

**James Albert DeLater**

## **HUET'S LIFE, CAREER, AND WORKS**

The long life, uncommon talent, and extraordinary erudition of the polymath cleric Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721) of Caen helped promote him to a place at the centre of intellectual life in the age of Louis XIV. Born into a Protestant family of Norman gentry on February 8, 1630, he was left an orphan at the age of five. His uncle, the mathematician and astronomer Gilles Macé, nominally took charge of his early rearing until he began formal studies in 1642 (lasting until 1650) at the Jesuit academy at Caen. Perhaps encouraged by his uncle's example, though not by his apparent indifference to teaching his nephew, Huet's manifest talent and passion for mathematics and the physical sciences never seem to have left him, though even before he had reached his majority he had already become proficient in classical languages and was studying Hebrew in consultation with a Protestant Orientalist and savant, Samuel Bochart (1599-1667), on special problems of Hebrew grammar. Huet went on to study Arabic, Syriac, Aramaic, and other oriental languages during a time that knowledge of these languages in an expanding Europe was becoming less rare, in part due to the establishment of university chairs reserved for the teaching of oriental languages as well as to the printing both of textual editions in these languages and of philological study aids such as grammars, dictionaries, lexicons, etymologies, commentaries, and translations. In 1652 Huet became an early member of an academy of arts and letters at Caen, and a decade later he founded a scientific academy there, which soon entered into correspondence with the young Royal Society in England. During the decade of its existence, Huet's scientific academy members investigated phenomena astronomical, chemical, physical,

and biological; Huet himself invented an anemometer and took an active part in experiments on the effects of toxins as well as experiments designed to disprove theories of spontaneous generation-*omne vivum ex vivo* ("every living thing from another living thing") was his unshakeable conviction.

By 1659 Huet had established a second residence at Paris and was frequenting the salons of art, letters, and fashion. He had already gained some recognition as a youth for his translation of the Greek pastoral romance *Daphnis and Chloe*. But in 1661 he brought out his first major work, *De interpretatione* (*On translation*; in two books, of which *De optimo genere interpretandi* is the first and *De claris interpretibus* [*On illustrious translators*] the second). In 1668 he published a two-volume collated edition, with a Latin translation, of Origen's scriptural commentaries on Matthew (his translation of these may be found in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 13, and his *Origeniana* in *PG* 17). From 1670 to 1680 he served under Bossuet as tutor to the dauphin. During this decade of service to Louis XIV and his son, Huet's tutorial duties, required Court appearances, and labours as general editor of the Delphin series of annotated Latin classics (over fifty were published; Huet himself provided eighty-eight pages of critical notes to the Delphin Manilius) threatened to reduce his time for private study, so through regulation of diet, wine, and exercise as well as by reducing his daily hours of sleep to about three, he was able to win back precious study time. It is also during this busy decade as royal tutor that Huet was elected to the Académie Française (1674) and was ordained priest (1676). Yet in this demanding period of his life there were lighter moments too, as when Huet demonstrated to a delighted queen and her court that the whole of the *Iliad* could be copied on leaves of paper so small and in a hand so miniscule that a transcription of the entire work could be fit into a nutshell (*Huetiana* XV: 'S'il est vrai que l'on ait pu mettre l'*Iliade* d'Homere dans une coquille de noix?').

After the dauphin had attained his majority and married, Huet was released from his tutorial duties, and within the next dozen years he

published an expanded edition of *De interpretatione* (1680) followed by a third (further expanded) in 1683, a revised third edition (1690) of a theological work, the *Demonstratio evangelica* (first published in 1679), and two philosophical works, the *Altnetanae quaestiones: de concordia rationis et fidei* (short title; 1690) and the *Censura philosophiae cartesianae* (1689), which argued against the Cartesian epistemological method of radical doubt. Though in his youth he was attracted by Cartesianism, Huet later became one of its most trenchant critics.

Huet was appointed bishop of Soissons in 1689, and after serving three years there, he received the papal bulls confirming his election as bishop of Avranches. He then turned his hand to drafting synodal statutes for ecclesiastical conduct and diocesan procedures (he had also qualified in the law in the 1650s), which were published between 1693 and 1698. During these years as bishop he also published several works on sacred history, a letter collection, and an edition of his Latin poetry. And even while occupying the see of Avranches, Huet was an indefatigable reader; one disappointed petitioner of the learned bishop, having been told by Huet's servant that the bishop was at that moment unavailable because he was at study, is said (by Saint-Beuve) to have remarked that he hoped in future it would please God to send them a bishop who had completed his studies! In 1699, however, he resigned his bishopric for reasons of ill health and subsequently became abbé of Aunay and Fontenay; during this autumnal period (1701-21) in his long life, he resided in Paris in a small house belonging to the Jesuits, to whom in 1691 he had already willed his large library of over 8000 volumes. In 1702 he published in French a history of the city of Caen, and following a grave illness in 1712 that left him unable to pursue his Orientalist studies, he published a study of ancient navigation (1716) and began writing his Latin memoirs, which were published in 1718. Though he died January 26, 1721, several more of his works were brought out posthumously: the *Huetiana* (1722), a four hundred page miscellany of mostly short essays on subjects mathematical, scientific,

critical, literary, historical, religious, philosophical, and biographical; a development of Pyrrhonian scepticism, the *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de l'esprit humain* (1723); and a romance, *Diane de Castro* (published in 1729, but written as early as 1670; another romance, *Le Faux Inca*, remains in manuscript). But his best known work remains his seminal treatise on the origin of the romance (*Lettre de Monsieur Huet à Monsieur Segrais: de l'origine des romans*), first published in 1670 as a preface to Mme. de La Fayette's romance *Zayde*, and frequently included in later editions of her works. Huet, who edited and corrected the manuscript of her romance, relates that Mme. de La Fayette told him that in publishing these two works in the same volume, she and Huet had fondly brought together their children in marriage ("Nous avons marié nos enfants"; Huet *Mémoires* 100).

Huet's memoirs reveal him as a man of tolerance as well as of learning and faith. He conferred on scholarly and religious subjects at Amsterdam with learned rabbis like Rabbi Mannasseh ben Joseph ben Israel (*Htina* LXXXIX: 'R. Manasse ben Israel') and encouraged moderation and understanding in the treatment of Jews, instead of what he describes as the all too common harshness and insolence (*Mem* 55). And though he seems ever since his boyhood to have been a faithful son of his Church, he had many Protestant colleagues and friends, and was prepared to undertake preliminary negotiations toward realizing Samuel Pufendorf's proposals for reconciling Roman Catholic and Protestant confessions (*Mem* 109). His memoirs also reveal that there was scarcely a celebrated man or woman of letters or learning in Paris whom he had not met. By visits, but above all through exchanges of letters, he knew many scholars and writers from all over Europe, and his large correspondence includes such diverse personages as Pierre de Fermat, Huygens, Daniel Heinsius, Isaac Vossius, Richard Simon, Colbert, Mme. de La Fayette, La Fontaine, Jean Chapelain, Bossuet, Mme. de Sévigné, Mme. Dacier, and Leibnitz.

Saint-Beuve extolled Huet as "la plume la plus savante de l'Europe, l'homme de la plus vaste lecture qui fut jamais" ("the most learned pen

in Europe, the man of the vastest amount of reading who ever lived") and "[h]omme docte aimable, poli, qui sut tout, tout ce qui pouvait être su alors, et qui est la dernière grande figure, et l'une des plus fines, de ces savants robustes d'une autre âge [...], l'homme d'une époque qui finissait" ("a man learned, amiable, urbane, who knew all that could then be known, and who is the last great figure, and one of the finest, of the robust scholars of another age [...], the man who ended an epoch"). For Voltaire, he was simply the "savant universal". The breadth and depth of Huet's interests, talents, and learning not only won him the admiration (as well as the envy) of many of his contemporaries, but, with reference to the area of translation, they may also have given him practical and theoretical bases for proposing in *DOGI* (sec. IV) that translators should adapt their methods of translating to the requirements of the subject matter they translate.

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Source : *Translation Theory in the Age of Louis XIV*, Manchester, St. Jerome Publishing, 2002, p. 3-5.