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I Introduction: Horace in the Eighteenth Century

While I originally intended to study renderings of Homer's, Vergil's, and Horace's sea passages in Creech, Dryden, and Pope in general, the sheer multiplicity of such passages and translations quickly forced me to limit my overview on two fronts. First of all, it became apparent that merely looking at translations of sea passages is not particularly interesting. If the sea is calm, it is calm, if it is blue, it is blue, if there are birds and fish, so much the better. It therefore occurred to me that the more interesting cases of translation are those that can be read as more than just relatively accurate translations, those that infuse the sea and the related nautical metaphors with astonishingly topical eighteenth-century subtexts, again affirming the relevance of nautical metaphors - the state as a ship to be carefully steered through dangerous waters - in political discourses of all times. And Horace alone furnishes enough examples of poems with a maritime theme or nautical metaphorical patterns and inspired quite enough translations and imitations throughout the ages. In the first book of the Odes alone, there are three poems consistently employing maritime and nautical imagery (I, iii; I, xiv; I, xvii). Additionally, more than a third of the poems resort to nautical and maritime vocabulary, images, and metaphors occasionally. But though there are several Sea Poems in Horace, Ode xiv from the first Book seemed especially appropriate. Given the analogy it establishes between the state and a ship, it easily lends itself to topical adaptations. After briefly discussing Horace's original, I will therefore look at the versions of Thomas Creech (1684) and of Christopher Smart (1767), before I discuss Swift's adaptation from the mid-1720s in greater detail.

The ubiquity of Horace as a cultural icon in the eighteenth century is overwhelming: as a poet whom every schoolboy had to translate and who was so frequently translated into English that one sometimes wonders whether Horace is not really a minor eighteenth-century English poet, with flashes of greatness when masters of translation take up his cause and try their hand at his poems. Indeed, there are so many complete and partial translations of Horace from the Renaissance to the late twentieth century - but especially in the Restoration and the Augustan Age - that H. A. Mason's comment that Horace should be seen as "an integral part of English literary experience" seems rather apt. Thomas Creech's translation alone, The Odes, Satyrs, and Epistles of Horace, which was first published in 1684, went through six editions between 1684 and 1743 and can therefore be said to be the dominant translation of Horace in the first half of the eighteenth-century. The second enormously successful eighteenth-century version, the Poetical Translation of the Works of Horace by Philip Francis, published between 1743 and 1746, went through nine editions until 1791. Carne-Ross and Haynes justly call Francis "the Horatian translator-general of the second half of the eighteenth century ... who has good claims to be considered the best translator of Horace," citing Johnson's praise that "Francis has done it best; I'll take his, five out of six times, against them all."

Conceptually, one might distinguish five kinds of translation, imitation or adaptation, of Horatian poems - or of any classical poem, for that matter:

The first kind would be a close rendering of a text without any updated topical references. To a greater or lesser extent, these may do justice to potential political subtexts of the original. Most complete translations of Horace, such as those of Creech or Smart, are likely to fall into this group.

Secondly, there are more or less faithful translations of individual poems; quite often, these will have been chosen because the poem seemed suggestive in one sense or another. An interesting Victorian example is William Gladstone's translation of Horace's Ode i, xiv, whose political subtext seems to have appealed to the Victorian statesman. If a poet chooses to translate one particular text, it is safe to suspect some kind of topical interest - unless, like Dr Johnson, one translates Greek poems into Latin to kill time during sleepless...
nights. There are, of course, innumerable translations of individual Horatian texts.

The third kind, and the one that interests me most in this essay, is the free adaptation that remains closely modelled on one specific classical poem but at the same time is infused with contemporary references. Such imitations of Horace with either veiled or explicit topical (political) references are frequent in the eighteenth century. Thomas Tickell, for instance, published a version of Ode, I, xv, which he applied to the Earl of Mar’s Jacobite rebellion of 1715. Some of Pope’s and Swift’s imitations of Horace belong here, too, but apart from Swift’s imitation of Ode, I, xiv, these are not Sea Poems.

To the fourth category belong poems that are loosely inspired by Horace without being patterned on one specific text. An interesting example is Samuel Johnson’s 1773 Latin Ode to the Isle of Skye, a poem that has frequently been praised, though it has hardly received any scholarly attention.

The fifth, and last, kind comprises poems loosely inspired by classical models without being adaptations of one specific text or even of one classical author. Edward Young’s 1728 “OCEAN. AN ODE. OCCASION’d By His MAJESTY’s late Royal ENCOURAGEMENT of the Sea-SERVICE. To which is prefix’d, an ODE to the KING: And a DISCOURSE on ODE,” is a case in point (Foxon Y94-96). Horace is one of the more obvious models; and in the accompanying “DISCOURSE on Lyric Poetry,” he is praised with “Pindar, Anacreon [and] Sappho” as one of the “great Masters of Lyric poetry among Heavens writers.” As far as Sea Poems are concerned, William Cowper’s Latin and English “On the Loss of the Royal George” and “In submersionem navigii cui Georgius Regale nomen inditum,” both written in 1782–83 and loosely based on classical patterns, deserve a mention.


See The Latin and Greek Poems of Samuel Johnson: Text, Translation, and Commentary, ed. Barry Baldwin (London, 1995), pp. 97–102. Among the texts in this collection obviously modelled on classical sources are several poems with a “sea” theme; see, for example, Johnson’s epilogue to Horace’s Carmen Saeculare (p. 120), as well as Johnson’s translations into Latin from the Anthologia Graeca (see, for instance, pp. 208, 209, 211, 219).

The only article I have been able to find is one on a potential error in the Latin grammar; see Paul Jeffrey-Powell, “A Grammatical Error in Horace’s Ode on the Isle of Skye (‘Posti profundis clausa recessurus’),” Notes and Queries, 233 (1988), 190–91.


Cowper, Poetical Works, eds Milford and Russel, pp. 544–45.

II Horace’s Ode, I, xiv and the Versions of Creech and Smart

In Ode xiv of the first Book, Horace addresses a ship tossed about by floods and storms, oars torn away, sails rent, the mast broken, and admonishes it to seek a safe haven:

O Navis, referent in mare te novi
Fluctuat o qui agis? fortiter occupa
Portum, nonne vides, ut
Nudum remigio latus,
Et malus otieri saucius Africo,
Vix durare curis:
Possest imperiosius
Aqua? Non tibi sunt integra lintes;
Non die, quos iterum pressa voces malo.
Quaeris Petica pinus,
Silve filia nobilis,
Jacetes genis, & nomen insulast,
Nim pictus transus navis puppis
Fidit tu, nisi ventis
Debes ludibrum, cave.
Noper sollicitum quam mihi tardantium,
Nunc desiderium, curaque non levit,
Interfusa silentes
Vites sequora Cycladas.

Prose Translation:

O ship, back into the sea new floods will pull you.
O what are you doing? Strive for the port. Do you not see how your sides are naked and bereft of oars,
and how the mast, struck by the African storm,
and the yards, groan, and bow, without cables the keel can hardly withstand the overwhelming flood? Your sails are no longer whole,
no Gods you could call upon in your distress. And though you are a Pontic pine,
noble daughter of the woods,
you boast your lineage and your name in vain:
the fearful sailor will not trust a painted ship.
You, if you do not want to be the sport of the winds, beware.
Recently my unrest and my care,
now my desire and my burning worry,
between the glittering
Cyclades avoid the sea.

Allegorical interpretations of this Ode have always been common. As early as the middle of the first century, Quintilian noted in his discussion of “allegory” that “Horace here says ship for republic, floods and tempests for civil wars, port for peace and unity.”14 Franckel adduces numerous Greek and Roman sources to make clear that nautical metaphors like this had long been established in political contexts. The Ode is strongly indebted to

14Quint Horatii Flacci Opera, ed. James Talbott (Cambridge, 1699), pp. 22-23. This is one of two editions in Swift’s library as he is likely to have used; I have inspected the copy of the Ehrenpreis Centre for Swift Studies, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster. For Horace in Swift’s library, see Passmann and Venken, II, 905. I have collated Talbott’s text with Odes and Epodes, ed. Paul Shorey and Gordon J. Laing (Pittsburgh, 1969 [1919]) and Quinti Horatii Flacci: sämtliche Gedichte, Lateinisch-Deutsch, ed. Bernhard Kyzler (Stuttgart, 1992), pp. 36-37. Accidental omissions appear, but there are no variants.

Alcaeus, one of the oldest Greek lyric poets, more specifically to a song about a ship in a tempest that has always been read as an allegorical reference to the state.¹⁵

Most scholars argue for a time of composition of Horace's Ode in either 35 or 33 B.C. Different situations within the Roman Civil War of the 30s have been proposed, it is true, but it is universally accepted that the poem must have been written in the last years before the establishment of the Empire under Augustus. It is important to observe that "Horace preferred not to lift at any point the veil of the allegory."¹⁶

Let us briefly look at the opening of Creceh's 1684 translation of this Ode:

*To the Common-wealth which was now ready to engage in another Civil War.*

And shall the raging Waves again

Bear Thee back into the Main?

Oh what dost do! put close to shore,

And never trust the Ocean more:

Thy Oars are gone, and Southern blasts

Have rent thy Sails, and turn thy Masts.*¹⁷

It is interesting to see that Creceh should have supplied an interpretative headnote that points to allegory, but his translation, not only in these first lines, is entirely free of any political overtones. As in Horace's original, at no point is the allegory lifted within the text. Had this translation been a separate publication, and had it been published only four years earlier, in 1680, one might have taken it as a veiled reference to the Exclusion Crisis. But as it stands, it is devoid of any political topicalization. As the editors of *Max Treu, ed., English* years earlier, in *The Odes, Satyrs, and Epistles of Horace: Done into English* (London, 1684), pp. 21-22. Copy in the Ehrengesellschaft, Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität, Münster.

His 1767 rendering of Ode xiv into octosyllabic couplets is a masterful translation, extending Horace's dense 20 lines to a mere 24 without losing anything significant:

²⁴See Fraenkel, *Horace*, p.155. The fragment is known as 46a D. For an edition of the fragments, see Max Tren, ed., *Alkaios: Griechisch und Deutsch*, 3rd ed. (München, 1980); for this particular song, see pp. 42-43 and 161-62.

²⁵Fraenkel, *Horace*, p.156.


²⁹See also Williamson's note, p. 387.

³⁰The reference is to Arthur Sherbo's edition (see note 19).
Swift's poems are imitations of Horace.23 But while Swift's "Horace, Epistle VII, Book I: Imitated and Addressed to the Earl of Oxford"24 and some of the other Horatian imitations have frequently been discussed, his imitation of Horace I, xiv, entitled "Horace, Book I, Ode xiv, O navis, referent, &c., Paraphrased and Inscribed to Ir—d" has hardly been studied in any detail;25 there is virtually no extended discussion of the poem, let alone one placing it within its historical contexts of mid-1720s Irish politics.26 One reader, to be sure, has called it "one of the most beautiful, but hardly known poems of Jonathan Swift."27 Like him, I would maintain that the poem does deserve some attention. Although sometimes believed to have been written as early as 1724, the poem is most frequently thought to have been written in 1726. Based on my reading of the text, I will argue that 1726 is indeed the much more likely date. What we do know for certain is that it was first printed in a small octavo pamphlet in Dublin some time in 1730 (Foxon S859) and reprinted in The Daily Post-Boy in London on 14 August of the same year.28

Let me address a number of key passages and suggest a reading:

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26For the contemporary Irish background, see, for example, Oliver W. Ferguson, Jonathan Swift and Ireland (Urbania, 1962); Sabine Bales, The Pamphlet Controvrei about Wood's Halfpence (1722-25) and the Tradition of Irish Constitutional Nationalism (Frankfurt, 2003). Neither of these discuss the poem.


28For the publication history, see Poems, ed. Rogers, p. 752, and Poems, ed. Williams, III, 769.
25, 59). While lines 9 to 12 and half of line 13 are a close paraphrase of lines 1 to 4 of the Latin original, lines 13 and 14 appear to refer to the resignation of Viscount Midleton in 1725 who, after having been Lord Chancellor for over a decade, had to resign in 1723. Midleton was replaced by Richard West, an Englishman without any solidarity and interest in Irish autonomy. The second "faithful counsellor" who was lost is Thomas Lindsay, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland since 1714, who died in 1724. He was replaced by Hugh Boulter, another Englishman. Boulter, as everyone knew, "devoted himself to George I, complied blindly with the ministerial Whigs, and was determined to wipe out any smudge of independence in his new country." Finally, the "Mast, which like an aged Patriot stood" (I. 15) is the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr William King, with whom Swift had a complex and rocky friendship that was probably at its most harmonious at about this time, the Wood's Halfpence affair having brought them closer together. King had been born in 1650 and had been in office since 1703. He was an old man in his mid-seventies by now, and in deteriorating health. Another Englishman was made Lord Chief Baron, one of the highest judges. Swift regarded all of these newcomers as turncoats serving English interests.

While this identification has long been accepted, those who argue for a date of 1724, before these losses occurred, have suggested that the Midleton parallel might be coincidental and that the reference is only very general. But that is not likely, because a second reference to Midleton later in the poem is even clearer:

Weary and Sea-tick when in thee conf't,
Now, for thy Safety Cares distract thy Mind,
As those who long have stood the Storms of State,
Retire, yet still bemoan their Country's Fate. (ll. 57-60)

We know that Midleton after his forced resignation as Lord Chancellor in 1725 continued to express his discontent with the situation in Ireland. He was indeed someone "who long ha[d] stood the Storms of State," who then "retire[d], yet still bemoan[ed his] Country's Fate." 36


Returning to the early section of the poems, the next four lines provide another instance of Swift's masterfully translating almost verbatim from Horace and then moving on to an interpolation that applies the passage to contemporary Ireland:

Your Cible's burst, and you must quickly feel
The Waves impetuous entering at your Keel.
Thus, Commonwealths receive a foreign Yoke,
When the strong Cords of Union once are broke. (ll. 19-23)

The first two lines closely translate Horace (6-8), while lines 21-22 proceed to Ireland's present situation, in which it was obvious that Irish disunity opened the way for yet more control and pressure from England. We know that Swift constantly complained about this self-defeating disunity and Ireland's internal quarrels. After the victory in the Halfpence Controversy, it was quickly becoming apparent that the unique harmony in opposing Walpole's plans was short-lived. On the other hand, the "strong Cords of Union" were indeed Ireland's only safeguard against pressure from England. Boulter's report on the coinage crisis plainly revealed that the major threat to English supremacy "was the unity of the nation, because if that held and was cleverly directed, no English government could force its measures on Ireland." And against this backdrop, lines 25-32, too, become very specific and also directly relate to the coinage crisis:

As when some Writer in a public Cause,
His Pen to save a sinking Nation draws,
While all in Calm, his Arguments prevail,
The People's Voice expand[s], his Paper Sails;
'Gain Pow'r, discharging all her stormy Bags,
Flutter the feeble Pamphlet into Rags.
The Nation scar'd, the Author doom'd to Death,
Who fondly put his Trust in pop'lar Breath. (ll. 25-32)

I would argue that these lines are a concrete reference to Swift's success in the controversy about Wood's Halfpence: if there is internal peace and the leadership and the people are united in their opposition, the writer's "arguments prevail"—as they did with Swift's Draper's Letters. In consequence, the following passage echoes the Dean's exasperation with the Irish in many of his contemporary tracts:

A larger Sacrifice in Vain you vow;
There's not a Pow'r above will help you now;
A Nation thus, who oft Heav'n as Calam neglects,
In Vain from injur'd Heav'n Relief expects. (ll. 33-36)

36 For the history of the controversy and Swift's role in it, see Ehrenpreis, Dean Swift, pp. 187-318; and, more recently, Baltes, The Pamphlet Controversy about Wood's Halfpence, passim.

37 Ehrenpreis, Dean Swift, p. 296.

38 Schakel, The Poetry of Jonathan Swift, calls lines 33-36 "the central message of the poem." He relates the motif of sacrifice to "the Israelites' constant efforts to appease their God and to avert anticipated doom by sacrifice" (p. 162).
The same pattern of close paraphrase of Horace and its ensuing application occurs in lines 47-52. While lines 47 and 48 paraphrase line 16 of the original, lines 49-52 supply the application to people who allow themselves to be taken in by courtly festivities and forget the good of their country. Again, this could hardly be more topical in our context:

In Ship's decay'd no Mariner confides,  
Lur'd by the gilded Stern, and painted Sides.  
So, at a Ball, unthinking Fools delight:  
In the gay Trappings of a Birth-Day Night:  
They on the Gold Brocades and Sain't's rav'd,  
And quite forgot their Country was enslav'd. (ll. 47-52)

The next lines continue the model of Horatian paraphrase and contemporary application: lines 53 and 54—"Dear vessel, still to thy Steerage just, / Nor, change thy Course with ev'ry sudden Gust"—vary or paraphrase lines 15 and 16 of the original, while lines 55 and 56—"change thy Course with ev'ry sudden Gust: / Like supple Patriots of the modern Sort, / Who turn with ev'ry Gale that blows from Court"—can, I think, only be read as a reference to new dignitaries like Boulter, who were doing anything to please their English patrons, the "supple Patriots of the modern Sort" being precisely the successors of earlier "faithful Counsellors," such as Midleton, Lindsey, and King. Boulter may indeed by seen as the archetypal representative of the opportunist and turncoat, who kept sending reports on the course of the Halfpence Controversy to Walpole, slavishly waiting for instructions.

It is difficult in this context not to read the second passage as a specific reference to Midleton, who continued to "bemoan [his] Country's Fate" (l. 60) even after he was forced to retire:

Weary and Sea-sick when in thee confin'd,  
Now, for thy Safety Cares distract my Mind,  
As those who long have stood the Storms of State,  
Retire, yet still bemoan their Country's Fate. (ll. 57-60)

Again, the first two lines paraphrase Horace's lines 17 and 18. The ensuing lines 59 and 60—characteristically introduced by "as", indicating similarity and comparison—describe Horace's and Swift's "Cares" for the "Safety" of their country to contemporary politicians "who long have stood the Storms of State." The tone of doom and warning in these final lines of course echoes the tenor familiar from Swift's prose tracts on Ireland:

Beware, and when you hear the Surges roar,  
Avoid the Rocks on Britain's angry Shore:  
They lye, alas, too easy to be found,  
For thee alone they lye the Island round. (ll. 61-64)

These, I believe, are the crucial lines. What becomes apparent is a masterful adaptation: Swift closely paraphrases Horace, translating literally every single line and thought of the original. He then almost imperceptibly glides into an application of these lines—and these applications, which often sound like timeless sententious generalities, are strikingly topical references to mid-1720s Irish politics which allow us to ascertain a precise terminus post quem for the poem's composition: May 1725, when Midleton resigned and was replaced by West as Lord Chancellor of Ireland. Most likely, however, as my discussion of lines 25-32 has shown, it was written after the summer of 1725, after Swift "in a public Cause"—Wood's Halfpence—"His Pen to save a sinking Nation dr[ew]." Although his arguments had prevailed, at the time of composition of the poem, Swift was no longer hopeful for the future of Ireland, as the tone of gloom and warning in the concluding lines indicates.