Literate Shepherds in 'Hodden-Gray': Allan Ramsay and the Limits of Pastoral

By Steve Newman

'Hodden-gray', defined in the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* as 'the homespun woolen cloth of the natural undyed colour', crops up at two significant points in the work of Allan Ramsay.[1] In particular, his use of 'hodden-gray' for a figure of humility, of 'a homely unaffected individual', highlights how Ramsay both uses pastoral and also strains against its limits, providing a vision of a Scotland that can be brought into the more polite environs of commercial modernity while still maintaining a critical edge.

Towards the end of *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725; 1729), Allan Ramsay's wildly successful pastoral drama, Madge laments, with more than a touch of schadenfreude, the situation that Peggie the shepherdess finds herself in once it is revealed that her betrothed, Patie, is of gentle blood. While Patie is now going to be sent by his father, Sir William Worthy, to 'strute a gentle Spark at Edinburgh Cross', to trade 'kitted Whey/For Gentler Tea' and abandon 'The Green-Swaird dance' in order to 'rustle amang the Beauties clad in Silk', Peggie must now be satisfied with coarser cloth, 'and tak what GOD will send in Hodden-Gray'.[2]

It turns out, of course, that Peggie need not be stuck with 'Hodden-Gray'; she, too, is a gentle shepherd. In fact, she is Patie's first cousin, spirited away to the countryside by her nurse, Mause, who overheard a plot by Peggie's aunt to murder the infant. With her pedigree raised, Sir William gives his blessings and hopes that their 'love/Produce a happy Race, and still improve' (84). The story ends with Peggie singing, at Sir William's command, a song, 'the newest that I ha'e', set to the traditional tune, 'Corn Rigs Are Bonnie' (88–89). The play thus seems to be a textbook version of what William Empson identified long ago as 'covert pastoral'—see Perdita in *A Winter's Tale*—in which the a character who appears to excel all others in the country turns out to be an aristocrat in disguise,

cutting against the leveling elements of pastoral and its critique of courtly or urban excess and suggestion of the superiority of a simple country life.[3] Read this way, 'Hodden Gray' appears to be little more than a figure for pastoral dress-up, any moment of real deprivation banished by the play's vision of happy pastorality. This is in keeping with an image of Ramsay as, like Sir William in his way, an enterprising improver—even as an *arriviste* all too eager to smooth out the rough edges of Scottish culture in his pursuit of fame and wealth North and South of the Tweed.

But the welcome recent revision of this condescending view of Ramsay,[4] a revision likely to be furthered in the forthcoming Edinburgh University Press edition, finds support in a surprising element of Patie's and Peggie's presentation—their interest in literacy and schooling. Patie is reported to pursue English and Scottish literature '[w]henee'r he drives our Sheep to *Edinburgh* port', reading Shakespeare, Jonson, Hawthornden, and Cowley (52). For her part, Peggie, once reassured by Patie that he will remain faithful, declares that she, too, will improve herself through education: '[A]ll the while I'll study gent'ler Charms/To make myself fitter for my Traveller's Arms:/I'll gain on Uncle Glaud,—he's far frae fool/And he'll not grudge to put me throw ilk School,/Where I will Manners learn' (69). This might be read as an expression of their natural aristocracy, and yet this does not fully account, I think, for the specificity with which Patie goes beyond the horizons of pastoral and involves himself in the urban book trade in which Ramsay plays so important a part, or Peggie's admittedly gender-restricted idea of acquiring manners through formal schooling.

This more disruptive potential in Ramsay's pastoral is more fully on display in *A Collection of Scots Proverbs* (1737), where 'Hodden-Gray' reappears: 'A brave Man can be as meritorious in Hodden-Gray as in Velvet'.[5] This is from the dedication 'To the Tenantry of Scotland, Framers of the Dales, and Storemasters of the Hills', where Ramsay sneers at the paradoxically 'gentle vulgar' who, '*mair nice than wise*,' aim to show their superiority when they 'tartle' at 'the braidness (or as they Name it) coarse expressions'. 'Coarse' sets up the contrast between the fine velvet and the coarse 'hodden gray' that Ramsay inverts as a true reflection of value, and this weaving together of the material and the metaphorical, like 'improvement' itself, appears more subtly in 'braidness'. Its primary meaning here is 'broad' as in 'broad' or 'low' humor. But in addition to

another textile meaning through the pun on ‘braid’, it also has a specific linguistic meaning, ‘braid Scots’, emerging in the eighteenth century to refer to Scots English as a whole with the connotation of plain speaking. That the ‘gentle vulgar’ ‘tartle’ when hearing or reading these valuable sayings—that is, they are uncertain whether to acknowledge them—shows how they have alienated themselves from their national birthright in pursuit of a ‘gentle’ status they have no real claim upon. Against their dismissal of the tenantry, Ramsay praises these humbler folk in georgic terms as ‘the Bees that make the honey that mony a drone licks mair of than ye do’ and for serving in ‘defence of their Nation’s independent honours and ancient renown.’ Again, he explicitly imagines the tenantry as *readers*—like Patie, but very unlikely to benefit from a pastoral miracle revealing them to be the sons of lairds and so able to steal ‘a spare Hour, when the day is Clear, behind a Ruck or on the green Howm’, as these proverbs ensure they will be able to ‘keep up the Saul of a conversation that is baith blythe and usefou’ (a Scots version of *utile et dulce*) at country gatherings. The portability of the book means it can ‘have a Place amang your Family-Books’, allowing the tenantry’s children to ‘get them by Heart’; and he further imagines them inscribed directly into the architecture, wishing that ‘may never a Window Sole through the Country be without them’.

Ramsay thus imagines a textual economy in which ‘Landwart’ wisdom is collected and re-circulated for the profit of the tenantry. This is not to say that Ramsay intended to restrict his readers to Scottish tenant farmers; they were unlikely to have been able to afford the edition of *The Gentle Shepherd* on ‘best paper’ for the one shilling he advertises in this volume. But it is also worth remembering that the date of this dedication, October 15, 1735, comes only a few weeks after the second act of the Porteous Riots, as on the night of September 7, a mob broke into the jail where Porteous was kept, seized him, and hanged him. In his report of the first act—the response by the ‘Brutal Portuos’ to a few stones thrown at the hangman on April 14—Ramsay refers to ‘the In[n]ocent Mob’, which is a phrase I have found nowhere else in *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*.[6] In a letter to Sir Alexander Dick next June, he complains in response to the harsh reaction of Westminster ‘we of [Edinburgh] have been sore handled about the Raskall Porteous which makes ane uneversall grumble’ (207); but then immediately proceeds to speak of his personal persecution, ‘particularly attacked by a certain act against our Publick Theatres having a set of players under my management’ (207). This is a remarkable juxtaposition of an ‘innocent’ urban ‘mob’ with

Ramsay's attempt to open a 'publick theatre', blocked by more orthodox citizens of Edinburgh armed with the 1737 Licensing Act. These examples should move us to consider the complex relationship between Ramsay's imagined world of pastoral readers on one hand and the volatile world of the city mob and the more polite but still controversial theater-going public, itself indicative of his complex interventions into what comes to be called the Scottish Enlightenment.[7]'Hodden-gray', defined in the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* as 'the homespun woolen cloth of the natural undyed colour', crops up at two significant points in the work of Allan Ramsay.[8] In particular, his use of 'hodden-gray' for a figure of humility, of 'a homely unaffected individual', highlights how Ramsay both uses pastoral and also strains against its limits, providing a vision of a Scotland that can be brought into the more polite environs of commercial modernity while still maintaining a critical edge.

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