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Parrots, Poets and Philosophers: Language and Empire in the Eighteenth Century

Charles II, though she survived long enough to attend the coronation of Queen Anne. Her effigy wears the robes she wore on that occasion, and displayed beside her is her parrot. Reputed to be the oldest stuffed parrot in England—perhaps in the British Isles—it makes, in this location, an incongruous reminder of the importance these birds once enjoyed as status symbols and tokens of the exotic. The parrots you see down at your local pet shop, somewhere between the aquariums, the dog food and the kitty litter, don't have quite the same aristocratic allure.

But the parrot as status symbol goes back the best part of two millennia before La Belle Stuart, herself something of a bird of gorgeous plumage. While this short paper cannot give a complete cultural history of the parrot, it does look at a few examples of parrots in poetry, and tries to show how these function as imitation, translation and cultural transfer, and what they might suggest about language and empire in the eighteenth century.

am reminded of the Victorian headmaster, John Mitchinson (1833-1918; Bishop of Barbados, 1873-81) who referred to the birch as “that most salutary appliance of education.”

The parrot makes his poetical entry in the work of the great Roman poet of love, Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, 43 BCE-17 CE), who in his *Amores*

—"there wasn't a bird on earth better at imitating sounds." But note the qualification in the next line: "you used to return the words [spoken to you] so well," *blaeso sono*,

elaborately packed in. He invites all the *doctae aves*, "learned birds," to gather for the parrot's funeral—the use of *doctus*

There is no suggestion in Statius that Melior's parrot is *blaesus*, indeed he is *facilis*, "adept," *monstrata ... reddere verba*, "to repeat words he has been taught." But we may well feel that in his spacious cage with its ivory and silver bars, the poor bird does not exist for himself, but only as a status symbol for Melior. However *doctus* or *facundus* he may be, the parrot is only allowed to repeat the words he has been taught, and Statius's mythological allusions remind us that the power of speech can be dangerous for those who possess it.

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I will now slide effortlessly over more than a millennium and a half of Western literature, resolutely ignoring such potentially interesting distractions as the "Speak, parrot" of the early Tudor poet John Skelton, or Cassio in Shakespeare's *Othello* using the phrase "speak parrot" to mean talk nonsense.

In the early eighteenth century, we find a Latin poem by Sir William Scott of Thirlestane, baronet (c.1674-1725), called *Psittacus ad D[ominam] E— B—, Dominam suam*, "The Parrot to his Mistress, the Lady E— B—." Scott was a fairly minor literary figure, but the poem appeared in an anthology with those of Archibald Pitcairne (1652-1713), a more celebrated writer whose Latin verses enjoyed considerable fame in the Scotland of his time, not least for the Jacobite and anti-establishment sentiments they expressed. Modern poetry in Latin formed an important part of British literary culture in the eighteenth century, even though it has now vanished entirely from the popular idea of the literary canon and is studied only by a comparative handful of scholars.

Scott's poem could not have existed without predecessors in classical Latin poetry, particularly the Ovid poem we have already looked at. It is written in the same metre, and there are significant verbal echoes. Yet there are important differences, in terms of both form and content. For a start, while Ovid and Statius lament the death of their subjects, in Scott the parrot himself speaks. *Garrula lingua mihi est*, "a prattling tongue is mine," he says, and indeed we may think that a parrot capable of producing fourteen lines of Latin in well-turned elegiac couplets must be talkative indeed. The parrot, or the poet, also knows his classical literature. The opening words, *India me genuit*, "India gave me birth," echo a famous verse epitaph on the greatest of Roman poets, Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro, 70-19 BCE), which begins *Mantua me genuit*—but we soon realise that this is a different sort of parrot. While Ovid's parrot is *Eois ... ab Indis*, Scott's is *fuscis ... ab Indis*, "from the dusky Indies." This may not seem that much of a change at first, especially if we think we detect an echo of a well-known poem by Tibullus, another Roman love poet (c.54-19 BCE), who imagines his beloved, with *comites fusci*, "dusky companions," brought from India (II, iii, 55). But Scott's next line is lifted almost entire from Ovid, with one significant change. Ovid has *psittacus, extremo munus ab orbe datum*, "a parrot, gift from the ends of the earth." In Scott, the line becomes *psittacus, Hesperio munus ab orbe datum*, "a parrot, gift from the western world." We have here a specifically American, or perhaps Caribbean parrot.

The *forma coloris* at the end of a hexameter line is another echo of Ovid, only here we have *pulchri ... forma coloris*, "beautifully coloured appearance." But it is the parrot's ability to speak which matters—he suggests that his appearance is only really

speak is used to flatter his mistress, and this is done in such a manner that it implies an imperial and racialised discourse.

His mistress is *Domina*; in eighteenth-century Latin this means a lady, as in the title of the poem, but anyone who had ever read any classical Latin would know it is also the usual term for a mistress of slaves. Later on, he refers to her as *Hera*, another word which means a mistress of slaves. There is perhaps also a pun here on the name of the Queen of Heaven in classical mythology, in spite of the difference-4(h)-1.8(e di)1Ther8(e

Tu mihi das epulis vesci, das divite fructu,
Et juncta ambrosiis vina odorata cibis:

Ironically, the descriptions of his food suggest it consists of exotics brought, like himself, from far-away places, products of trade and empire. The parrot is horribly reminiscent of the slaves one sees in British paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in portraits of titled ladies or in family groups, where the slave, like the parrot in this poem, is stripped of his or her individuality to become an exotic, an "other," a symbol of the owner's wealth and status.

There is another layer of meaning, of course. The poem's words are not produced *murmure ... blaeso* at all, but in elegant Latin verse. The poem is an imitation of Ovid, but that does not make the poet an *imitatrix ales* or an *imitator* like the parrots of Ovid and Statius. For eighteenth-century writers, imitation is a domesticating strategy (to borrow Lawrence Venuti's terminology) which establishes the translator's power over his original. To imitate classical authors, in Latin or in English, was to assert one's rights over them, and to repeat the claim that the British were the true inheritors of all that was good in Roman culture. This found perhaps its most startling manifestation in a colonial context in the badge devised for the Caribbean colony of Grenada later in the eighteenth century and shown on the silver mace of the island's House of Assembly. This used the motto *hae tibi erunt artes* ("these shall be thy arts"), a quotation from Virgil's *Aeneid* (vi, 852), where it is part

The English version of the same poem, "The Parrot" by William Cowper (1731-1800), a much better remembered poet than Bourne, whose pupil he had been at Westminster, is a very free one. I will just draw your attention to two points. In the Latin, it is not clear exactly who has sent the parrot to Thais (or Belinda, as Cowper calls her, inevitably reminding eighteenth-century readers of *The Rape of the Lock,* though his reference to her as the captain's "toast" keeps something of what is implied by Bourne's choice of the name Thais)—someone in love with her, but who this might be is left to the reader's imagination. Cowper adds the details about the sea-voyage and the parrot's having come to "the British shore" as "Part of the captain's precious store"—something which may remind us of the way in which captains of slaving vessels were often allowed to carry a number of slaves for their own financial benefit, and how this was one way in which slaves ended up in Britain, sold or presented to families who kept them as servants.

Cowper's last stanza is an expansion of Bourne's final couplet:

> *Ardua discenti nulla est, res nulla docenti*
> *Ardua; cum doceat fœmina, discat avis.*

—"Nothing is hard to the learner, nothing is hard to the teacher, since it is a woman teaching and a bird learning." Cowper's use of "prate" makes ex,s nkk wha3g isg(g)8.(n)]TJTD0.0009 T

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as a black man and a poet to address such an exalted personage, and he appropriates classical and later Latin literature as if it were his own, just as Scott and Bourne do. When he says *Insula me genuit* ..., the island is Jamaica, but the echo of the epitaph of Virgil is there as it is in Scott's poem. By writing Latin verse, Williams is making a very visible claim to the status of an educated gentleman, a status previously reserved for whites.

It was a claim some found disturbing. The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-76), in his essay "Of National Characters," remarked of sweeping generalisations that "Men of sense condemn these undistinguishing judgements." Nevertheless, he himself dismissed black people as a whole in a footnote, saying "I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even an individual, eminent either in action of speculation." Hume had heard of Williams, but the accomplishments of the Jamaican poet could not be allowed to get in the way of the philosopher's arguments. "In Jamaica, indeed," says Hume, "they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly." The white Jamaican historian Edward Long (1734-1813), a self-appointed spokesman for the local oligarchy, quoted Hume's remark as part of a commentary on Williams's poem which was designed, together with a biased and tendentious translation, to argue that Williams was no counter-argument to Long's claims that black people were racially inferior to whites.

Translation and imitation of classical authors was deemed admirable in white writers, but the appearance of a black writer who could do the same thing was cause for alarm. Such a writer had to be dismissed as an *imitator*, not one who produced literary imitations in the respectable sense of the word, but as only a parrot. The same

There is a new edition of this with an Introduction by Howard Johnson (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

I have discussed Williams elsewhere—for example in the entry on him in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (forthcoming)—and am currently working on a longer study of him.

On "domesticating translation," see Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995). On the cultural importance of Latin verse in eighteenth-century Britain, see Leicester Bradner, *Musae Anglicanae: A History of Anglo-Latin Poetry 1500-1925* (New York: Modern Language Association of America; and London: Oxford University Press, 1940), especially Chapter VIII, and D. K. Money, *The English Horace: Anthony Alsop and the Tradition of British Latin Verse* (London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1998).

On John Mitchinson, see John Gilmore, *The Toiler of the Sees: A Life of John Mitchinson, Bishop of Barbados* (Barbados National Trust, 1987).

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Simile Agit In Simile

Cristatus, pictisque ad Thaida Psittacus alis,
Missus ab Eoo munus amante venit.
Ancillis mandat primam formare loquelam,
Archididascaliæ dat sibi Thais opus.
Psittace, ait Thais, fingitque sonantia molle
Basia, quæ docilis molle refingit avis.
Jam captat, jam dimidiat tyrunculus; et jam
Integrat auditos articulatque sonos.
Psittace mi pulcher pulchelle, hera dicit alumno;
Psittace mi pulcher pulchelle, reddit alumnus heræ.
Jamque canit, ridet, deciesque ægrotat in horâ,
Et vocat ancillas nomine quamque suo.
Multaque scurratur mendax, et multa jocatur,
Et lepido populum detinet augurio.

Nunc tremulum illudit fratrem, qui suspicit, et pol!
Carnalis, quisque te docet, inquit, homo est;
Argutæ nunc stridet anûs argutulus instar;
Respicit, et nebulo es, quisquis es, inquit anus.
Quando melior fuit tyro, meliorve magistra!
Quando duo ingeniis tam coiere pares!
Ardua discenti nulla est, res nulla docenti
Ardua; cùm doceat fœmina, discat avis.

Vincent Bourne

Text from: John Mitford, ed., *Poematia Latine partim reddita partim scripta a Vincentio Bourne* … (London: William Pickering, 1840), 146-7.

The Parrot

translated by William Cowper from the Latin of Vincent Bourne

In painted plumes superbly dress'd,
A native of the gorgeous east,
By many a billow toss'd,
Poll gains at length the British shore,

Sweet Poll! his doting mistress cries,
Sweet Poll! the mimic bird replies;
And calls aloud for sack.
She next instructs him in the kiss;
'Tis now a little one, like Miss,
And now a hearty smack.

At first he aims at what he hears;
And, listening close with both his ears,
Just catches at the sound;
But soon articulates aloud,
Much to the amusement of the crowd,
And stuns the neighbours round.

A querulous old woman's voice
His humorous talent next employs;
He scolds, and gives the lie.
And now he sings, and now is sick,
Here Sally, Susan, come, come quick,
Poor Poll is like to die!

Belinda and her bird! 'tis rare
To meet with such a well-match'd pair;
The language and the tone,
Each character in every part
Sustain'd with so much grace and art,
And both in unison.

When children first begin to spell,
And stammer out a syllable,
We think them tedious creatures;
But difficulties soon abate,
When birds are taught to prate,
And women are the teachers.

Text from: *The Poetical Works of Vincent Bourne*

The Parrot to his Lady

translated by John Gilmore from the Latin of
Sir William Scott of Thirlestane, Bart. (c. 1674-1725)

The Parrot to his Lady, the Lady E-------- B--------

The Indies gave me birth, and I am sent
From dusky tribes, from sunset lands afar –
No Mantuan bard – a gift, a parrot, meant
To please my Lady, though my speech should jar.

A prattling tongue is mine, and colours fair,
If yet my plumes with thee should favour find;
Thou wilt spic'd wines and dainties with me share,
Ambrosial tokens of a mistress kind.

Ye Indies, where the harsh Sun burns each coast,
Water can ne'er be liken'd unto wine –
Let all your Indian maids their beauty boast,
Still fairer is my mistress' form divine.

Sweetly speaking I'll delight thine ear,
Though punishment for broken speech is just;
Yet may I, if such fault in me appear,
Die at thy snow-white hand if die I must.