

# **Authorship of the 1743 Prose Translation of Lucretius**

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Rev. Samuel Dunster, D.D., Vicar of Rochdale



*S. Dunster, A.M.*

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3963-authorship-of-the-1743-prose-translation-of-lucretius/?postID=31457#post31457>

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The translation of Horace before mentioned was the work of an Anglican prelate named [Samuel Dunster](#) (1675-1754), who went on to earn a Doctorate in Divinity, and served for many years as Vicar of Rochdale in the vicinity of Manchester. The most extensive biography available is in [The Vicars of Rochdale: Vol. 1](#) by Francis Robert Raines. Dunster published a series of works in his early career, beginning with

Quote

a curious and somewhat interesting account of the shires and principal towns in England, under the title of *Anglia Rediviva*, 8vo., London, 1699.

He further published a sermon on the book of Proverbs, advocating in defense of public education, in 1708. In 1709-1710 there appeared two translations; [The Considerations of Drexelius on Eternity](#), which ran through a number of subsequent editions, and the volume of Horace's *Satires and Epistles* now under consideration. This latter work also went through several editions, but there is some evidence that the literary establishment of the day disapproved of Dunster's prose version. A friend of Jonathan Swift's wrote a few stinging couplets at Dunster's expense, which he sent to the famous poet;

Quote

Attack'd, by slow-devouring moths,  
By rage of barb'rous Huns and Goths:  
By Bentley's notes, my deadliest foes,  
By Creech's rhimes and Dunster's prose;  
I found my boasted wit and fire  
In their rude hands almost expire:

-John Sican, 1712-1753

Another couplet appeared from the hand of a Professor of Greek at Cambridge;

Quote

O'er Tibur's swan the muses wept in vain,  
and mourn'd their Bard by cruel Dunster slain.

-Prof. Thomas Francklin, Cambridge University

There was a kind of mania, not to say insanity, inherent to this view of things. In the frontmatter to his translation of Juvenal, John Dryden had stated his intention to "make [the poet] speak that kind of English, which he would have spoken had he lived in England, and had he written to this Age". Had Juvenal lived not in Rome but in London, in other words, and in the

late 17th and early 18th century, he would have written in rhymed couplets.

In the wake of these criticisms in his early career, Samuel Dunster did one of two things. Either he never published another translation from Latin ever again, or else he continued to publish translations from Latin and he did so anonymously. There is scant evidence in favor of either proposition.

In 1739 there appeared an anonymous prose translation of the *Satires* of Juvenal, and this work has diversely been attributed to one of two men; Reverends Samuel Dunster and Thomas Sheridan. Column 2259 of the third volume of Halkett and Laing's [Dictionary of the Anonymous and Pseudonymous Literature of Great Britain](#) (1882-1888) attributes a 1777 reprint of this work to "Samuel [?] Dunster".

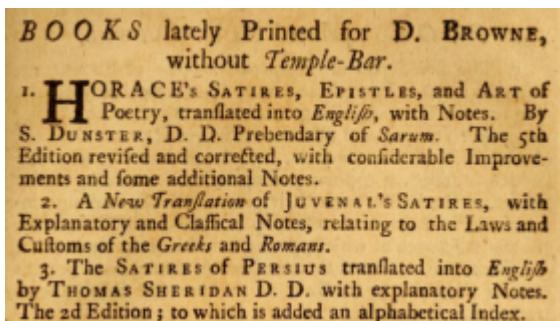
**SATIRES (the) of Juvenal; translated  
with explanatory and classical notes,  
relating to the laws and customs of the  
Greeks and Romans. [By Samuel [?]  
DUNSTER.]  
London : 1777. Octavo. W.]**

Contrarily, the [Dictionary of National Biography](#) records the following;

Quote

[Thomas] Sheridan wrote much and published little. Translations of the 'Satyrs of Persius' (1728, 8vo) and 'Satires of Juvenal' (1739, 8vo), both of which had several editions, and the 'Philoctetes' of Sophocles (1725) were the most noteworthy of his productions.

The *Persius* and the *Juvenal* were both to be found in the bookseller's shop of Daniel Browne near Temple-Bar. In the 1743 edition of *Lucretius* the following advertisement lists all three of these works--Horace, Persius, and Juvenal.



**BOOKS** lately Printed for **D. BROWNE**,  
without *Temple-Bar*.

- H**ORACE'S SATIRES, EPISTLES, and ART of Poetry, translated into *English*, with Notes. By S. DUNSTER, D. D. Prebendary of *Sarum*. The 5th Edition revised and corrected, with considerable Improvements and some additional Notes.
- A *New Translation* of JUVENAL'S SATIRES, with Explanatory and Classical Notes, relating to the Laws and Customs of the *Greeks* and *Romans*.
- The SATIRES of PERSIUS translated into *English* by THOMAS SHERIDAN D. D. with explanatory Notes. The 2d Edition; to which is added an alphabetical Index.

Which of these men was actually responsible for the translation of Juvenal? And even more interestingly, could these two names hold the key to the prose translation of Lucretius?

Vocation and Avocation

The flourishing of human talent that blossomed among the Anglican clergy during the 18th and early 19th centuries is a matter of record, and I would point to Bill Bryson's [At Home](#), a rather discursive account of his time spent living in an old rectory in the English countryside, as offering an exemplary look into this interesting world. The upshot is that when a huge number of educated people are given leisure time and an income, their output may be prodigious. The Reverends Dunster and Sheridan are no more than typical of their set; their occupation was minimal, their free time extensive.

[Thomas Sheridan](#) (1687-1738) was, among other things, an essayist, playwright, poet, and a close personal friend of Jonathan Swift. His [Satyrs of Persius](#) stand somewhat apart from the Horace, Juvenal, and Lucretius linked to above; in the first place, the translator has given us no preface. The prologue which you shall see before the first Satire is not Sheridan's; it was written by the poet Aulus Persius Flaccus himself, and has merely been translated.

By contrast, the three prose translations under consideration all have features common to each of their prefaces. All three of them contain;

1. A self-effacing references to the translator's own language or abilities.
2. A justification for translating verse into prose.
3. A defense against those who would lay the sins of the Roman poet at the feet of the English translator.

Here's how this works in practice.

The Three Prefaces Compared

## **1. A self-effacing reference to the translator's own abilities.**

Dunster's Horace:

Quote

This was the motive which induced me attempt the following translation; I am very sensible, that the Grace and Delicacy of the Latin Can't be turn'd into English; but our Language is not without its beauties, which perhaps are no less pleasing and delightful.

Anonymous Juvenal:

Quote

I have attempted a Just and Intelligible Translation of Juvenal's Satires, and offer them to be read, without the alluring Jingle of poetic Trappings, in a plain and simple Dress, with nothing besides their own native Worth and Excellency to recommend them.

Anonymous Lucretius:

Quote

I have endeavoured (because disencumber'd from the Fetters of Poetry) faithfully to disclose his Meaning in his own Terms, and to shew him whole and intire ; I have followed the different Readings and Explications of the best Expositors, but whether agreeable to the Mind of the Author or no, Comparison only can discover.

## **2. A justification for translating verse into prose.**

Dunster's Horace:

Quote

This I thought the most likely way to make him intelligible, which, is much better done in Prose than Verse; the Restraint of Rhime is no ordinary Difficulty, it too often forces the ingenious Translator to abandon the true Sense of the Poet, and for the sake of a sounding Word, put in something of his own.

Anonymous Juvenal:

Quote

However, let these Poetical translations enjoy undisturbed the Glory they have acquired: it will be Fame and Reward sufficient for me to render this Great Author more familiar, to shew him as he really is, and endeavour that the English Readers of both Sexes may not continue unacquainted with the true Value and the just undisguised Merit of Juvenal's Satires.

Anonymous Lucretius:

Quote

This is no wonder; for the Poet he [Creech] undertook is not to be confined and shackled by the Rules of Rhyme; his Verse is nearest, and runs more naturally into Prose than any other, Juvenal and Horace only excepted, among all the Classicks.

## **3. A defense against those who would lay the sins of the Roman poet at the feet of the English translator**

Dunster's Horace:

Quote

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Having given this Account of the following Version, I must advertise the Reader of one thing more, and that is, that I have castrated our Poet, in translating nothing that border'd on Obscenity, or that was contrary to the Rules of Decency and good Manners ; insomuch that the most modest Person may now safely read his Satires and Epistles, and not run the risque of endangering his Vertue.

Anonymous Juvenal:

Quote

Some perhaps may conceive, that Juvenal is an Author of too free a Character, and too loose a Manner to appear in a plain and natural Translation ; but to censure the most severe and pungent Satires against Vice, as the strongest Incentives to the Commission of it, betrays a Narrowness of Mind, which I think deserves no Answer.

Anonymous Lucretius:

Quote

And here I would have it be understood, that I translate Lucretius only as a Classick Writer of the first Rank, and one of the Venerable Fathers of Latin Poetry, without thinking myself accountable for his Principles, or justifying his System; and whoever apprehends the Design of this Work, in any other View, is a Person of narrow and stinted Conceptions; he is a precise Fanatick in the Republick of Letters, and a secret and ignorant Enemy to Human Learning.

The reader will perceive that the earliest translation takes a milder approach, and the latter a more combative one. Note also the reference in the preface to Lucretius, that "his Verse is nearest, and runs more naturally into Prose than any other, Juvenal and Horace only excepted, among all the Classicks."

If Thomas Sheridan translated the *Satires* of Juvenal, why do they contain this prefatory material while his *Persius* does not? There is, moreover, criticism of Thomas Creech in the preface to both Horace and Lucretius.