

Correspondence

To the Editor of the Journal of British Studies:

Two thoughts dominate after a re-reading of the entire Greene-Stanlis correspondence and ancillary interventions: (i) That the essence of my own naiveté (and perhaps also of Mr. Greene's) was to have supposed that the question at issue in this whole exchange was essentially an historical one – the nature of *Dr. Johnson's* position on the natural law and not, as Mr. Stanlis now frankly asserts, “*our* [i.e. his own and Greene's] respective convictions regarding God, human nature, and physical nature.” (ii) That brevity is indeed the soul of wit.

FRANCIS OAKLEY
Williams College

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To the Editor of the Journal of British Studies:

Professor R. L. Colie, in her article, “The Social Language of John Locke,” writes (*J.B.S.*, IV (1965), 37), that “the state of modern Hebrew led seventeenth-century men to comment upon the change and decay inevitable in all languages.” As an instance of such comment she cites what she terms “a remarkable passage” in Thomas Baker’s “Reflections upon Learning” (1700).

As a footnote I would point out that this discovery of the change and decay which befell all languages was enunciated in a book very familiar to seventeenth-century men, as it had been to men of medieval and Renaissance times, and throughout the sixteenth century: The *Ars Poetica* of Horace. (Horace has it also in *Epistles*, Book II, 2: Loeb ed., pp. 433, 435.)

English men of letters drew freely upon the *Ars Poetica*; Queen Elizabeth “Englished” part of it in 1598; and for the seventeenth century one need mention only Dryden’s well-known finding that Ben Johnson was “a professed imitator of Horace” (*Dryden’s Essays*: Everyman ed., p. 15). I would suggest, therefore, that the state of modern Hebrew was not the sole causal factor in leading men to comment on the fortunes of languages; to it should be added their knowledge and acceptance of the Horatian judgment;

and to substantiate my contention I adduce the fact that Baker's "remarkable passage" simply restates the substance of the following lines from the *Ars Poetica*:

As forests change their leaves with each year's decline, and the earliest drop off, so with words, the old race dies, the new-born bloom and thrive. We are doomed to death — we and all things ours. [Baker: Words, like other things, are subject to the common Fate of vicissitude and change; they are always in Flux, ebbing and flowing.] . . . all mortal things shall perish, much less shall the glory and glamour of speech endure and live. Many terms that have fallen out of use shall be born again, and those shall fall that are now in repute, if Usage so will it, in whose hands lies the judgment, the right and the rule of speech (*Ars Poetica*, Loeb Classical Library, pp. 455, 456). [Baker: for being governed by Custom . . . it is scarce possible it should be otherwise. *Caesar* who gave *Laws* to Rome, could give none to its languages . . . in this Custom is only absolute (*Reflections upon Learning*, italics Baker's, p. 17).]

The main points, that words, like all other things, are subject to change, and that the ruling hand in the matter is Usage (custom) appear in both writers. It would seem certain that Baker knew Horace, either at first hand, or indirectly through the continuing Horatian tradition.

In the n. 36, p. 39 of Professor Colie's paper a slip occurs: Lagado and not Brobdingnag was the place where an artificial language was being projected.

CONSTANCE I. SMITH
Cranleigh, Surrey, England

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