See Patterson (1984) and Keenan (2011) for an overview of how Roman history is deployed through substituted figures, pointed historical parallels, and other strategies designed to evade censorship, enabling playwrights to stage and comment on contemporary Stuart politics, particularly issues of favoritism, ambition, and court corruption associated with the Duke of Buckingham.

²⁵ « La Faveur esleva ceste Cathenoise, de la cendre a la gloire, & l’Orgueil la precipita de la gloire à la cendre. J’en presente l’Histoire à V. M. comme d’un monstre de fortune, qu’elle verra par curiosité, les autres par instruction: car c’est un tableau qui marque le naufrage de ceux qui n’abaissent les voiles, pour donner moins de prise à la tempeste (‘Au Roy’) ». All quotations are drawn from Hawkins’s English translation; spelling has been modernized.

politics. Matthieu's *Philippa* recounts the rise and fall of Queen Joan of Naples's favorite, Philippa—a washerwoman who gained considerable influence in 14th-century Naples, persuaded the queen to murder her husband, Prince Andrew, and was sentenced to death and executed in a brutal and public fashion.

In the *Histoire des prosperitez malheureuses d'une femme Cathenoise, grande seneschalle de Naples* Matthieu explores in depth the workings of human passions within the sphere of politics. Much of the biography portrays Philippa's manipulations of all her mistresses, particularly the young Queen: she "had no desire, but to humour her, rather added increase than moderation to her appetites, thinking on nothing but to reign in the Kingdom..." (Matthieu, 1632, pp. 269-270).²⁶ The Catanian embodies the post-Machiavellian figure of the evil minister who leads a prince away from virtue, and the antithesis of neo-Stoic ideals that sought to regulate the passions through moderation, reason, prudence, constancy, and patience. By exposing the passions that drive corrupt ministers and inexperienced rulers, Matthieu offers negative exempla through which readers may distinguish between legitimate and questionable forms of prudence and learn to guard themselves against deception. The biography of Philippa thus functions as a political dramatization of the dangers of unrestrained desire, warning both kings and ministers against the abuse of power.

The Spanish version includes, as part of its prefatory material, a 'Judgement of the works of Matthieu' (*Juicio a las obras de Pedro Matheo*) by the influential writer Francisco de Quevedo. While Quevedo acknowledges Matthieu's reputation in Spain for his judicious historical writing, he also stresses that, as a French subject writing about an enemy nation, he is biased. The 'Judgement' identifies one major fault: Matthieu's alleged calumny regarding the humble origins of the kings of Aragon in contrast to the supposed greatness of the French monarchy; The passage is corrected in the Spanish translation through a marginal note that counters these claims. This intervention is significant given that the events narrated take place in Naples, then under Aragonese rule, making the defense of its dynastic prestige all the more pointed.

While Matthieu's accounts of the lives of Sejanus and Philippa were published in Paris in the same year as separate works, the English reception brought them into closer alignment. In the English context, Sir Thomas Hawkins's 1632 translation of the history of the infamous female favorite was published together with *Sejanus*, as mentioned earlier, creating a paired reflection on the fall of powerful ministers.²⁷ The frontispiece of the 1632 edition of the *Unhappy Prosperitie Expressed in the Histories of Aelius Sejanus and Phlippha the Catanian* is a rich visual allegory that encapsulates the moral and political themes of the text. Sejanus appears on the left, facing Philippa on the right, a mirrored placement that signals that the two figures are to be read as parallel moral exempla. Beneath the

²⁶ « Sa gouvernante qui n'avoit autre passion que pour luy plaire apportoit plustot de l'accroissement, que de la moderation à ses desirs ne pensant qu'à regner dans le Royaume... » (Matthieu, 1617, pp. 387)

²⁷ The Rouen edition by Ian Berthelin in 1642 also combined Matthieu's *Sejanus* and *Philippa*, along with the political biography of the Marquis of Villerroy.

ornate central cartouche containing the book's title, a Latin anagram—*Seianus: Es Ianus*—plays on Sejanus's name by identifying him with Janus, the two-faced god who sees both past and future, underscoring the didactic value of recalling the past to illuminate present dangers. In the lower section of the frontispiece, the two scenes on the pedestals deepen this meditation on the rise and fall of fortune. On the left, Neptune rising from the sea is accompanied by the caption *Ianus: qui faelix aspiciis ortum* (Janus, being fortunate, beholds the beginning), evoking his ascent to prosperity. Opposite this image is a shipwreck, paired with the caption *Despisis: occasum miser* (you ignore the downfall), a reminder of the neglected warnings and inevitable ruin. Between these two scenes, a vignette representing people approaching a blazing fire visualizes divine and moral retribution.²⁸ A line from Juvenal's Satire X—*Ardet adoratum populo caput, et crepat ingens Seianus* (The head once adored by the people burns, and mighty Sejanus bursts apart)—anchors the book as a timeless cautionary tale on the instability of fortune.

If the false imprint and nameless translator for the 1628 English version of Sejanus shields the act of translation itself in a context critical of favorites, the visual allegory of the English frontispiece of the *Unhappy Prosperity* (1632), an edition that pairs Sejanus and Philippa under the advocacy of Janus, can be read as a semiotic operation aimed at guiding the readers' moral and political interpretation, reinforcing the trope of the cyclical rise and fall of power.

In Matthieu's view, greed, deceit and dissimulation drove Philippa's actions, and much of her biography is therefore devoted to describing her manipulation of her mistress. When Philippa sees her position at court threatened by Joan's pregnancy (which would increase her husband's power at court), she "caused her [Joan] to swallow the poison of a horrid counsel [...] saying Heaven would do her a great favour if he made her a widow before she were a mother" (Matthieu, 1632, p. 280).²⁹ Andrew's assassination is a historical fact, and Matthieu exonerates Queen Joan of direct responsibility, attributing the crime instead to her susceptibility to the favorite's influence. As a woman, Joan is portrayed as governed by emotion; as a queen, however, she ultimately breaks free from Philippa's hold and reclaims the prudence expected of a ruler, rectifying her earlier misjudgments and punishing the guilty:

...In all this we must conclude that ill success waits on unjust prosperity, that there is not any wickedness which bears not its pain and repentance; that he who perpetrates one, expects the opportunity of another, that whilst the worlds theater lasts, Fortune thereon will play her tragedies and will make it appear she flatters those she means to stifle (Matthieu, 1632, pp. 298-299).³⁰

²⁸ The frontispiece of the 1639 edition is even more elaborate, with both figures standing beside a globe from which a large tree grows, accompanied by a caption *Ubicunque damnor, datur ultra...* (Wherever I am cast down, another is raised in my place).

²⁹ « ... luy fait avaller le poison d'un detestable Conseil dans la douceur de sa liberté, disant que le Ciel luy faeroit une grande grâce, s'il la rendoit vefve premier que d'estre mere » (Matthieu 1617, p. 402).

³⁰ « En tout cela il faut conclurre qu'il a du malheur aux Prosperitez injustes, qu'il n'y a point de meschanceté qui ne porte sa peine & son repentir, que qui en fait une, en attend une autre, que tant que le theatre du



Figure 2. Frontispiece of the 1632 English edition of Matthieu's joint biographies of Sejanus and Philippa.³¹

Philippa and her children were brought to justice and subjected to grievous torments. After being tortured, naked, they were “dragged through the town upon a hurdle, then tied to three ship masts, burning pincers twitched them, razors flayed them, and flames choaked them” (Matthieu, 1632, p. 296). According to Matthieu, Philippa “died in the midst of her torments, her heart and entrails were torn out, her head set upon one of the gates of Naples, and the rest of her body turned into ashes” (Matthieu, 1632, pp. 296-297). His

monde durera, la fortune y jouera des tragedies, & fera voir que elle embrasse ceux qu'elle veu estouffer » (Matthieu, 1617, p. 428).

³¹ Courtesy of the British Library, Early English Books online (EEBO).

account parallels the horrific fate of Concini and Galigai. Contemporary chronicles and engravings record how Concini's corpse was pillaged, torn to pieces by the crowd, dragged through the streets, and even disinterred and desecrated the day after burial (Duccini, 1991). Galigai, for her part, was executed on the Place de Greve, her body burned, and her ashes scattered to the winds (Mongrédien, 1968).

3. Conclusions

In the seventeenth-century European imaginary, political biography emerged as a thriving genre that secured historians such as Pierre Matthieu lasting fame within the Republic of Letters. His *vitae*, which used the past to instruct monarchs and ministers in the responsible exercise of power, and warned them of the perils, served a moral and political purpose. In the two biographies briefly examined here, infamous historical characters such as Sejanus (mapped onto Concini) and Philippa the Catanian (aligned with Leonora Galigai) became enduring cultural symbols of the treacherous counselor, resonating from the Louvre to the courts of Madrid and London.

Historical writing as practiced by Matthieu and other seventeenth-century historians can be understood a translational practice since the historian mediated the transfer of meaning from past to present, and then it was, in turn, translated into other languages and political contexts. In both *Aelius Sejanus* and the *Histoire des prosperitez malheureuses d'une femme Cathenoise*, he established a rhetorical bridge between ancient Rome, medieval Naples, and contemporary France, aligning the Roman Capitol and the Neapolitan court with the Parisian Louvre to universalize a warning about the recurrent dynamics of favoritism and political downfall across time and empires. From an interlingual translation perspective, these narratives, drawing on Tacitus and Boccaccio, were first reworked into French before circulating into other vernaculars, including English and Spanish.

The versions of Matthieu's biographies in Spain and England exemplify the mechanisms of cultural translation, where both Sejanus and Philippa's identity are reframed and redefined through translation to make their cases resonate within the receiving culture. The political mirroring pattern, linking Sejanus with figures such as Concini, Lerma, Olivares, and Buckingham, demonstrates the success of this process of cultural transposition. The mobility of Matthieu's critique is thus a direct result of his translational strategies and those of his translators across Europe. Moreover, some printers, such as those responsible for the 1632 *Unhappy Prosperity* edition, relied on what can be called intersemiotic translation to highlight the central message of the biographies. In short, the interlingual translation of historians served as a form of cultural translation in the seventeenth century, reshaping content to align with the expectations and ideological frameworks of the receiving culture. As this brief analysis of Matthieu's work has shown, the historian-translator in early modern Europe did not merely transmit history across languages, but actively produced it; translation was not ancillary to historiography, but integral to it.

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About the author: Adrián Izquierdo is a professor at Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid. He previously taught at Hunter College and Baruch College (CUNY), where he directed the Multilingual Translation Minor. He authored *Pierre Matthieu en España* (2019, Iberoamericana/Vervuert) and *La reñida canonización de Góngora* (2023, e-Spania Books), and edited *Polyglot Texts and Translations in Early Modern Europe* (Brill, 2025).