

Matthew Prior

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Fig. 1. Luca Giordano, *The Death of Seneca*

Matthew Prior was born in 1664 in Westminster, Middlesex, to George, a Dorset joiner, and Elisabeth Prior. George and his brothers, one of whom owned a Rhenish (wine) tavern, sent his eight-year-old son Matthew to receive his education at Westminster School. Showing an early interest in poetry, Prior excelled in the three years leading up to the untimely death of his father. Without his father's financial support, Prior left school and began working for his uncle, spending his spare time reading and translating. The Earl of Dorset, Charles Sackville found him reading the Roman poet Horace in his uncle's tavern. Impressed with his translation skills, Sackville sponsored the remainder of Prior's education, becoming Prior's first patron. In 1681 Prior was named a King's Scholar, which recognized his skills in classical languages, ultimately allowing him to go against the wishes of his sponsor and attend St. John's College until 1687. After his graduation, Prior drifted, eventually becoming tutor to the sixth Earl of Exeter's children in the middle of 1688.

Prior's appointment as Secretary to the English Ambassador at the Hague in 1690 marked the beginning of his political career. It was not long afterwards that

Prior found himself aligning with the Tories, who embodied the brotherhood and community that Prior valued. Prior, however, saw his political pull decline after the death of King William in 1702 and, up until the death of Queen Anne in 1714, he found more purpose in poetry than politics. Seventeen of Prior's poems were published by Edmund Curll in 1707 under the title *Poems on Several Occasions*. Prior, unsatisfied with the anthology, created his fifty-one-poem collection using the same title, published in early 1709 by Jacob Tonson.⁵²³

When Queen Anne died in 1714, Prior was recalled from France, where he was the acting ambassador, and placed under house arrest. The Whigs, who came to power under King George, confined him to his home. Prior, refusing to implicate his fellow Tories in treasonous activity, was eventually released two years later. Prior became so unpopular in 1718 that some of his friends, including Pope, Swift, Gay, and Arbuthnot, promoted a subscription to his collection as a way of supporting him. By subscribing to a poetry collection, people paid extra ahead of time and would be rewarded with a dedication or a special edition copy. This allowed Prior to continue living in relative comfort, along with the money he received from his Cambridge Fellowship.

“Picture of Seneca dying in a Bath, by Jordain: At the Right Honorable the Earl of Exeter's at Burleigh-House” was written as an occasional poem (something written for a specific occasion) and was published in this 1718 collection. The poem is in iambic tetrameter couplets, easily read aloud. While Prior wrote many occasional poems during his career, this is not amongst his most famous or popular works. Having been educated in classical literature, Prior's knowledge of Seneca and Nero would have been great enough that he could make connections between them and his own situation. In many ways, this poem reflects the betrayal he experienced during his years as a politician.

Prior wrote this poem on the occasion of seeing *The Death of Seneca*, which hangs in the third George room at Burghley House (see fig. 1). Having been sentenced to death by the Roman Emperor Nero, Seneca chose to bleed to death with his feet in a bath, taking poison to speed up the process when his demise became drawn out. In the foreground of the 246.5cm by 301cm oil on canvas piece, Seneca's students write down his final thoughts. In the background, a group of men and Roman soldiers watch on from the Roman countryside. Books are

⁵²³ Catalogues list the text as “[1708] 1709,” which likely indicates it appeared before March 25 in 1709, which was still officially 1708: until 1752, England did not use the Jan. 1st start of the Gregorian calendar prevalent in Europe. Many publications from Jan.-Mar. in the years 1582–1752 are double dated or ambiguously dated. Tonson may have released the text early but dated it 1709.

scattered around Seneca's feet, and a dog sits facing the Stoic. This painting would have been available for Matthew Prior to view while tutoring the sixth Earl of Exeter's children and is still available for viewing at Burghley House in Peterborough, England.

Further Reading

Cunnally, John. "Nero, Seneca, and the Medallist of the Roman Emperors." *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 68, no. 2, 1986, pp. 314–17.

"Welcome to the Burghley House Collections." *Burghley Collections*,
<https://collections.burghley.co.uk/>.

Rippy, Frances Mayhew. *Matthew Prior*. Twayne Publishers, 1986.

Reference

Giordano, Luca. "The Death of Seneca." *Burghley House Collections*, Burghley House Preservation Trust Limited,
<https://collections.burghley.co.uk/collection/luca-giordano-3/>. Accessed 15 Feb. 2022. Used with permission from Jon Culverhouse and The Burghley House Collection.

Picture of Seneca dying in a Bath, by Jordain: At the
Right Honorable the Earl of Exeter's at
Burleigh-House⁵²⁴

WHILE cruel NERO⁵²⁵ only drains
The moral SPANIARD's⁵²⁶ ebbing Veins,⁵²⁷
By Study worn, and slack with Age,
How dull, how thoughtless is his⁵²⁸ Rage!
Heighten'd⁵²⁹ Revenge He should have took; 5
He should have burnt his Tutor's⁵³⁰ Book;
And long have reign'd⁵³¹ supream in Vice:
One nobler Wretch⁵³² can only rise;
'Tis He whose Fury shall deface
The Stoic's⁵³³ Image in this Piece.⁵³⁴ 10
For while unhurt, divine JORDAIN,⁵³⁵
Thy Work and SENECA's remain,
He still has Body, still has Soul,

⁵²⁴ *Poems on Several Occasions*, J. Tonson and J. Barber, 1718, p.8; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

⁵²⁵ *Nero* fifth Emperor of Rome (54-68 CE), famous for his vices

⁵²⁶ *Spaniard's* Seneca was born in Córdoba, Spain

⁵²⁷ *Veins* ordered to commit suicide, Seneca bled to death in a warm tub, aided by poison

⁵²⁸ *His* Nero's

⁵²⁹ *Heighten'd* augmented

⁵³⁰ *Tutor's* Seneca tutored Nero, beginning in late childhood

⁵³¹ *Reign'd* facing death by crucifixion, Nero fled the Roman senate and committed suicide

⁵³² *Wretch* someone deeply saddened or misfortunate, here an imagined person who would vandalize the painting

⁵³³ *Stoic's* a school of Philosophy that preached the correlation between positive behaviour and positive experience and that the wise man is immune to misfortune

⁵³⁴ *Piece* the painting *The Death of Seneca* by Luca Giordano

⁵³⁵ *Jordain* while W. Pickering suggests in his 1835 collection *The Poetical Works of Matthew Prior: With the Life of Matthew Prior, Volume 1* that this painting was created by Jacques Jordaens, it is far more likely that this poem references *The Death of Seneca* by Luca Giordano, sometimes credited as L. Jordanus

And lives and speaks, restor'd and whole.



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