William Cowper’s admiration for the poetry of Matthew Prior proved a lifelong source of inspiration. Although Prior remained a very popular poet until the middle decades of the century, Cowper was perhaps unique in retaining a sense of Prior’s centrality as far as the end of his life (which coincided with the end of the century). The nineteenth century, by contrast, tended to find Prior somewhat trivial if not smutty and the twentieth century failed to rehabilitate Prior as any kind of literary heavyweight deserving of anything other than the most peripheral and elective pedagogic treatments.

The impact of Matthew Prior upon (among others) William Cowper concerns forms of generic continuity and historical alienation, alongside forms of historical continuity and generic alienation. I have written elsewhere that the important influences on William Cowper could be conveniently abbreviated to just two: John Milton and Matthew Prior.1 A straightforward reading would neatly assume that Milton was responsible for the more ponderous religious meditations and Prior for the lighter conversational epistles. However, the detailed reality of Prior’s influence is rather more complex: it is also a decisive one on Cowper’s most serious verse. It would be elegant to suggest that Milton correspondingly influenced Cowper’s lighter verse, but this influence is less direct, evidenced by the spoof Miltonic tradition represented by John Phillips’ Splendid Shilling (1701), which had a very formative influence on Cowper’s lighter moments. Indeed, Cowper’s very earliest recorded poem is a blank verse meditation on a broken shoe (1748).2 (Mock-Miltonic blank verse is so prevalent in The Task that establishing when the Miltonic thread is being pastiched and when it is to be taken seriously is a very subtle if ultimately very rewarding task.)
Prior's influence on Cowper's light verse is both fully acknowledged (by Cowper) and easily demonstrated. A bantering form of address and a fondness for ballads and for beast fables connect both poets. One of the more interesting pervasive features of Prior's influence on Cowper, meanwhile, is his sheer versatility. Prior employs more verse forms than any other poet of his generation, offering odes, ballads, heroic couplets, Hudibrasts and epigrams. There is, in short, no default setting format to a Prior poem. Likewise, Cowper puts himself to the task of mastering a wide range of verse forms since the very difficulty of versification had its own therapeutic value for him.

The only major verse form that Cowper employs and Prior does not is blank verse, and the only major verse form that Prior employs and Cowper does not is the Pindaric ode. The Pindaric was uncongenial from Cowper's point of view because the Nonsense Club (Churchill, Lloyd, Bonnell Thornton and Colman) that had defined his poetic taste as a young man was famous for its attacks on Thomas Gray, and Lloyd and Colman had earned the approbation of Samuel Johnson when they spoofed Gray's so-called 'Great Odes'. The young Cowper had even written a spoof 'Dissertation on the Modern Ode' and had it published in St. James Magazine in 1763. For the whiggish (borderline and actual Wilkesite) wits of the 1760s, Gray and Mason were reactionary quietists, and the ode was therefore a contaminated form. For Churchill, Lloyd and Colman, political quietism was itself a political endorsement of the status quo at a time when the opposition to the Bute and Grenville administrations made civic engagement a positive duty.

Prior's inability and/or refusal to employ blank verse, most particularly for Solomon where it might have been of service, can be understood in terms of straightforward prematurity. Cowper's own blank verse stood on the shoulders of Thomson, Young and Akenside, providing the vantage point of a substantial body of work that demonstrated that it was possible to write extended blank verse poems that employed Miltonic techniques without merely parodying them. Prior did not enjoy such a legacy to interpret and adapt. Milton, of course, was a polemicist, content to sound like a voice crying in the wilderness while Prior was a diplomat, professionally and temperamentally out of sympathy with Milton's dominant register. Milton's post-Restoration verse does not seek to flatter or befriend anybody, whereas Prior was professionally devoted to precisely that end.

Prior, therefore, was someone who was unconvinced that heroic couplets could accommodate every poetic topic, but equally unconvinced that any other single measure stood a chance of achieving any