

## JOHN GILMORE

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



Tile: Delft c.1890, with a design used from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries [Author's collection]

If you go to Westminster Abbey and visit the selection of the Abbey's treasures on display in the undercroft, you can see an extraordinary selection of funeral effigies, originally intended for display on the coffins of the royal and noble dead they commemorate. Among them is that of "La Belle Stuart," Frances Stuart (1647-1702), Duchess of Richmond and Lennox, one of the celebrated beauties of the court of

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.

The parrot is described—briefly—by the Roman naturalist Pliny (Gaius Plinius Secundus, “Pliny the Elder”, 23-79 CE; *Nat. hist.*, x, 117). India sends this bird, he informs his readers, and he refers to their gorgeous colouring. But it is their ability to speak which is the real attraction. *Imperatores salutat et quae accipit verba pronuntiat, in vino praecipue lasciva*—“it greets emperors, and whatever words it hears, it repeats; when drunk it is a saucy bird.” It is also hard-headed: *capiti eius duritia eadem quae rostro*, says Pliny—“its head is as hard as its beak.” *Hoc, cum loqui discit, ferreo verberatur radio*—“this, when it learns to speak, is beaten with an iron rod.” Notice how the use of the passive voice neatly ignores the question of who is beating Latin words into the poor bird's head. Not that the iron rod suggests any excessive brutality, for in case we are wondering about this slightly implausible detail, Pliny reassures us that, *non sentit aliter ictus*—“it doesn't feel the blows otherwise.” I

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* (II, vi) laments the death of a parrot which belonged to his real or imaginary girlfriend Corinna. There is almost certainly a model in the poems which Ovid’s predecessor Catullus (Gaius Valerius Catullus, c.84-c.54 BCE) wrote about the pet bird which belonged to the woman he called Lesbia. This was a *passer*, usually translated as “sparrow” —perhaps some other sort of bird, but clearly something European and fairly domesticated. By contrast, the exotic nature of Corinna’s bird is signalled in the first line of Ovid’s poem. He is *Psittacus, Eois imitatrix ales ab Indis*—“the parrot, mimic bird from the East Indies.” Ovid refers a couple of times to his brilliant colouring—*rari forma coloris*—but it is the ability to speak which is the parrot’s real attraction and makes him the *avium gloria*, “glory of birds.” He has a *vox mutandis ingeniosa sonis*, “a voice skilful in changing sounds.”

He has a *sermonis amor*, “a love of talk.” He is *loquax*, “loquacious,” he is *humanae vocis imago*, “an echo of the human voice.” Even as he dies, he can still bid farewell to Corinna, and in Elysium the other birds will continue to listen attentively to his speech. Indeed, on his tombstone as big as himself, an inscription reminds readers that *ora fuere mihi plus ave docta loqui*—“I had a mouth for speaking more than any ordinary bird.” This echoes what has been said of him earlier in the poem:

*Non fuit in terris vocum simulantior ales:  
reddebas blaeso tam bene verba sono.*

—“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*, “with an imperfect [or stammering] sound.” The adjective *blaesus* suggests some sort of speech defect. It is very clever and amusing of the bird to be able to speak Latin, but you don’t expect him to do so with the eloquence of an Ovid.

If we move on a few decades, we find another parrot poem, this one written by Statius (Publius Papinius Statius, c.45-96 CE), a poet who lived in Rome in the upper-class society in and around the court of the Emperor Domitian. Statius is not particularly well known nowadays, but he was immensely popular from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, and his *Silvae*, a collection of occasional poems, were much imitated. In the *Silvae* (II, iv), we find a poem on the death of another parrot, this time one which had belonged to Statius’s friend and patron, Melior. In some ways it echoes Ovid’s poem, though it seems more obviously designed to flatter the parrot’s owner. This parrot is *dux volucrum*, “a leader among birds.” He is *domini facunda voluptas*, “a chatter-box who delights his master.” He is *humanae sollers imitator... linguae*, “a skilled imitator of human speech.” He can utter *meditata verba*, “practised words.”

Statius describes the favoured bird picking his way around a Roman feast, no doubt to the amusement of the guests, but he was not always on the loose, for the parrot possessed an elaborate and costly cage, befitting the wealth of his owner Melior, but which alas! is now empty. Like Ovid, Statius imagines his parrot in the company of other birds. Both poems mention Philomela (who was turned into a nightingale), the peacock (in both poems referred to as the bird of Juno, the Queen of Heaven and consort of Jupiter in Roman mythology), and the legend of the phoenix which was reborn from its own funeral pyre. Statius’s mythology is perhaps more

elaborately packed in. He invites all the *doctae aves*, “learned birds,” to gather for the parrot’s funeral—the use of *doctus* again echoing Ovid. Statius’s learned birds are *quis nobile fandi ius Natura dedit*, “those to whom Nature has given the noble right of speech,” and we then get several lines of mythological references to talking birds. But these are all rather ill-omened allusions. The nightingale’s song laments the fact that Philomela was turned into this sweet-singing bird because she was raped by her brother-in-law Tereus, who cut out her tongue to prevent her telling her sister. The magpies—not the most melodious of birds—were maidens transformed as a punishment for daring to challenge the Muses to a singing contest. And knowing that the *Phoebeius ales* is the raven depends on an acquaintance with the myth that the raven was changed from white to black as a punishment for having told an unwelcome truth to Apollo.

The exotic nature of the parrot is noted. He is *plagae viridis regnator Eoae*, “the green ruler of the eastern shore,” and the adjective *Eous*, referring to the dawn, echoes Ovid’s description of his parrot as *Eois ... ab Indis*. He is associated with other exotic birds, whom he is described as surpassing: the *gelidi ... Phasidis ales*, “the bird of the icy Phasis” (a river in Asia Minor) is the pheasant, and *quas umentis Numidae rapuere sub austro*, “those whom the Numidians [a North African people conquered by the Romans] hunt under the moist south wind,” are guinea-fowl. The parrot is a *saluator regum*, “a greeter of kings,” *nomenque locutus / Caesareum*, “and he has even spoken the name of the emperor.” Naturally he will be given a splendid funeral, which will allow his owner Melior—at least in Statius’s almost certainly deliberately over-wrought imagination—to display his wealth by burning other costly and exotic things on the parrot’s pyre: Assyrian balm, Arabian incense and Sicilian saffron.

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 beautiful if his *picta ... pluma*, "coloured feathers," please his mistress. His ability to

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 in quantity between *hĕra* and *Hĕra*, the wife of Zeus, which suggests even greater obsequiousness.

The Indies boast, and Indian maidens may boast how beautiful they are, but they are not to be compared with the Lady E. B. Water—light in colour—is not to be compared with wine—dark in colour. The wine may be sweet, but the purity of the water is superior. The Indies are sunburnt, but the Lady E. B. is distinguished by her *candida forma*, a phrase which emphasises not just her beauty, but her whiteness, with a definite contrast between the *candida* and the adjective *fuscus* used earlier with reference to the Indies. Later on, the parrot expresses the hope that if he is found at fault, and deserves punishment, he may perish at her snow-white hands, *niveis ... manibus*. Why should he deserve such a fate when his words are meant to please her, *dulci ... loquelâ*, “with sweet speaking”? It is because he fears he will in fact speak *murmure ... blaeso*—that word *blaesus* we met in Ovid—with broken speech, stammering, mumbling like one who does not know his mistress’s language properly.

The parrot is a *munus ... datum*, “a gift which has been given.” He says *tibi mittor ab Indis*, “I am sent to you from the Indies.” He is in Scotland not as a result of something he has done, but as a result of the actions of others. Far from his western world, he depends on his mistress for his food:

*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 of a famous passage claiming it was Rome’s destiny to rule other peoples. In the Grenada badge, the point is made with brutal frankness by the accompanying image, which shows slaves bringing sugar-canes to a cattle-mill.

To write verse in Latin was to assert one’s status as an educated gentleman, and the conceit of putting elegiac couplets into the mouth of a parrot reaffirms the

poet's superiority over all those who could not appreciate such skilfully wrought cultural trifles, whether they were parrots, plebeians, or slaves brought from the colonies.

I want to look at one more parrot poem, *Simile agit in simile*, by Vincent Bourne (c.1695-1747), whose collected Latin verses were first published in 1733 and appeared in about a dozen different editions over the next hundred years, with the last being in 1840. Again we have an oriental parrot, *missus ab Eoo munus*, "a gift sent from the East" to the beloved Thais, though Thais appears to be of a rather different social status from the Lady E. B. —the name which Bourne gives her is that of a celebrated courtesan of antiquity and suggests that she was the mistress of the parrot's donor and not his lawfully wedded wife. With the assistance of her maids Thais decides to teach the parrot to speak. Bourne shows his ingenuity in the way he manipulates the Latin for comic effect; his readers would have found something highly amusing in the way Thais reserves for herself the *archididascaliae ... opus*, "the task of headmistress," as the very idea of a female *archididascalus*, a term normally applied to the headmaster of an all-male public school such as Westminster, where Bourne himself taught for many years, would have seemed risible. A reference to Poll (or Polly) as a conventional name for a parrot is slipped in by use of the interjection *pol* in the Latin, an entirely classical usage derived from the name of the minor deity Pollux, as well as by the *Psittace mi pulcher pulchelle*. There is some nice use of diminutives, such as *tyrunculus*, meaning "a little scholar." Although written in elegiac couplets, like the Ovid poem, there is nothing in the way of direct allusion to it. The parrot proves an apt pupil of his mistress, referred to as *hera*, as in Scott's poem (though I would not claim any direct connection), and his abilities as a mimic provoke a great deal of mirth.

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 explicit what is only implied in the Latin, that the parrot and his mistress, and birds and women in general, occupy themselves with idle chatter. However, any of Bourne’s original readers who were slow on the uptake would have been given a heavy hint by the title of the Latin, which means “like works on like.”

To sum up, the eighteenth-century poems follow their classical models in showing the parrot as an exotic ornament conferring status on its owner, much as the ability to describe these things in Latin verse demonstrates the superior breeding of

the gentleman poet. The poet can imitate Ovid or other classical authors freely because they are part of the intellectual property his education and rank have given him. On the other hand, the parrot, permanently distinguished by his colouring, is expected to imitate the language of his master or mistress for their amusement rather than his own. Perhaps he will be trained to do so with something akin to the iron rod mentioned by Pliny; perhaps he will be more fortunate and enjoy the kisses of a Thais. In any case there are limits to what is expected of him: he will talk *murmure ... blaeso*, imperfectly, or he will “speak parrot” as Cassio puts it, or at best “prate.” While Scott’s Lady E. B. might have been able to appreciate his poem, Bourne’s Thais was presumably unaware of a joke which is as much at her expense as at that of her bird—for Bourne the conversation of both women and parrots is only idle chatter; both have an education which is inferior to that of gentlemen, because no more is either expected or required of them. Indeed, we may recall Statius’s hints that undue eloquence in subordinate creatures is dangerous and undesirable.

But what happens when the exotic creature wishes to speak his own words rather than merely echo those he has been taught? Some of the earliest poetry from the British Caribbean colonies consists of verse in Latin, though this is by members of the white oligarchy—while eighteenth-century British opinion did often treat the white creole living in Britain on the profits of his plantation as an exotic “other,” he could usually be absorbed more or less painlessly into the existing order of things.

It was a different matter when somebody like Francis Williams started addressing Latin poems to the governors of Jamaica. Williams (c.1690-1762) was a black Jamaican whose father had been a slave. The one poem of his which survives, addressed to a governor of Jamaica in 1759, is in many ways a conventional enough piece of flattery of the great. But Williams includes a spirited claim to his entitlement

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 or 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

techniques of translation and imitation were called into play once more, in the attempt to prove that Williams's poetry was, as Long put it in a quotation he adapted from Pope, no more than "woeful stuff." Like parrots in British drawing-rooms, slaves and their descendants in the colonies were coerced into learning the language of their masters, but they were expected not to get too good at it. Williams might refer to himself as having *docto dulcis in ore decor*, "sweet elegance in a learned mouth," but while a green parrot might be allowed in jest to be *doctus*, it was not a claim that white gentlemen in positions of power found easy to accept from a black poet.

#### A Note on Sources

Pliny is quoted here from the Teubner edition by Ludwig von Jan and Karl Mayhoff (Leipzig, 1906- ). A Latin text of Ovid's poem and an English verse translation by Guy Lee are given in *Ovid's Amores* (London: John Murray, 1968). The *Silvae* of Statius were edited by J. S. Phillimore for the Oxford Classical Texts series (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905; second ed., 1918). Briefer mentions of parrots appear in Persius (Aulus Persius Flaccus, 34-62 CE; prologue to his *Satires*, l. 8) and in Martial (Marcus Valerius Martialis, c.40-c.104 CE), *Epigrams* XIV, lxxiii, where the parrot says that while his hearers will teach him the names of other people, he has learnt to say "Hail, Caesar!" all by himself.

A neo-Latin echo of Statius may be found in the poems (*Carmina*, II, vi) of the German writer Petrus Lotichius Secundus (1528-1560), where a parrot belonging to the nobleman Daniel Stibar is praised as a means of praising his owner. Sir William Scott's parrot poem appears in [Robert Freebairn, ed.] *Selecta Poemata Archibaldi Pitcarnii ... et Aliorum* (Edinburgh, 1727), 126. The most useful edition of Bourne's poems is that by John Mitford, ed., *Poematia Latine partim reddita partim scripta a Vincentio Bourne ...* (London: William Pickering, 1840), where "Simile Agit in Simile" is at 146-7. This edition includes an appendix with a selection of Cowper's translations of Bourne; this does not include "The Parrot," which may, however, be found in a separately paginated appendix to *The Poetical Works of Vincent Bourne* (Oxford: Talboys and Wheeler; and London: William Pickering, 1826), and in editions of Cowper's works. Francis Williams's poem, and Edward Long's commentary and translation, appear in the latter's *History of Jamaica* (3 vols., London, 1774), II, 475-85.

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,  
 Archididascaliae 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,  
Part of the captain's precious store,  
A present to his toast.

Belinda's maids are soon preferr'd  
To teach him now and then a word,  
As Poll can master it;  
But 'tis her own important charge,  
To qualify him more at large,  
And make him quite a wit.

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* (Oxford: Talboys and Wheeler; and London: William Pickering, 1826), separately paginated appendix, 4.

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## The Parrot to his Lady

Sir William Scott of Thirlestane, Bart. (c. 1674-1725)

*Psittacus ad D. E----- B-----  
Dominam suam.*

India me genuit, fuscis tibi mittor ab Indis  
    Psittacus, Hesperio munus ab orbe datum:  
Garrula lingua mihi est, pulchri mihi forma coloris  
    Picta placet Dominæ si mea pluma meæ:  
Tu mihi das epulis vesci, das divite fructu,  
    Et juncta ambrosiis vina odorata cibus:  
India si jactes; vestra est plaga Solis iniqui,  
    Lympha parum dulci est assimilanda mero;  
Omnes si formam egregiam jactetis & Indæ,  
    Candida forma meæ vos superabit Heræ:  
Sint tibi deliciæ dulci mea verba loquelâ,  
    Murmure si blæso sit mea pœna mihi;  
Sed mea si culpa est, niveis licet usque precari  
    Vestris sit manibus, si periturus ero.

Text from: [Robert Freebairn, ed.] *Selecta Poemata Archibaldi Pitcarnii ... et Aliorum* (Edinburgh, 1727), 126.

## 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.