

Authorship of the 1743 Prose Translation of Lucretius

Post by “Joshua” of July 14, 2024 at 9:37 AM

Introduction

In a forum [thread](#) from 2018, [Cassius](#) raised the question of authorship as to the translator of the prose edition of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* that was printed in London "for Daniel Brown (sometimes Browne), at the sign of the Black Swan without Temple-Bar." Cassius has prepared a [copy](#) of the text for the forum, derived from the [PDF version](#) at Internet Archive (archive.org).

The translation in question was printed with facing Latin and English text in two volumes, octavo size, "*adorned with copper plates, curiously engraved by GUERNIER, and others*". The copy that was digitized at Internet Archive was previously owned by American President John Adams, and is now in his collection at the Boston Public Library.

There has been a great deal of confusion about the identity of the translator. The ambiguity of the title page has led some, including later Lucretian scholar John Mason Good, to conclude that Guernier was himself the translator. This is certainly not the case; [Louis du Guernier](#) was a French engraver who relocated to England, and died "probably around 1735" at the latest. Furthermore, the translator in page v of his preface refers to English as "our language"; an odd thing to say for a Frenchman. No, this translation is not the work of du Guernier, and the true identity of the person responsible has never been known.

A Note on English History and English Verse

"I hated the very idea of the eighteenth century, with all those smug men writing tight little couplets and being so dead keen on reason."

-Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

The two titans of English verse in the first half of the 18th century were the Englishman [Alexander Pope](#) and the Irishman [Jonathan Swift](#). This period saw the dawn of the [Age of Enlightenment](#), a time which

Quote

featured a range of social ideas centered on the value of knowledge learned by way of rationalism and of empiricism and political ideals such as natural law, liberty, and progress, toleration and fraternity, constitutional government and the formal separation of church and state.

The previous century in England had been an eventful one. It started with the death of the last monarch of the Tudor dynasty, Queen Elizabeth I, in 1603; a year after Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was first registered for publication. Following the unwed and childless Queen's death, her cousin King James VI of Scotland acceded to the throne of England as James I in the [Union of the Crowns](#). The reign of King James VI and I saw the foiled Gunpowder Plot of 1605, a new translation of the Bible into English in 1611, the death of William Shakespeare in 1616, and the outbreak of the devastating Thirty Year's War in Europe in 1618. At his death in 1625, he was succeeded by his son Charles I.

The reign of Charles I saw the birth of John Dryden, England's first poet laureate, in 1631. The King quarreled extensively with Parliament over the limits of power, failed to quell surging religious factional resentments, provoked a Civil War which he lost, and was executed in 1649. Between his death and the restoration of his son Charles II in 1660, England fell under the control of dissident Puritans in a period known as the Interregnum. A republic was established called the Commonwealth of England, Oliver Cromwell took over as Lord Protector, and Lucy Hutchinson began work on the first translation of Lucretius into English.

The return of Charles II and the Restoration of the Monarchy followed the first general election in nearly twenty years. A general amnesty was proclaimed, but Cromwell's inner circle was exempted; Lucy Hutchinson's husband Col. John Hutchinson was among those exempted, and he was imprisoned and died in custody in 1664.

The following two years were disastrous;

Quote

In 1665, the Great Plague of London began, peaking in September with up to 7,000 deaths per week. Charles, his family, and the court fled London in July to Salisbury; Parliament met in Oxford. Plague cases ebbed over the winter, and Charles returned to London in February 1666.

After a long spell of hot and dry weather through mid-1666, the Great Fire of London started on 2 September 1666 in Pudding Lane. Fanned by strong winds and fed by wood and fuel stockpiled for winter, the fire destroyed about 13,200 houses and 87 churches, including St Paul's Cathedral. Charles and his brother James joined and directed the firefighting effort. The public blamed Catholic conspirators for the fire.

-Wikipedia

In 1668, John Dryden was appointed Poet Laureate by the King. While Shakespeare and his contemporaries had preferred unrhymed iambic verse, John Dryden's work saw a return to the meter of Geoffrey Chaucer, whose *Canterbury Tales* of the 14th century were written in Middle English in Heroic couplets. In a passage rich with allusions to Lucretius' hymn to Venus, Chaucer

writes;

Quote

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(So Priketh hem Nature in hir corages),
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

Display More

John Dryden's own translation of Lucretius opens thus;

Quote

Delight of humankind, and Gods above,
Parent of Rome; propitious Queen of Love,
Whose vital pow'r, Air, Earth, and Sea supplies,
And breeds what e'r is born beneath the rolling skies:
For every kind, by thy prolific might,
Springs, and beholds the regions of the light.
Thee, Goddess, thee the clouds and tempests fear,
And at thy pleasing presence disappear:
For thee the land in fragrant flow'rs is dress'd;
For thee the Ocean smiles, and smooths her wavy breast;
And heav'n it self with more serene and purer light is blest.
For when the rising Spring adorns the Mead,
And a new Scene of Nature stands display'd,
When teeming buds, and cheerful greens appear,
And Western gales unlock the lazy year:

The joyous Birds thy welcome first express;
Whose native Songs thy genial fire confess;
Then salvage Beasts bound o're their slighted food,
Strook with thy darts, and tempt the raging flood.
All Nature is thy Gift; Earth, Air, and Sea:
Of all that breaths, the various progeny,
Stung with delight, is goaded on by thee.
O're barren Mountains, o're the flowery Plain,
The leafy Forest, and the liquid Main
Extends thy uncontroll'd and boundless reign.

Display More

Dryden's influence on the poetry of the 18th century can hardly be overstated. Alexander Pope wrote that "Dryden taught to join / The varying pause, the full resounding line, / The long majestic march, and energy divine". Samuel Johnson recorded that "the veneration with which his name is pronounced by every cultivator of English literature, is paid to him as he refined the language, improved the sentiments, and tuned the numbers of English poetry".

Until the godsend publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798, heroic couplets would be the order of the day.

Blech.

Three Prose Translations; Horace, Juvenal, and Lucretius

It is perhaps not altogether unsurprising, then, that these 'smug men writing tight little couplets' had no appreciation for the new prose translations that were starting to come out. We will be looking at three such translations, all printed for Daniel Brown in London.

- "[The Satires and Epistles of Horace, Done into English with Notes](#)", in several editions, first printed in 1709; translated by Rev. Samuel Dunster, M.A. The second edition featuring Dunster's portrait appeared in 1712, and included Horace's *Ars Poetica*, or *Art of Poetry*.
- "The Satires of Juvenal Translated: with Explanatory and Classical Notes, Relating to the Laws and Customs of the Greeks and Romans". The [second edition](#) was printed for Daniel Brown in 1745.
- "[T. Lucretius Carus of the Nature of Things, in Six Books. Illustrated with proper and useful notes. Adorned with copper plates, curiously engraved by Guernier, and others](#)", printed in 1743.

The latter two translations were both published anonymously.