



Gillespie, S. (2018) 'Horace's Letter of Invitation': A newly discovered Horatian imitation by Allan Ramsay. *Scottish Literary Review*, 10(1), pp. 159-168.

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Deposited on: 18 January 2017

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Stuart Gillespie

‘Horace’s Letter of Invitation’:

A newly discovered Horatian Imitation by Allan Ramsay

Abstract: Some ten imitations of Horatian poems by Allan Ramsay are known from printings in Ramsay’s own lifetime and later recoveries from manuscripts. Another more extensive imitation, of Horace’s Epistle 1.5 inviting a friend to a dinner party, can now be added. This note presents a diplomatic transcription from the Beinecke Library manuscript which contains the only known copy, followed by discussions of the imitation’s links to other works by Ramsay and of its relationship to the Latin poem on which it is based.

A manuscript volume in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, CT, contains an unnoticed and apparently unique copy of a Horatian imitation ascribed by the copyist to Allan Ramsay. Yale MS Osborn c229/1 is the second volume of a substantial three-volume collection of verse texts ‘by Several Hands, and on various Subjects’ made by the antiquary Maurice Johnson (1688-1755), ‘most of which’, as its title page also informs us, ‘were never printed’. Page images for the complete volume are freely available to view online via Beinecke Digital Collections, perhaps rendering more detailed description of the manuscript as a physical object superfluous.¹ This particular item extends the sequence of Horatian imitations in part published in Ramsay’s *Poems* of 1721, which contained half-a-dozen formal imitations of Horace. Four other imitations (perhaps earlier, experimental attempts of Ramsay’s), one of them fragmentary, were first printed from surviving manuscripts in the twentieth century. The published imitations attracted admiration for their inventiveness and felicity, and helped to win greater respect for verse written in Scots.²

The Beinecke imitation differs in some fundamentals from the rest. It is a fully developed performance, not an experiment, and it is one of only two of Ramsay's imitations to venture beyond Horace's *Odes* into the *Epistles*, meaning that it is also longer than any of the others. It seems to refer directly, by first name, to one or more members of Ramsay's social circle. This suggests the possibility that it was written for a real-life occasion, as other eighteenth-century versions of this familiar Horatian poem of invitation can be shown to have been. If that occasion arose after 1721, this could explain why it did not appear along with the rest of the printed imitations; but Ramsay refrained from publishing many of his compositions, including, for instance, nine of the fourteen 'tales' or social satires he wrote between about 1715 and 1745. These, perhaps like this Horatian imitation, were intended not for the printer but 'for performance in convivial circumstances', as their most recent editor puts it.³

The apparently rough-and-ready orthography, inconsistent punctuation, and somewhat arbitrary capitalization of the Beinecke text are not out of keeping with the texts of Ramsay's other Horatian imitations which are known from manuscripts:⁴ eighteenth-century writers usually left it to their printers to make their copy more polished and consistent in these and other respects.⁵ My diplomatic transcription also retains a few apparent copying errors; these are noted immediately following.

Horace's L^r of Invitation – Si potes Archaicis. L.1 Epist 5

By Allan of Ramsay the Scots Poet

Sire, gin your Honour woud vouchsafe to take
 Your Kale with me the Neight & coars ote Cake,
 If in syke Company ye dow be Seen,

I shall expect ye at saxhours at Een.

Ise promise nae fine things, but shanno fail

To fill the ton with good strong Berwick ale

Ken ye quo I to Meg, wha comes y^e Neight?

Ne're fash, quo Meg, S^r aw Thing shall be right

But sare I feare Y^r Hon^r is too nice

10 Id gar Ye take for aunce a Feuls advice.

Let ne heigh thoughted Cares disturb y^r mind

But give a Loos to Pleasure more refind:

Leave off dull Busness, banish fruitles Sorrow

Indulge to neight, & sleep It out tomorrow.

Thô in the Kirk ye chance to nod a few)

It is but doing as the Elders do,)

And ne great Scaith between Mess. John & you.)

Contempt & Bedlam be the Blockheads Curse

That Starves his Weam to plenish well his Purse:

20 That hoards his Geer for some young booby Lad

that just has Sence enough to wish him dead.

Ne Syke like Whims for me, De'el ha me then,

There's much mere confort in the Topet Hen;

Wondrous Effects of aw reviving drink

It arms the Cowards gars y^e Blockhead think

Unlocks y^e Cabnett of the Secret Heart,

And makes us honest spight of all our Art.

Confirms o^r waving hopes, forbids despair

Unloads all Burdens of afflicting Care;

30 The starvd drunk wretch eats visionary Beef
 And a Cock Laird's much greater than his Chief.
 Expect ne daintys, But be sure to find
 An hearty welcom, & things geud in kinde;
 Clean snaw-white Nap'ry shall o'f Table spread
 To deight y^r Gob shall Serviteurs be laid,
 The Stoups & Trenchers shall be made for fine
 And thô not Siller, shall like Siller shine
 Reflect each transient Image as they pass
 And do the office of a Keeking Glass.

40 Ne tale Pipe Scoundrel shall o'f Joys molest,
 That blabs the secrets of an honest Guest.
 But aw Gay Sowsie Lads, as one coud wish
 Of the same Kidney nor half Flesh, half Fish,
 Y^r auld Fr^{ds} Ned and Mat will sure be there
 (there's vast temptations in a Cague of Beer)
 Twa blither Carles there stay not in the Marse,
 Ane for lang Stories kend and ane for Farce;
 Blith Sawney too, unless some leering Loon
 Has drawn him else to some sly nook oth' Town

50 Bad me expect him here – but let that pass
 Sawney Yee ken's a Devil at a Lass.
 There's room for mare, bring wha ye like, but think
 Where's muckle thronging, there'll be muckle Stink.⁶

With no other copies of the text available, we cannot know how many scribal hands it passed through before it reached Maurice Johnson's collection. But a low number is implied by the apparent non-survival of any other copy, and also by the apparently few substantive errors.⁷ One of the errors suggests that Johnson or a previous copyist did not fully understand Ramsay's Scots: the word 'sowsie' in line 42 is not recorded, and is probably an error for 'sonsie'. The author is named as 'Allan of Ramsay the Scots poet', where the 'of' suggests another kind of unfamiliarity with the writer and his milieu. 'Waving', in line 28, is a more routine copying error: this probably read 'wavring' at an earlier stage in the manuscript transmission. In line 25 one would suspect that 'Cowards' was originally singular, to match 'Blockhead'.

Numerous details of different kinds connect the poem to Ramsay. The heading – Ramsay's own English title followed by the opening words of the Latin – matches the format of the headings which his printed Horatian imitations have in 1721; this format is not unique to Ramsay, but numerous other possibilities were available in this not unpopular genre. The 'Cock Laird' of line 31 takes us immediately to the poem of that title in *The Tea-Table Miscellany*. 'Mess. John' (line 17) is a conventional name for a clergyman in Scottish writing of this period, but is also used elsewhere by Ramsay, near the end of his *Epistle to Robert Yarde, of Devonshire*. 'Sawney' (line 48), although the conventional name for a stage Scotsman,⁸ is also a name mentioned in other poems by Ramsay, and once, in 'The Blythsome Bridal', he is 'Sawney the tutor', implying a real-life figure (whose given name was Alexander). It could not quite be proved that the setting is Ramsay's beloved Edinburgh, but there seems little doubt that this is the 'Town' of line 49, partly because the 'Marse' (or 'Merse'; from 'marsh') of line 46 was the name of the nearby region of Berwickshire lying

between the Tweed and the Lammermuir Hills. And so one could continue; but the most Ramsayan feature of all is, of course, the language.

Ramsay was not the only Scot to imitate Horace, whose customary designation as an ‘honorary Englishman’ in this period may be in need of revision. John Corbett has recently characterized the Scottish Horatianism of the early eighteenth century as ‘focuse[d] on the Roman poet’s moral seriousness and his sense of urbane comradeship’,⁹ and the second part of this formulation seems apt here, though I shall press further on the point in a moment. Yet this emphasis on comradeship and conviviality was not unique to Scottish responses, as can be judged from the fact that Horace’s Epistle 1.5 was regularly translated and imitated by non-Scottish writers too. This Latin poem was simply part of the cultural vocabulary of the educated male of the day, just as other Horatian poems regularly came to mind when writers both professional and amateur had occasion to compose poems of, say, salutation, or of lost love. Ramsay’s own limited schooling would have involved no drilling in Latin, however, and he admitted in the Preface to his 1721 *Poems* to ‘understand[ing] *Horace* but faintly in the Original’.¹⁰ It is notable that he committed himself nevertheless to producing these imitations, though not to publishing them all – a point to which we shall return. His grasp of the Horatian poems behind them, probably dependent, as his editors have surmised, on ‘the study of translations and the advice of friendly Latinists’ (*Works*, IV, 118), seems adequate in this case, although, since he has decided to embellish, suppress, and otherwise adjust many details, we cannot tell what Ramsay made of many of the nuances.

I do not propose to undertake here a detailed analysis of Ramsay’s imitation, nor of its relationship to Horace’s poem, but a few notes on the major decisions he has taken may be in place. In the following discussion Philip Francis’s later eighteenth-century translation of Horace, which became standard and was considered by Samuel Johnson the best English version of Horace overall, is used for comparison.¹¹ Horace warns his invitee that the food

will be plain, but Ramsay's 'Kale ... and coars ote Cake' (2) seems extreme, and when Horace's wine is replaced by 'Berwick ale' (6) we may begin to suspect the poem is in the territory of parody. It turns out this is not its general mode. Ale is sometimes the specified drink in other contemporary imitations of Epistle 1.5; it is, after all, the procedure of imitations to offer equivalents in another time and place, and claret, say, might well have seemed too expensive a beverage for equivalence (Horace's wine is indifferent: he describes it as 'nor old ... nor excellent', as Francis puts it). But Ramsay's invitation could have offered some less homely food than kale to match the dazzling table linen and the 'serviteurs' appearing later on, and even the oatcakes are made 'coars' ones. The gap has arisen because Horace's observation that the food will be no fancier than vegetables or 'herbs' (Francis writes 'Herbs alone') has suggested the 'kale', while the formality of the dining arrangements later in Horace's poem has been considerably exaggerated. Horace mentions no servants, and expresses the decency of the table in much more muted terms. Ramsay's promise of 'Clean snaw-white Nap'ry' (34) corresponds to an undertaking merely that soiled linen will not be used (Francis has 'That no foul Linen wrinkle up the Nose'). Hence, in Ramsay, a degree of luxury sits incongruously with the food of the poor, though it helps that the luxury is qualified ('not siller', 37).

Ramsay next introduces a figure named Meg, who speaks in line 8: 'Ne're fash, quo Meg, S^r aw Thing shall be right'. To judge by the 'Sir' she is a servant. No such figure and no such line appear in Horace's poem; why create her? Perhaps because direct speech and dialogue will allow much more colloquial language than an epistolary poem could admit: a letter-writer does not use an expression like 'Ne're fash'. This explanation would be consistent with an intention to read or perform the poem. But it is a brief effect: line 9's 'Y^r Hon^r', by repeating the form of address used in line 1, signals a return to the voice of the host. And at this point the host draws on the vocabulary of previous *carpe diem* poems, notably

some of the extremely well-known translations of classical texts by Dryden and Cowley. Thus Ramsay combines with the strongly Scottish lexis ('fash', 'sare', 'gar') and invented Scottish detail (elders in kirk) echoes of such memorable poems as Dryden's version of Horace's Ode 3.29, in which Maecenas is urged to 'Give thy Soul a loose' (21; compare Ramsay's line 12), and Cowley's version of the Anacreontic poem 'The Epicure', which proposes 'Let's banish business, banish sorrow' (11; compare Ramsay's line 13). These poems were so well known in the earlier part of the eighteenth century that Ramsay may be said to allude to, rather than merely echo them: a reader (or hearer) of this composition might well have recognized the words and known where they came from. Eighteenth-century writers were fond of such intertextual effects, which are not inappropriate in an imitation like this.

With the triplet which finishes at line 17 this passage ends; triplets were often so positioned as to conclude a passage, and a printer might well have indicated by indentation a new verse paragraph immediately following. And indeed it would have been inadvisable to prolong this excursus further, given the danger of losing touch with the Horatian poem (recognizing Ramsay's variations on which would have given an eighteenth-century audience much of its pleasure). Yet once again from line 18, Ramsay's words are at an angle to the Latin, and decidedly less genial in mood. The Horatian poem is governed at this point (lines 12-15 of the Latin) by the *carpe diem* theme: 'What good to me is wealth if I cannot use it?' the host asks; self-denial only enriches one's heir, so let us take our pleasure. In Ramsay's version the emphases are almost reversed: his host's disdain for the hoarder comes first, and his recourse to the 'confort' of the 'Topet hen' almost seems to be his way of drowning these negative feelings.

Ramsay is content to echo the next passage of the Latin, in praise of wine, more closely. For both poets, wine brings to light what is hidden in men's hearts. 'The Cabnett of the Secret

Heart' (26) is a decidedly more expressive formulation than Francis's simple 'the secret soul', though at a further remove from Horace's even simpler 'operta recludit' ('brings to light secrets'). Wine, for both poets, makes the coward brave, makes our hopes seem realizable, reduces or removes burdens from our hearts, and makes us feel free. It would be very hard on Ramsay if, for this last point, we were to prefer Francis's prosaic but accurate 'Even in th' oppressive Grasp of Poverty | It can enlarge, and bid the Wretch be free' to his 'The starvd drunk wretch eats visionary Beefe | And a Cock Laird's much greater than his Chief' (30-1), even if Horace's language is as abstract and general as Francis's - he asks 'contracta quem non in paupertate solutum?' (20). A satirical tinge colours such lines in the imitation, but only at one point in this passage does Ramsay decisively darken the Horatian mood, when he speaks of 'Art' in line 27. As well as taking the load from anxious hearts, Horace says, wine teaches or encourages us to try new arts – in Francis, 'from our hearts | Drives the dull Sorrow, and inspires new Arts'. It seems unlikely that Ramsay has misunderstood Horace, who clarifies his point in a line Ramsay omits but could not have overlooked: 'fecundi calices quem non fecere disertum' (19; 'Who has not been made eloquent by the flowing bowl?'). Ramsay, then, is probably just expressing a more sombre moral vision when, instead of describing wine as inspiring eloquence, he merely says it puts a stop to the 'art' of concealment, or dissembling - it 'makes us honest spight of all our Art' (27).

After the eulogy of wine we return to the invitation – another point at which a printer would probably have signalled the start of a new verse paragraph. But the next two lines (32-3) are not a version of anything in the Latin text. Where Horace says 'Haec ego procurare et idoneus imperor et non invitus' (20-1; 'I am able and not unwilling to provide these [following] things'), and Francis translates rather blandly 'Chearful my usual task I undertake', Ramsay begins to specify the things/task - 'Expect ne daintys, But be sure to find | An hearty welcom, & things geud in kinde'. By thus characterizing the provisions before

enumerating them, Ramsay gives his reader a more explicit steer, even more explicit if we know (as the eighteenth-century reader would know) that ‘dainties’ is a word heavy with connotations in the retirement poetry of this era. Dainties are the luxury foods that fine folk eat, but there are also ‘unbought dainties’ – practically a set phrase – which are available to all. In Dryden’s version of Horace’s Epode 2 (1685), the husbandman’s wife provides ‘wine to drive away the cold, | And unbought dainties of the poor’ which are preferable even to oysters and turbot.¹² Ramsay envisages his host as offering neither kind of dainty. But there is an element of repetition here, since line 6 has already stated ‘Ise promise nae fine things’.

The ensuing eighteen lines of Ramsay’s poem, 34-51, equate to a mere seven lines of Horace’s (22-8). Francis’s translation, approximating much more closely to the Latin, shows where Ramsay has concentrated most effort. Francis’s host undertakes

That no foul Linen wrinkle up the Nose;
 That every Plate with bright Reflexion shows
 My Guest his Face; that none, when Life grows gay,
 The social Hour of Confidence betray.
 That all in equal Friendship may unite,
 Your Butra and Septicius I’ll invite,
 And, if he’s not engag’d to better Cheer,
 Or a kind Girl, Sabinus shall be here.

Francis is obliged to translate, but Ramsay is committed only to imitating – a difference John MacQueen rightly stresses in the context of Ramsay’s printed Horatian imitations.¹³ Particularly towards the end of this passage, he takes advantage of this freedom in order to localize and concretize to considerable effect. Where Horace hardly offers more than three

guests' names, Ramsay invests these figures with enough individuality to conjure up something of the ethos of their social group, as well as to suggest the atmosphere of any dinner they might all attend. A better term for this atmosphere than 'urbanity' would be Daiches's phrase 'male conviviality' – 'a mode', as he sees it, 'in which Ramsay was particularly successful'.¹⁴ When his printed Horatian imitations appeared in 1721, Ramsay would have been about thirty-six years old, perhaps an age similar to that of the friends referred to here (the reappearance of at least one of their names elsewhere in his poems making it seem plausible that they were identifiable real-life figures). A further dimension is added to Ramsay's imitation of Horace's Epistle 1.5 if we imagine its author performing a reading in the presence of this very group of friends.

I referred previously to other early translations and imitations of Horace's Epistle 1.5. Some of these can of course be found in the more complete printed collections of Horace in English of the period, such as Thomas Creech's *Odes, Satyrs and Epistles of Horace* of 1684.¹⁵ Others, however, were never printed, and remain in manuscript to this day: their authors, like Ramsay, seem to have intended them solely for private use.¹⁶ Yet these are very much part of the history of Horace's reception, in some ways more revealing than the more formal works belonging to the print record. One thing such responses reveal is that a large number of people of many different ranks and conditions of life participated creatively in a widespread culture of translating and imitating ancient Latin poetry, particularly in the decades around 1700, a culture which has gone almost completely unexamined.¹⁷ This culture is at least as important a context for Ramsay's Horatian imitations as printed predecessors like Creech.

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¹ See <<http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3443179>> (accessed 3.9.2016). The text discussed here appears on fols 37^r-38^r.

² The standard account of Ramsay's Horace appears in the standard edition: Burns Martin *et al.* (eds), *The Works of Allan Ramsay*, 6 vols (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1951-74; hereafter *Works*), III, 108-19. For the influence of Ramsay's Horatian imitations on later eighteenth-century Scottish writers see John Corbett, *Written in the Language of the Scottish Nation: A History of Literary Translation into Scots* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1999), pp. 105-12.

³ Roger Greaves (ed.), *Allan Ramsay's Fables and Tales: A New Collected Edition from his manuscripts and prints*, 2 vols (Paris: Jacques Reich, 2011), II, vii.

⁴ There may in this case be an additional element of faux-antique spelling, a kind of quasi-Spenserian Gothicization, raising further issues.

⁵ For texts of the manuscript imitations left unprinted during Ramsay's lifetime see *Works*, IV, 340-3. For the practice of Ramsay's printer Ruddiman see *Works*, III, v.

⁶ MS Osborn c229/1, James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

⁷ The errors I note would be compatible with a hypothesis that Johnson acquired his copy of the poem from an acquaintance or correspondent at few removes from Ramsay. Johnson, an almost exact contemporary of Ramsay's, had a large correspondence through his work for the Gentleman's Society and the Society of Antiquaries, and was acquainted with several Scots in London as well as the literary figures who frequented Button's coffee house.

⁸ See David Johnson, *Music and Society in Lowland Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 130-1. Later in the eighteenth century 'Sawney' became a derisive name for Scotsmen in general.

⁹ Corbett, p. 102.

¹⁰ *Works*, I, xviii; roman and italic fonts reversed.

¹¹ Francis's version of Epistle 1.5 is quoted here from its first printing in his *Epistoles and Art of Poetry of Horace. In Latin and English* (London, 1747), pp. 41-5.

¹² Dryden, 'From Horace, Epod. 2d', 71-2; Paul Hammond and David Hopkins (eds), *The Poems of John Dryden*, 6 vols (Harlow: Longman, 1995-2005), II, 383.

¹³ John MacQueen, *The Enlightenment and Scottish Literature*, Vol. 1: *Progress and Poetry* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1982), pp. 103-4. His further suggestion that the 'more Epicurean' of Horace's works provided Ramsay with 'an effective instrument' for mocking the ways of a predominantly Calvinistic society seems relevant to the present imitation as well as the others, though this is not the main purpose here.

¹⁴ David Daiches, *The Paradox of Scottish Culture: The Eighteenth-Century Experience* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 25.

¹⁵ Creech's translation was reprinted many times, on occasion with an accompanying Latin text, and is just the type of work Ramsay might have used to assist him, though I am not aware of any attempt to establish whether his Horatian poems ever echo or otherwise reflect it.

¹⁶ For another example, addressed to a friend by one John Joynes and belonging to the 1650s, see Victoria Moul, *Jonson, Horace and the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 59-62.

¹⁷ This culture is represented in a substantial collection of unprinted manuscript verse of this era assembled in my forthcoming edition of *Newly Recovered English Classical Translations, 1600-1800* (Oxford University Press).