

Jonson, Translation, and Horatian Lyric by Daniel Hooley

The first obligatory stop on the popular itinerary of English Horatianism is the poetry and drama of Ben Jonson, and by now most of us literary tourists are acquainted with its familiar outlines: Jonson the first prominently classicizing poet writing in English, master of epigram, translator of Catullus and others, identified himself progressively more closely with the verse and identity of Horace, particularly in the face of controversy, the failure of his dramatic work, and disappointments with courtly allies and patrons. In time, the presence of Horace becomes pervasive. Apart from works directly translated (among them, the *Ars Poetica*), quotations, allusions, translated fragments and adaptations turn up everywhere. In “The Poetaster” (1601) Jonson sets a contemporary literary dispute in Augustan Rome, and adopts Horace as his mask, a character redeemed by the adjudicating Augustus from scurrilous attacks of “Crispinus” and “Demetrius” (Marston and Dekker). Much later, after the failure of his “The New Inn” (1628), Jonson’s “Ode to Himself” makes Horace and classical lyric something of a haven from public disappointment.

One feature of Jonson’s revolutionary Horatianism is the transformation of Horace’s presence in English letters; before Jonson, Horace is, as he was for Dante, Horace the satirist; in larger terms, Horace the moralist, the poet of the hexameter verses. With Jonson and after, Horace the lyric poet comes into being for English writers. Though Jonson himself did not venture far into the pretty countryside of *carpe diem* dalliance, his “tribe” did, beginning notably with Herrick. Jonson’s lyricism turns to other Horatian themes: friendship, literary alliance, the ironized persona. And it is more technical; his original lyrics and translations are the first to offer an answering technical sufficiency to classical precedent; Wyatt, Surrey, and the scattered others before him simply had not yet Jonson’s mastery of the English versification. After Jonson, poetry and the idea of lyric were profoundly altered.

Within these broad outlines of literary history, Jonson’s Horatian translations have played a not inconspicuous role. But I should like to turn to them again, particularly to the full translations of C. 3.9 and 4.1. Not to reconsider them in “translational” terms as *verbum pro verbo* productions, but as specimens in a larger discussion of the place of the lyric voice within an arena of sometime brutally hard political and social contestation. Jonson’s choice of source text, genre, and his manner of rendering are meaningful in terms quite beyond those suggesting themselves immediately (to a twentieth century close-reader) on the printed page. Further, the act of translation enables a range of expression not available to his other Horatian (original) work: in the latter, Jonson “is,” or plays at Horace for various non-trivial reasons; in the former, Jonson “does” or plays out Horace for equally non-trivial reasons. Jonsonian translation is pointedly bi-focal (or bi-vocal), an “impersonation” overtly presupposing historical incongruity and at the same time a diachronic “choosing up of sides.” Translating Horace is no merely aesthetic decision, and yet literary aesthetics will take a central role in the deadly serious drama of literary/cultural polemic. Jonson’s own *Timber* (*Discoveries*) and his version of the *Ars*

Poetica offer useful material for the sorting some the latent concerns in these translations, and I plan to make, in my short time, some good heuristic use of them. In the end, I hope to show how Jonson's Horatian lyric (and by extension the lyric of Jonson's age) is given further and significant dimension by the "secondary" art of Jonson's Horatian translation.