

## The Ramsay ‘ū’: minims, stress marks, and the unknown

Ramsay’s sporadic mark, or breve, above the letter ‘u’ in certain words in his manuscripts seem to have at least two functions: as stress-markers for pronunciation and, possibly, a quirk based on a much older system of writing.

If we take Ramsay’s transcription of *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* (Mitchell Library MS 308889), we see the following on the title page, being his introduction to his transcription:

Interludes  
Or Allegorical Plays made by  
Sir David Lindsay of the Mount Bar<sup>t</sup>  
Lord Lyon King at Arms  
Preceptor To King James the fifth  
of Scotland a Gentleman of much witt  
and Learning a great Satyrist particularly  
on the corrūptions of the Clergy  
from  
an old Manuscript Book belonging to  
Mr William Carmichael of Skirling [sic] Advocat  
which was written  
by Mr George Bannatyne in the time of his youth  
Anno 1568 who to his readers in  
the first page of the Book says  
Ye reverend redaris thir workis revolving richt  
gif ye get crymis correct thame to zour micht  
and curss na clark that cunningly thame wrait  
bot blame me baldly brocht this Buik till licht  
in lenderist tyme qwhen knowlege was nocht bricht  
bot lait begun to lerne & till translait  
my Copies awld mankit & mutillait

In the *OED* the etymology of ‘corruption’ is explained: “Latin *corruptiōn-em*, noun of action from *corrumpĕre* to corrupt’. In the *DSL* it is explained that the word ‘corrupt’, meaning ‘to corrupt physically, morally, or by bribery/ to break up’ dates back to around 1340. We might speculate that Ramsay, who was engaging with the Bannatyne from 1718, was thinking of the Scots version of the word and entered the breve here to distinguish the ‘u’ from the upcoming ‘m’ in the word ‘corrump’, only to change his mind and use the English word ‘corruption’, rendering the breve unnecessary. This brings us to the notion that Ramsay’s use of the breve is often *suggestive* of minim distinction.

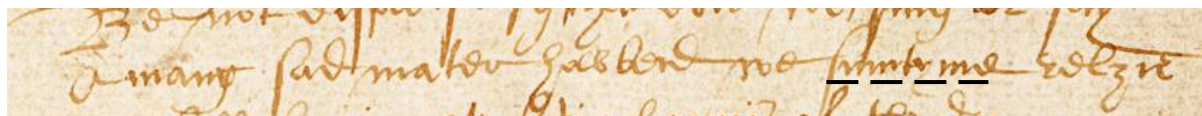


[From a twelfth century MS showing minim distinction in the form of dashes above the ‘i’]

But why would Ramsay, whose own hand is clear enough to distinguish **u**’s from **m**’s and **n**’s, use these marks at all? One answer might be that his consultation of the Bannatyne MS prompted it. As we often find with Ramsay’s work in Older Scots, he is essentially learning on the job.

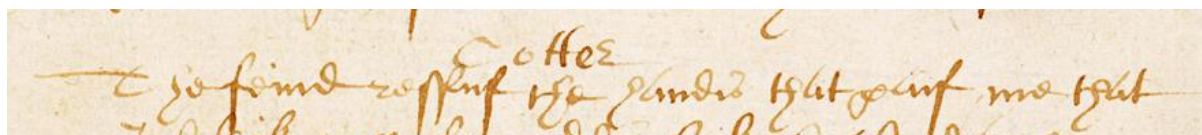
We see it again in his transcription of *Ane Satyre*:

Amang Sad matter thocht we sūmtime Relzie



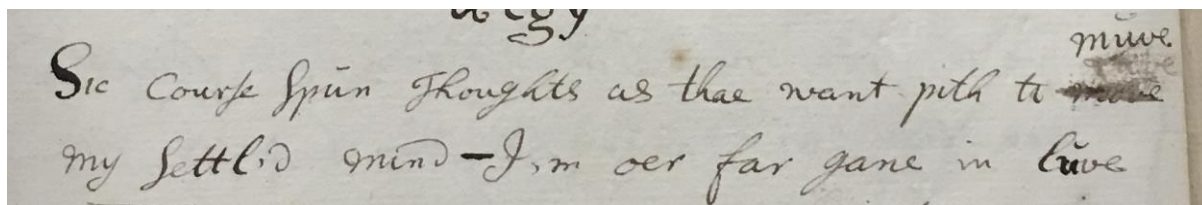
[from the Bannatyne MS.]

As we can see there is no breve here in the Bannatyne MS, which was put together in 1568. There are marks above the letter ‘a’ at certain points (see below) but this might just be a feature of style rather than a deliberate distinction or stress-mark.

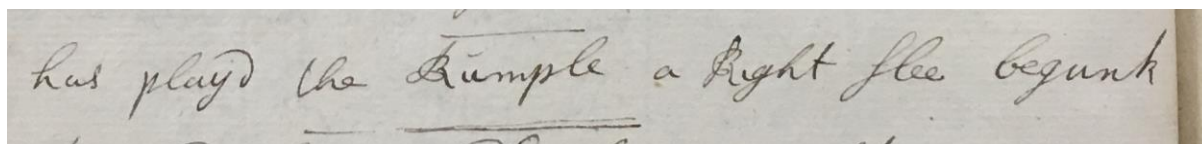


ie. ‘The feind ressaif the handis that gaif me that’

What is most curious is that Ramsay uses breves above certain instances of the letter ‘u’ in the fair copy of *The Gentle Shepherd*. Bearing in mind that this manuscript (NLS, MS 15972) was ‘written in the years 1724 & 1725 at the 40<sup>th</sup> of his age’, we can safely say that Ramsay had already seen the Bannatyne MS. In the following examples, the breve is used in instances consistent with minim distinction:

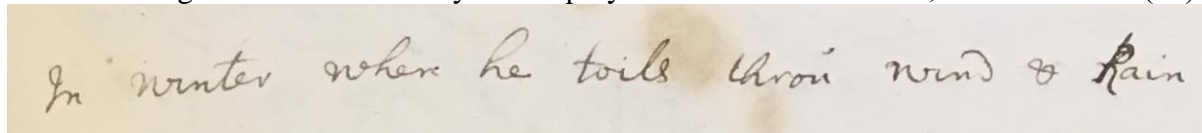


p. 20: Spün; müve; lüve

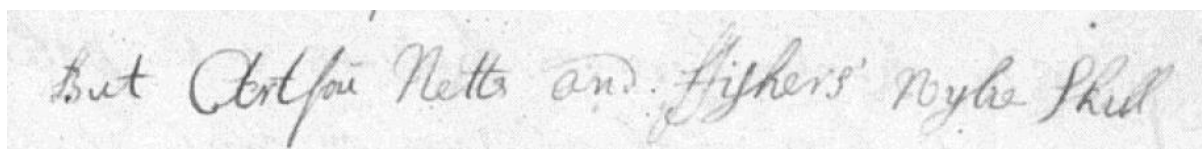


p. 28: Rümple

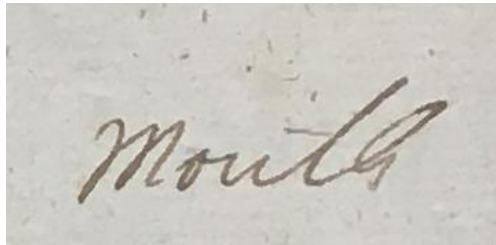
To make things less certain Ramsay also deploys ‘ü’ in other conditions, such as ‘throü’ (25):



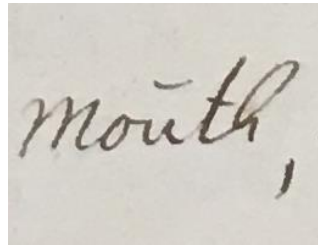
We see *this* use in an earlier work, ‘The Prospect of Plenty’ (c. 1718-21) (Huntington MS 1490). ‘Artfoü’:



We know that Ramsay had likely seen the Bannatyne in 1718 (cf. *Christ's Kirk* versions), so this different usage of the breve may still be linked in some way to his figuration of Older Scots. But in these instances of 'foŭ' we open the door to Ramsay's emphasis on sound-stress, *ie.* a prompt for the reader to hear the Scots 'fou' and not the English 'full'. We have another example of the breve as a stress-marker in 'mouth', in both the draft and fair copy MS versions of *The Gentle Shepherd*. Act 2, Scene 2, Bauldy: line 9:



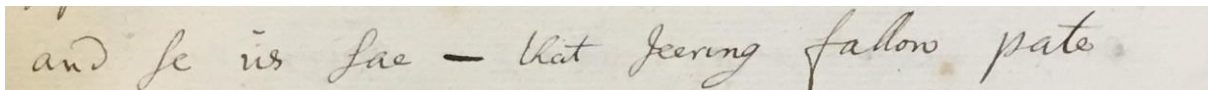
[EUL La.II.212\*]



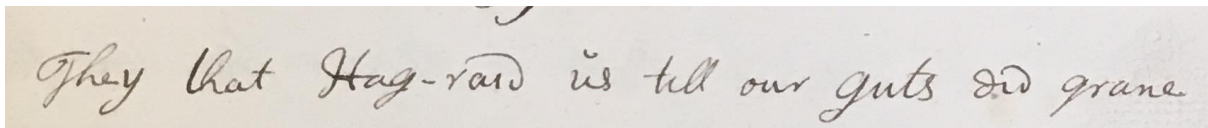
[NLS MS 15972]

Perhaps Ramsay is emphasising the sound: *foo/ foŭ; mooth/ moŭth.*

As for as conjectures go it is more difficult to explain why the breve is used in some instances of 'us':



[*The Gentle Shepherd* fair copy, NLS MS 15972, p. 17]



[*ibid*, p. 29]

In any event, we return to the conclusion that Ramsay's use of the breve is sporadic and multi-functional. In the interest of weaving this into the Textual Policy, it might be suggested that:

*In instances of manuscript collation wherein Ramsay uses a breve or other marker, include a reference to his wider use of it in the Note, making it clear that these marks were never part of the print history of his works but certainly played a part in his own development as a writer.*

[Modern example of the U-umlaut used in Scots, in William Soutar *Seeds in the Wind: Poems in Scots for Children* (London 1948 [1933]), p. 13, 19, 33, 35, 51: 'müne'; p. 28, 47: 'süne'; p. 33, 36, 37, 34: 'abüne'; p. 49: 'sün'; p. 49 'stüde'; p. 67: 'münebricht'.]

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