

Close reader

John Donne's Horace

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Few writers' libraries survive intact for long. In John Donne's case, most of his books were sold after his death in 1631, in accordance with his will, and dispersed widely. Volumes today can be found as far afield as the Huntington Library in California and the Russian State Library in St Petersburg. Yet not all were flung so far. The Middle Temple Library in London, less than a mile from Donne's deanery at St Paul's Cathedral, holds over eighty of Donne's books, and more than 200 more have been identified in other public and private libraries. Donne's bibliographer, Sir Geoffrey Keynes, observed that stray volumes "will continue to turn up here and there, in sale rooms or on library shelves where their provenance has long remained unnoticed", and turn up they do. One such volume, the discovery of which I reported in the *Book Collector* of Spring 2012, is of exceptional literary interest. Identified at Wadham College, Oxford by the antiquarian booksellers John Bonham and Viscount William Bangor, and kindly brought to my attention by the College Librarian Tim Kirtley and the Donne scholar Peter McCullough, this is nothing less than Donne's copy of the works of the Roman poet Horace, with Donne's signature and Italian motto ("Per Rachel ho servito, & non per Lea") partially cropped yet clearly visible on the title page.

The find is an especially significant one for three main reasons. First, the volume offers a rare glimpse of Donne's study of classical poetry and poetics. In Donne's extant library, few books of poetry, or indeed any other kind of writing that might today be classed as imaginative "literature", survive. Most, rather, are works of divinity, religious controversy, law, statecraft and history – on topics often directly connected with Donne's activities first as a religious polemicist and later as an ordained minister in the English Church. Donne's Horace, then, joins his copies of Virgil (in Italian) and Ovid as the only works of classical poetry among his surviving books. Second, the Wadham College Horace contains marginal reading marks and annotations in Donne's hand, in ink and pencil, with a density rarely found in other books from his library. (This assertion is based on my examination of over 270 of the books known to have belonged to Donne.) We should be wary, of course, of reading too much into such brief notes; the thoughts that fit into margins are small ones, as Daniel Wakelin has elsewhere observed. Even so, the extent and nature of the marginalia here strongly suggest that Donne not only read Horace, but with serious and studious intent. Third, the majority of Donne's apostils focus not on the texts of Horace's poems themselves, but on the edition's Latin scholia and Renaissance commentaries. This is fascinating because it provides us, for the first time, with material evidence of a potentially crucial factor in Donne's literary development: that is, the vital formative and mediating part played by such commentaries on Donne's reading of classical poetry and poetics.

To understand the full significance of the find, it is helpful first to consider what Horace meant to Donne and his contemporaries. By the late sixteenth century, the Roman poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65–8 BCE) had come to rank alongside Virgil and Ovid at the forefront of European literary culture. In England, editions of Horace's complete works

were in plentiful supply, and his *Satires*, *Odes* and *Epistles* (including *Ars poetica*) were widely known, imitated and admired. To Donne's friend Ben Jonson, Horace was "the best master, both of virtue, and wisdom", a Stoic sage who was also the Epicurean poet of *carpe diem* and *nunc est bibendum*, who drank as he would write: "In flowing measure, fild with Flame, & spright". Jonson, who put Horace on the stage in his early play *Poetaster* (1601), and Dryden, for whom Horace was both critical authority and exemplary man of letters, were only the most well-known seventeenth-century English imitators of the poet-critic Horace. Horatian attitudes, plots and cadences are also clearly present in poets as different from each other as Thomas Campion, Henry Wotton, Thomas Carew, Robert Herrick, Henry Vaughan, Richard Lovelace, Abraham Cowley and Andrew Marvell.

But just how Horatian was Donne's poetry? For Dryden, critical of Donne's rough versification, the answer was very, remarking that

Horace's *Epodes*, and in his *Essayes in Divinity* (1614), Donne variously misquotes (intentionally, perhaps) one of the Roman poet's *Satires*, adapts a Horatian dictum and cites Horace as a historical source.

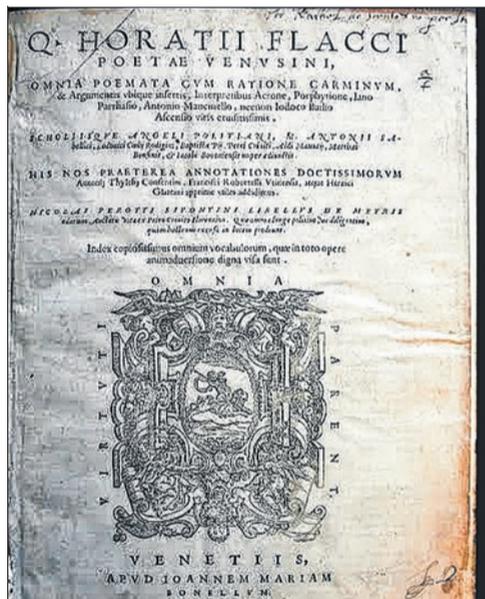
The relationship between Donne and Horace, then, is a diffuse one, and in one sense Donne merely echoes conventional pieties in his sermons when he variously calls Horace "the best Poet", "the learned Poet", or simply "the Poet". However, I have also found, in my editorial work on the new *Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*, that Donne cites, alludes to or mentions Horace more often in his sermons than he does any other classical author, including Virgil. It is certainly possible, of course, that Donne the congregation-pleasing preacher is simply pandering in these instances to fashionable and popular enthusiasm for Horace. But it is equally likely that the frequent references are simply what they appear to be: markers of the high esteem in which Donne, throughout his life, held Horace and his works.

One further tantalizing hint of Donne's affinity with Horace deserves mention. During his

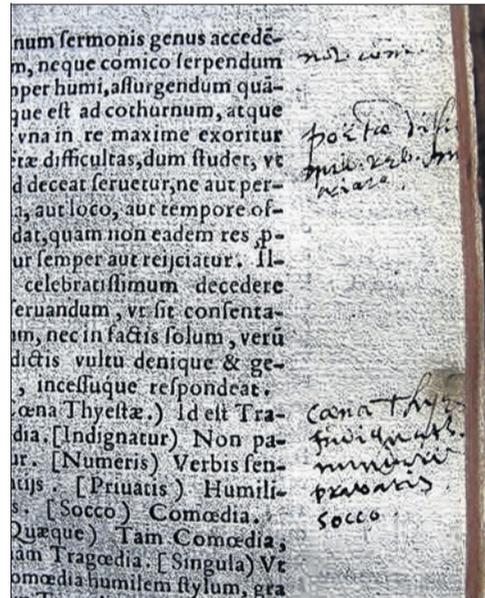
make". It has also been argued that in *Cynthia's Revels* Jonson once again based a character called Criticus (renamed Crites in the folio) on his friend Donne. Jonson may well have thought of Donne as Criticus in his preface to *Ars poetica* simply because of Donne's critical acumen and their shared satirical impulse. Yet might Donne and Jonson also have enjoyed a shared interest in Horace in general, and in *Ars poetica* in particular? And might Jonson's lost dialogue preface even have sprung from conversations that he and Donne had had about it? The discovery of Donne's Horace can't answer these questions, of course, but Donne's intensive annotation of the *Ars poetica* does at least show how intently he read Horace's foundational work of poetics.

What kind of book, then, is Donne's copy of Horace, and what sort of notes did he make in it? The Venetian edition owned by Donne was printed by Giovanni Maria Bonelli in 1562 as the eighth reprint of an edition first published in 1544. The volume was bequeathed to Wadham by the botanist and literary scholar Richard Warner in 1775, and Donne's motto and signature are located, as in other books owned by Donne, at the top and bottom right-hand corner of the title-page respectively. The volume, *Q. Horatii Flacci . . . omnia poemata cum ratione carminum, & argumentis ubique insertis*, principally intended as text for use in schools, contains all of Horace's poetic works, sandwiched between columns of collected Latin commentary, including ancient scholia as well as the explanatory notes of sixteenth-century editors. Many of Donne's characteristic marginal pencil marks are present in the pages containing Horace's *Odes*, while the pages containing *Ars poetica* and the first three *Satires* contain marginal annotations in brown ink, partially cropped. The large majority of annotations, as Peter McCullough also observed, are citational rather than interpretative or evaluative. It is probable, given the edition's intended readership, that Donne first acquired and read his copy of Horace relatively early in life (although we don't know for sure when Donne first began writing his motto in the books that he owned). The theory of early ownership and use is supported by the calligraphic evidence: the elaborateness of the initial letter "J", expansively written with many flourishes, in Donne's signature is consistent with the style in which Donne signed himself in his youth, and almost certainly dates to before his marriage in 1601.

In the first part of the book, Donne's pencil marks are confined chiefly to the so-called Parade Odes, the first nine poems of Horace's *Odes*, Book 1. Here we find topics of politics and war, love, death, wine and friendship, poetry, music and the gods; literary devices such as the *priamel* (the comparative listing of options); and types of poems such as the *propempticon* (valedictory poem) and *recusatio* (in which the poet rejects one poetic genre or style for another). Some of this we find in Donne's own writing, as we do the formal inventiveness and stylistic variety that is a distinguishing feature of the Parade Odes – all of the poems are in different metres and tones of voice, each one a subtle modulation of the urbane irony and Epicurean wisdom characteristic of Horace. Donne's reading marks, discreet pencil dashes for the most part, are particularly frequent in the margins of *Odes* 1.1, 1.2, 1.5 and 1.6. Yet here, as elsewhere in the volume, Donne's marks are invariably placed next to the Latin commentar-



Donne's signature and motto on the title page of Horace's works and, right, a detail from the *Ars poetica* section



Donne "follow'd Horace so very close, that of necessity he must fall with him". Pope too, in his rewriting of Donne's *Satires*, played up the Horatian connection, as did the mid-eighteenth-century man of letters William Mason, for whom "sage HORACE!" beamed from each line "hewed out" by "rough DONNE!" Yet Horace's presence in Donne's writing – variously, if distantly, felt as poetic model, source and creative influence – is mostly confined to Donne's *Satires* and Verse Letters, and even here, as critics have been at pains to show, Donne always reinvents whatever he borrows or imitates from the Roman poet. In a process that Greg Kneidel aptly calls "eclectic classicizing", Donne in his *Satires* synthesizes method, manner and ideas from Horace with those of other Roman poets, such as Persius and Juvenal. In his letters, Donne quotes a line from

stay with the poet William Drummond at Hawthornden Castle in 1618–19, Ben Jonson reportedly read aloud to his host his preface (now lost) to his translation of Horace's *Ars poetica*. In the dialogue preface, one of the principal speakers was called "Criticus", and Jonson famously told Drummond that "by Criticus is understood Donne". Taken alone, this remark is slender evidence of Donne's association with Horace. Jonson may well have been in his cups when he said it, and we only have Drummond's account to go on, first printed in full from a transcript in 1842. Yet Jonson's reported identification of Donne with Criticus fits what else we know of the relationship between the two men, not least Jonson's high regard for Donne's literary judgement: "Who shall doubt, Donne, where I a Poet bee, / When I dare send my Epigrammes to thee? / That so alone canst judge, so' alone dost

ies (or “Glosses” or “expositions” as Donne would have called them), rather than next to the verse itself. Although the marginal pencil marks here are too slight and indeterminate to allow specific conclusions to be drawn, we can usefully speculate about the ways in which Donne’s reading of the commentaries may have informed his understanding of the *Odes*, and even, in turn, contributed to the development of his own literary style.

Four figures stand out among the commentators or “Glossers” of Horace’s *Odes* marked up in Donne’s 1562 edition. They are: the Italian humanist pedagogue and rhetorician Antonio Mancinelli (1452–1505), who produced editions of Cicero, Virgil and other Roman writers, and whose commentary on Horace was widely published; the ancient scholiasts Pomponius Porphyryon and pseudo-Acro; and, to a lesser extent, the Flemish printer and grammarian Jodocus Badius Ascensius (1462–1535). Mancinelli’s comments, which are positioned first for each ode, refer chiefly to metre and technical matters such as definitions and analysis of the syllabic patterns of the first (or lesser) Asclepiad, a kind of Aeolic metrical line built around a choriamb, used by Horace in many of his *Odes*. We also find in Mancinelli cross-references to other Roman poets such as Virgil and brief mentions of historical context. On the evidence of his pencil markings in the *Odes*, Donne appears to be scrutinizing Mancinelli first, before moving on to Porphyryon, pseudo-Acro and Badius to pick out matters not already covered. (Donne occasionally cross-references the same lemma in two or more commentaries, but this happens rarely).

From the pattern of Donne’s reading marks, it is clear that when reading the *Odes* he focuses as much on the poems’ metrical and stanzaic forms as he does on their subjects, attitudes, tone and rhetorical style. The same is true in his reading of Horace’s *Satires* and *Ars poetica*. This is intriguing given Donne’s later reputation as a metrical innovator; famously, Jonson went so far as to remark to Drummond, “That Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging”. Traditionally, scholars such as Arnold Stein and John Hollander have attributed Donne’s conscious rejection of poetic smoothness and ornament to a variety of causes: the poetic fashions of his day, Francis Bacon’s emphasis on plain style, the harshness or discord of recognized antiquity (such as the satires of Persius), and Donne’s own preference for mimicking actual speech rhythms rather than sticking obediently to poetic metre. Yet few, if any, have considered the part played in Donne’s thought by his study of the ancient and Renaissance expositors of poets such as Persius and Horace, witnessed here by his careful and frequent pencil markings of passages and sententiae, intended for later extraction to his commonplace book.

In Horace’s *Satires*, Donne appears to have marked only the first three poems in Book 1. As elsewhere in Donne’s Horace, the verse satires themselves are rarely annotated, but the commentary often is. Horace’s *Satires* 1.1 (“Qui fit, Maecenas”) and 1.2.9 (“Ambubaiarum collegia”) aim respectively at greed and adultery – both targets for Donne’s *Satires*. *Satires* 1.3 (“Omnibus hoc vitium est”) recommends fairness and moderation in criticism of others, an attitude harder to find in Donne’s satirical writing. The sole commentator on the *Satires* in this edition is Jodocus Badius, the Flemish scholar, grammarian and pioneer printer, working in

Paris in the early sixteenth century. Badius specialized in editions of Roman classical texts aimed at the student market, often accompanied by his own highly prescriptive and comprehensive *familiale commentum*, illustrated with extensive quotation from earlier scholiasts. Donne seems to have read Badius’s commentary closely, frequently picking out words and works mentioned and noting them in ink in the margins. On numerous occasions, Donne writes “ordo” next to Badius’s text, a short form of “ordo est” or “ordo igitur est” (“the order is” or “the order therefore is”). Grammarians typically used the exegetical phrase “ordo est” when explaining complicated Latin word order; *ordo-est* glosses are common in medieval commentaries and typically preface a simplified rearrangement of the poet’s phrases and clauses. Donne’s use of this term in the margins of Badius’s commentary is significant because it indicates that he is reading Horace’s *Satires* as much for a technical understanding of their Latin style as for their matter.

Yet here, as elsewhere in the volume, Donne’s marginalia are as enigmatic as they are revealing. On the one hand, Donne’s study of Badius’s commentary, with its pedagogical rather than scholarly emphasis, conjures a picture of the young John Donne at his books, dutifully working his way through his Latin exercises. On the other hand, the ink marginalia peter out before the end even of *Satires* 1.3. Indeed, Horace’s *Satires* 1.9, often thought of as the departure point or even model for Donne’s *Satyre* 4, is entirely unmarked. Few conclusions, of course, can be drawn from such absence of evidence; nor would it be wise to suggest that Donne’s reading marks or the lack thereof constitute a complete or meaningful picture of his engagement with Horace. Yet what we can say is that the pattern of Donne’s annotations of Horace – what he chooses to mark up and how he does so – provides an intriguing snapshot of Donne’s interest in Horace at a particular formative moment in his educational and poetic development. And this snapshot, in turn, helps to connect Donne’s own thought and art, often seen as boldly original or *sui generis*, with a long tradition of literary exposition and debate, found in the commentaries themselves.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the discovery, however, is Donne’s reading of Horace’s *Epistle to the Pisones*, or *Ars poetica*. In late sixteenth-century Europe, the *Ars poetica* was the authoritative text on poetic composition, and a fixture on student reading lists. Its modern editor, C. O. Brink, has called the *Ars poetica* “a work of the imagination that makes a poetic symbol out of a literary theory”, and at least part of its appeal to poets such as Donne and Jonson, alongside its antiquity, authority and subject, lay in its epistolary verse form, style and structure. Donne’s reading marks and annotations can be found throughout the poem’s 476 lines, as Horace moves from consideration of artistic content and technique to an account of the poet himself, his aims and his calling. Here, as elsewhere, almost all of Donne’s annotations simply cite authors and references picked out from the text, rather than providing an original comment or gloss. And, once again, the majority of the ink underlinings and annotations are placed next to the Latin commentaries rather than next to the poem itself.

Donne’s reading marks and annotations are most densely clustered in the commentary of Aulo Giano Parrasio (Ianus Parrhasius, 1470–1522), an Italian humanist scholar and grammarian whose commentary on the *Ars poetica* was first printed posthumously in Naples in 1531. As Ann Moss has shown, Parrasio’s commentary does more than simply annotate Horace’s text. It also uses the *Ars poetica* as the departure point for numerous issues of literary debate, concerning fiction’s truth or falsity, the utility and morality of literature, and the challenges poets face in both assimilating and adding to the achievements of their predecessors. Donne’s interest in the question of poetry’s usefulness, and in particular in Horace’s famous dictum that pleasure is persuasive, is signalled by his ink underlining of the relevant line: “Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci” (“Every vote is won by the man who mixes the beneficial with the sweet”). In the margin of Parrasio’s commentary, Donne has underlined in ink the sentence following the lemma “Miscuit”: “Qui docuit & delectavit. Laus poëtae est, ut prosit doctrina, delectet elegantia, nam & doctam lectionem sine ulla delectatione negligere se ait Cicero in Tusculanis” (“One that teaches and entertains. It is a poet’s glory when erudition benefits having been chosen for elegance; for example, Cicero says in the *Tusculan Disputations* that he disregards a learned text that lacks any amusement”).

Did the young student Donne, as he thought about the distinctive capacity of poetry both to delight and move its readers to think, follow up Parrasio’s citation here by reaching for a copy of Cicero’s *Tusculanae disputationes*, leafing through to Book 2, Section 3, to find this repudiation of graceless philosophical works – “doctam lectionem sine vlla delectatione negligere”? It is certainly not impossible: Donne’s extended thesis on suicide, *Biathanatos*, appears in places to draw on the *Tusculan Disputations*, suggesting at the very least that he knew the work. Ultimately, of course, we simply cannot know whether Parrasio’s commentary exercised a specific or general influence on Donne’s thinking, reading and writing in this period. What we can say, though, is that Wadham College’s Horace brings to light a picture of Donne, at an early age, immersed in sixteenth-century humanist writing on matters of contemporary literary debate, such as the relative importance of instruction and pleasure, or literary style, in the relationship between poem and reader.

Above all, the discovery of this book reveals the particular significance of its commentaries for Donne’s early thinking about poetic technique. In the section of the *Ars poetica* dealing with diction as affected by arrangement, genre, emotion, character, and age of words, Donne frequently underlines the poem in ink and annotates the margins of Parrasio’s commentary. One of the words Donne underlines in the poem is “sesquipedalia”, in the lines, “Telephus, & Peleus, cum pauper, et exul uterque, / Projicit [sic] ampullas, & sesquipedalia verba” (“Telephus and Peleus often grieve in the language of prose, when, in poverty and exile, either hero throws aside bombast and words a foot and a half in length”). In the longer passage from which these lines come, Horace is suggesting that literary decorum is all very well, matching style and diction with genre as appropriate, but that sometimes even tragedy must abandon its high style of sonorous rhetoric (“ampullas”) and multisyllabic diction (“sesquipedalia

verba”) if it is to touch the spectator’s heart (“cor spectantis tetigisse”).

There is a direct link here to Donne’s own poetry, in his mocking use of the phrase “sesqui-superlative” in his dedicatory verse, “Upon Mr Thomas Coryat’s Crudities”. Victoria Moul has written illuminatingly about Donne’s use in the poem of this inkhorn term, its related adjective “sesquipedalis” and its “allusive roots in Latin satire aimed at stylistic excess”. Clearly Donne noted the word when reading Horace’s critique of literary bluster in the *Ars poetica*, observed how Persius and Martial borrowed it for their own satiric purposes, then later remembered it when composing his mock-panegyric to Coryate’s vast “pandect . . . and universal book”. Yet Donne’s annotation of Parrasio’s gloss here also reveals the diligent literary student as well as the future satirist. Following the lemma “Sesquipedalia”, Parrasio provides a useful catalogue of the “Mensurarum appellationes”, or names of twelve poetic measures, in ascending size: from “digitus, uncia, palmus, sextans, pes, and cubitus” to “gradus, passus, decempeda, actus, stadium, and milliarium”. In the margin next to Parrasio’s list, Donne has written “Mensuraru[m] appellatio[n]es”, and seems to have noted closely the twelve measures, reflecting his keen interest in metre, rhythm, form – the technical aspects of poetry – as much as the historical, contextual or interpretative. Once again we are reminded that for Donne and other poets and commentators in this period, a pragmatic understanding of how to use language and style to compose a poem was at least as important, if not more so, than theorizing about its interpretation.

To estimate the particular significance for Donne’s poetry of his close reading of *Ars poetica* is not a simple matter. Modern scholarship has found little place for *Ars poetica* in Donne’s poetic theory and practice, looking instead to understand the genesis and nature of Donne’s metrical innovations through comparison with contemporary literary fashions and trends. This approach has much to recommend it: Donne’s experiments in verse form and metre were by no means unique, and contemporary parallels can be found at home and abroad. Yet the influence of *Ars poetica* and its accompanying commentaries also have a part to play. In his work on Elizabethan satire, James Baumbach has shown how Renaissance criticism of Roman satire, by Badius, Parrasio, Francesco Robortello, Antonio Sebastiano Minturno and others shaped the ways in which English poets such as Joseph Hall, John Marston and Donne creatively imitated, adapted and tested classical satire. Katrin Ettenhuber, too, has recently shown how Donne’s reading of St Augustine often “takes place in layers, with texts being channelled through multiple levels of mediation”. It is vital, then, that we take account of the ways in which the mediation of commentators such as Parrasio, Badius, Porphyryon, pseudo-Acro and others reinforced ideas intrinsic to the ancient works they sought to explain. In the case of *Ars poetica*, these included notions of coherence, moral, stylistic and generic decorum and propriety. Donne himself, in a court sermon preached in 1621, referring to commentaries on scripture, declared that “It is the Text that saves us; the interlineary glosses, and the marginal notes, and the varia lectiones, controversies and perplexities, undo us”. But as the margins of his copy of Horace show, he hadn’t always thought that way.