

Note

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF JEAN LE CLERC: A NEW SUGGESTION

Jean Le Clerc (1657–1736) was perhaps the most prominent of the Reformed writers read by an English audience after the Huguenot exile in the late 1680s.¹ Having moved to an unsatisfying living with the Remonstrants in Amsterdam before the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Le Clerc yearned for a clerical appointment in England.² His editorship of the *Bibliothèque universelle et historique* (1686–93) brought him a reputation, but he was long suspected of heterodox religious views. By promoting his works, his English friends brought him an equal mix of fame and notoriety.

In 2010, J.G.A. Pocock put Le Clerc centre stage in his influential account of late-seventeenth-century philology.³ He noted, however, that ‘Le Clerc’s English connections, the identity of his translators, and the extent to which he was party to whatever they intended, deserve further investigation’.⁴ This note suggests one such link. Specifically, it regards the English translation of Le Clerc’s *A supplement to Dr Hammond’s Paraphrase and annotations on the New Testament*.⁵ Its translator is listed in one of the two 1699 editions as ‘W.P.’ This has not been accounted for: I argue that it denoted William Pople (1638–1704).⁶ Reading this text as a translation by Pople, moreover, provides a new window into the dynamics of Anglo-Dutch theological exchange in the 1690s.

It is useful to note Le Clerc’s other known English translators before pressing the case for Pople. Earlier English versions had already

tarnished Le Clerc’s name in important circles. In 1690, the Rector of Exeter College, Oxford, Arthur Bury, published a book entitled the *Naked Gospel*. Among other arguments, this lucid work proposed that the doctrine of the Trinity is unnecessarily complicated, in contrast to the plain Christianity of the Apostles. Bury was eventually banished from his rectorship in 1695. In 1690, however, a book appeared in London masquerading as *An historical vindication of The naked Gospel* (1690), with a polemical letter serving as a preface that condemned Aristotelian learning.⁷ It went under Le Clerc’s name, though the letter was not his own. His views were publicly condemned as Socinian by the former Public Orator of the University, Robert South.⁸ His reputed translators—Thomas Brown, and the Socinian-inclined Charles La Cène among them—only furthered this association with ‘Grub Street’.⁹

With Le Clerc’s hopes for clerical appointment duly damaged, he needed more reliable literary transmitters. In 1699, Le Clerc turned to the *Paraphrase and annotations upon all the books of the New Testament* of Henry Hammond (1659).¹⁰ This was not the first time that Hammond had appealed to Le Clerc; he had made reference to Hammond’s exegesis during the 1680s. In 1699, he went on to publish another edition of Hammond, annotating his exegesis of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. Hammond (1605–60) elucidated a contextual view of John’s Gospel, in which the Apostle presented a startlingly clear message about the nature of God to defeat the party of Gnostic heretics. This reading promoted Le Clerc’s long-standing view that the ante-Nicene Church Fathers had been Platonists, but that John’s Gospel was not an Arian text. Le Clerc thereby avoided the orthodox charge of Arian heresy, and used his commentary to buttress his argument that John had written the Gospel in response to the Gnosticks, and, crucially, against the Platonists too. It was Le Clerc’s attempt to highlight his own original standpoint: a view anti-patristic and also anti-Platonic.

Why would William Pople translate this work? Born in Hull, he had picked up an ‘excellent

¹ My thanks are due to Jacob Chatterjee, Matthew Leech-Gerrard and Sarah Mortimer for encouragement towards the ideas in this note.

² Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science* (Cambridge, 2015), 535.

³ J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, Volume V: The First Triumph* (Cambridge, 2010), 89–114.

⁴ Pocock, *Barbarism*, 106.

⁵ Jean Le Clerc, *A supplement to Dr Hammond’s Paraphrase and Annotations on the New Testament* (London, 1699).

⁶ For biographical information see Caroline Robbins, ‘Absolute Liberty: The Life and Thought of William Pople, 1638–1708’, *W&MQ*, xxiv, (1967), 190–223.

⁷ Jean Le Clerc, *An Historical Vindication of The Naked Gospel* (London, 1690).

⁸ Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, 535.

⁹ Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, 202–3, 535.

¹⁰ Jean Le Clerc, *A Supplement to Dr. Hammond’s Paraphrase and Annotations on the New Testament* (London, 1699).

command of Latin'.¹¹ His uncle was none other than Andrew Marvell; William was known to be the poet's 'favourite nephew'.¹² Popple had been a wine merchant in Bordeaux, before managing to move his family away from religious persecution in 1688. He soon published *A Rational Catechism* (1688), set as a dialogue between a Father and Son on the principles of Christianity.¹³ This text emphasizes God's gift to humans of both a soul and a body, and argues that the soul cannot acquire happiness without the worship of a higher being. That depends, though, on humans fulfilling their 'duty'. This right path of natural law had been made known by revelation. As a result, Popple argues that 'Any such Notions therefore as pass the comprehension of the meanest Capacities are not to be reckoned as things whose knowledge is of absolute and indispensable necessity'.¹⁴ 'Those that fall short of that comprehension', he writes, 'would thereby be excluded from a possibility of Salvation'. This is very similar to the view of Le Clerc, in the prefatory letter (which he composed) to the *Paraphrase and annotations*. He there writes that 'Rhetorical Arguments [...] depend only upon the Speakers fancy, and are not to be tried by the rule of right Reason'.¹⁵ This is all equally complementary with the anti-priestcraft tone to Locke's view of the 'Marks of Men striving for Power and Empire over one another, [rather] than of the Church of Christ'.¹⁶ Popple was a kindred spirit as much to Le Clerc as he was to Locke.

This evidence of intellectual motivation can be strengthened by Popple's links with Le Clerc. The publication of the *Catechism* in 1688 had been greeted with praise from Le Clerc.¹⁷ In France, Popple was acquainted with Isaac Papin (1657–1709), who recommended his family to Le Clerc as 'kind, learned and liberal'.¹⁸ Moreover,

Popple's friendship with Locke brought him into a circle in which Le Clerc played another crucial role in the 1690s. Popple was the secretary of the Dry Club, on the agenda of which the subject of religious toleration often took priority. This wine merchant turned intelligencer was passionate on the issue, something never clearer than in his introduction 'To the Reader' of Locke's *Letter*: 'Absolute liberty', Popple wrote, 'Just and True Liberty, Equal and Impartial Liberty, is the thing that we stand in need of'.¹⁹

There is textual evidence for Popple's translation of Le Clerc as well. Mark Goldie notes that Popple made Locke's *Letter* 'starker and livelier'; the Latin 'was adjusted to clarify, to emphasise and to make more intimate'.²⁰ The same is evident in Popple's work with Le Clerc in the following:

*Sed aliis verisimile non videtur Evangelistam, ut Tessaradecedas observaret, decem consulto rececuisse personas; & in ea quidem praesertim parte, in qua eum adcuratiorem esse oportebat, quia erat minus nota; notissima enim erat feries Genealogiae Regiae Davidis familiae, usque ad tempora captivitatis, obscure ab eo tempore ad Christum.*²¹

'But it does not seem probable at all to others, that the *Evangelist*, merely for the sake of keeping to the number of *fourteen*, should designedly pass over *ten* persons, and especially in that part of his Computation in which it behov'd him to use the *greatest* exactness, because it was *least* known; for *till* the time of the Captivity, the Genealogical series of the Royal Family of David was very well *understood*, but from that time to *Christ* it was known but *obscurely*'.²²

The succinct clarity of Popple is evident in 'designedly' for '*adcuratiorem*', and in the almost obsessive italicization. 'Probable at all' is an intensifier of '*non videtur*'—a practice ubiquitous in Popple's translation of Locke. Popple's clarifying and intensifying hand is found throughout Le Clerc's text.

If our attribution to Popple is correct, it highlights the extent of Locke's immersion in the

¹¹ Robbins, 'Absolute Liberty', 196.

¹² Nicholas von Maltzahn, 'Marvell and Maniban', *EIRC*, xxxv, (2009), 25.

¹³ William Popple, *A rational Catechism* (London, 1688).

¹⁴ William Popple, *A rational Catechism* (London, 1688).

¹⁵ Le Clerc, *Paraphrase and Annotations*, (Preface).

¹⁶ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), in Mark Goldie (ed.), *Locke, Second Treatise of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, (Oxford, 2016), CXXIV.

¹⁷ John Marshall, 'Huguenot Thought after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes: Toleration, "Socinianism", Integration and Locke', in Randolph Vigne and Charles Littleton (eds.), *From Strangers to Citizens: The Integration of Immigrant Communities in Britain, Ireland and Colonial America, 1550–1750* (Portland, Oregon, 2001), 204.

¹⁸ Robbins, 'Absolute Liberty', 201.

¹⁹ Locke, *Letter*, 123.

²⁰ Locke, *Letter*, xxxvi.

²¹ Jean Le Clerc, *Novum testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi, Ex Versione Vulgata, Cum paraphrasi et Annotationibus*, 2nd edn (Frankfurt, 1714), 6.

²² Le Clerc, *Paraphrase and Annotations*.

contemporary debates on the Platonism of the Fathers. This was emphasized by the Preface to Locke's own *Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul* (1707): 'he that shall attentively read the Christian writers', writes Locke, 'will easily find how much the philosophy, they were tinctured with, influenced them'.²³ That historical and exegetical opinion owed much to Locke's reading of Le Clerc and his interaction with figures like Popple. Indeed, Locke himself owned a copy of Le Clerc's supplement to Hammond.²⁴ The intellectual link from Le Clerc to Locke is clear: but it depended upon the easy transmission of these foreign texts through the hands of skilled intermediaries like Popple.

Why, then, did Popple hide his identity to the general reading public? Assessments of Le Clerc continued to be suspicious. His chances in England were constrained by connections to journalistic circles looked down upon by many churchmen. The *Bibliothèque universelle* was widely read, but it only helped draw its editor's name into the vexed Trinitarian debate of the 1690s.²⁵ Le Clerc notes the 'care and faithfulness' of his translator in the prefatory letter to the *Annotations*, but does not reveal his identity. Where Popple had been so happy to put his name by the Englishman Locke and his text on the eve of the 1689 Toleration Act, he was not keen to do so in 1698. Anti-Trinitarianism had been ruled beyond the limit of toleration in 1689. The decade after 1689 had underlined the dangers of association with the ideas explicitly proscribed even by that landmark piece of legislation.

Popple's purposeful maintenance of a relatively anonymity, then, might allow us to point towards two conclusions—the first about Le Clerc, and the second a broader intellectual shift. Le Clerc's relationship with Popple displays the extent of his engagement with English intellectual life, beyond the more well-known association with John Locke and Isaac Newton.²⁶ But it was clear that, by the end of the 1690s, Le Clerc's English translators were doing him more harm than good as far as any hopes of English preferment were concerned. Le Clerc's readers questioned whether the translators were more radical Socinians, such as the

controversialist Charles La Cène.²⁷ By publishing anonymously, Popple did little to diminish this damaging association. If he had publicized his role, readers may have been more inclined to read Le Clerc in line with the more moderate tolerationism of the Englishman Popple. Instead, Popple thought it safer to protect himself from a public link to Le Clerc's writing, rather than to lend his friend a moderate seal of approval. In furthering the association with radical continental Socinianism, Le Clerc's friend only got him further away from a comfortable English living. In 1699, there were two more editions released in London of Le Clerc's *Paraphrase and annotations*: neither of them sported the 'W.P.' label. In fact, translations of Le Clerc published in England after 1699 hardly ever had a translator's identity affixed.²⁸ Popple may well have decided his identity was best hidden entirely.

Le Clerc's example therefore bears a logical consequence for the state of Anglo-Dutch theological exchange by the end of the 1690s. Le Clerc made an effort in his notes on Hammond to argue that Platonism had been rife among the Church Fathers, but that John's Gospel was not an Arian text. This was a balanced and sophisticated exegetical position. But in the Trinitarian and confessional storms of the 1690s, the translation history of Le Clerc's works may suggest that it got lost along the increasingly polarized lines of heterodoxy and its opponents. Le Clerc's failure to rid the ante-Nicene Fathers of Platonist stains was, for an English audience of 1700, just not orthodox enough. William Popple had translated Locke in 1689 in a quite different religio-political climate to that which greeted his translation of Le Clerc a decade later.

PATRICK MAXWELL

New College, Oxford, UK

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²³ John Locke, *Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul* (London, 1707).

²⁴ John Harrison and Peter Laslett (eds.), *The Library of John Locke*, (Oxford, 1965), 111.

²⁵ For which see Rob Iliffe, *Priest of Nature: The Religious Worlds of Isaac Newton*, (Oxford, 2015), 365–72, and Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, 531–38.

²⁶ Patrick Maxwell, 'Isaac Newton's Heresy at New College', *New College Notes*, 25:3.

²⁷ Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, 535.

²⁸ 'Publications of Jean Le Clerc', on the 'Grub Street Project': <https://www.grubstreetproject.net/people/9277/works/?order=title>.

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