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Mary Jane and Patrick Scott

The Manuscript of James Thomson's
Scots Elegy



James Thomson, though Scottish by birth and upbringing, has usually been included among the English eighteenth-century poets, because his major works, *The Seasons* and *The Castle of Indolence*, are in formal Augustan language. He has seemed to stand in strong contrast to such Scots vernacular poets of the period as Allan Ramsay, and contemporary Scots critics, like their modern successors, sometimes lamented the fact that Thomson had not "trod at least in part in the paths of Allan Ramsay," so that he might have given "a classical polish to a dialect...still spoken by people of the best fashion."¹ While Augustan English was indeed Thomson's chosen literary language, it is interesting to recall that he once tried his hand at versifying in the vernacular, in the satiric poem, *An Elegy upon James Therburn in Chatto*. The textual history of this, Thomson's sole Scots poem, is complex, and is revealing both of Thomson's own attitudes towards Scots language, and of the attitudes of his various editors, all of whom proved to some extent either unwilling or unable to understand a work which violated their expectations about its author.

The *Elegy* stands last in the fair-copy holograph manuscript of Thomson's juvenile poems, the rest of which are all written in more or less standard English. The manuscript, which constituted Thomson's first literary production, had been in the

possession of the Newberry Library, Chicago, since 1890;² the library has not been able to trace the original since about 1970, but recently rediscovered a photostat of it, on which the present article is based. By the early nineteenth century, the manuscript had already been damaged, before any editor worked with it, but enough of the text remains for the reader to infer Thomson's intentions in the piece.

It is not known exactly when the elegy was written. Jamie Therburn, described by a later writer as "a drunken sot,"³ was probably a local character known to Thomson in the Borders. Chatto was the name of a hill and farmstead in Hownam Parish, near Thomson's mother's lands of Widehope, and not far from Thomson's own parish of Southdean.⁴ Thomson left the Borders to attend Edinburgh University in 1715, and the poem was almost certainly written while he was a student there. The manuscript itself has usually been dated c. 1720 or earlier,⁵ but, even though a number of the poems would probably have been composed before that date, additional evidence suggests that the fair copy was made somewhat later, in or after 1721. Another, more serious, elegy in the collection is *A Pastoral betwixt Thirsis and Corydon upon the death of Damon by whom is... Mr: William Riddell*. There was a William Riddell contemporary with Thomson in the arts courses at Edinburgh University in 1717-1720, and also in the divinity class in 1720-21, where he was a member of the same "society" or small study-group as Thomson himself;⁶ Riddell disappeared from the class records, however, after 1721, which gives a possible date for his death. If Riddell did not in fact die until 1721, then Thomson's juvenile manuscript must have been compiled shortly thereafter.

The *Elegy upon James Therburn* is clearly an imitation of Allan Ramsay's Scots mock-elegies, such as those on *Maggie Johnston* (1713), *John Cowper* (1717), and *Lucky Wood* (also 1717), which were republished as a group in 1718, and which all use the same "standard habbie" stanza form used by Thomson.⁷ Ramsay's elegies in their turn were modelled on such earlier verses in the genre as Robert Semphill's *Habbie Simson, the Piper of Kilbarchan* and *Epitaph on Sanny Briggs*, William Hamilton's *Gilbertfield's Last Dying Words of Bonnie Heck*, and Alexander Pennecuik's *William Lithgow, his Epitaph*, all of which had been included in the first or second part of James Watson's *Choice Collection* (1706, 1709).⁸ Thomson had undoubtedly read these other mock-elegies in Scots when he set out to write about James Therburn; it is likely that he was also personally acquainted with Ramsay, Hamilton and Pennecuik, while in Edinburgh. His own poem uses formulas common in the others: Therburn is referred to several times as "the

carl,' and the phrase "But what remead" (line 40, used as a short line, rhyming with "dead") is closely paralleled in Ramsay's *Maggie Johnston* (line 76). Thomson's *Elegy* as a whole, in its rather coarse outspoken treatment of a drunkard's impotence, is within the convention established by this period, of using Scots for satire and "low" comedy. If anything, Thomson's poem is more heavily satirical and harsher in tone than some of the others--certainly more so than Ramsay's rather jovial and affectionate *Maggie Johnston* and *Lucky Wood*.

The *Elegy upon James Therburn* is not, of course, of equal literary merit to these more famous mock-elegies. It is an apprentice piece, a "crude effort," which some critics have seen as proof of Thomson's wisdom in choosing formal English as his literary language.⁹ Still, the poem is not nearly so "crude" stylistically as most editors would have the reader believe, owing to the editors' misreadings, mishandling of lineation, and weak attempts at supplying missing words. The following is a straightforward transcription of the extant text with a collation of the previous editions. Lines of periods have been supplied to indicate portions of text missing from the manuscript--the right margin at the foot of p. 52 (recto), stanza 1; the left margin at the foot of p. 53 (verso), stanzas 4 and 5; and the right margin at the foot of p. 54 (recto), stanza 8. Words in brackets show Thomson's own deletions, and his insertions have been italicized.

[p. 52] An Elegy upon Ja.....
 In Chatto

Wow [0] Chatto you're a dreary place
Pale sorrow broods on [every] *ilka*....
Therburn has run his me.....
Wi.....

[p. 53] And now and now ah me! alas! [5]
 The car leys dead

2

Having his Pater noster said
He took a dram and went to bed
He fell a-sleep and death was glad
 That he had cacth'd him [10]
For Therburn was e'en ill bested
 That none did wacth him

3

For had the carl but been aware
 That meagre death who none does spare
 T'attempt sic things should ever dare [15]
 As stop his pipe
 He might have com'd to flee or skare
 The greedy gipe

4

Had he had but a gill or twae
got the vict'ry sae [20]
herburn o'er the brae
 Into the grave
ed am wae
 greet and rave

5

.....alian stout [25]
ad merry bout
hammer out
 And as I have't
ths whirl'd about
 she conceiv'd [30]

6

[p. 54] The fumbling fellow some fouk say
 Should he jobb'd on baith night and day
 She had withoutten better play
 Remained still
 Barren for ever and for ay [35]
 Do what he will

7

Therfor they say he got some help
 In getting of the little whelp
 But passing that: it makes me yelp
 But what remead [40]
 Death lent him [such] *sic* a cursed skelp
 That now he's dead

8

Therburn for ever mair farewel....
 And be thy grave baith dry.....
 And rest thy carcass soft and well
 Free frae.....
 And may no wand'ring night.....
 Disturb.....

[45]

Finis

Collation of Printed Texts:¹⁰

1. Wow] Now *G, A, O*
2. *after ilka*] *G, A, O* supply face
3. *after his*] *G, A, O* supply race (and omit me): *S-W*
suggests melancholy race (still non-metrical)
4. *omitted in G, A, O*
5. *G omits the second and now*
alas!] *alace!* *O*
6. car] carl *G, A*; carle *O*
 leys] lays *G*; lies *A, O*
10. had catch'd] had catch'd *G, A*; did catch *O*
11. e'en] e'er *G*
12. wath] watch *G, A, O*
13. carl] carle *O*
17. com'd] come *G, A, O*
19. Had he had] How he'd had *G, A*; Now had he *O*
20. *before got*] *G, A, O* supply Death would nae
21. *before Therburn*] *G, A, O* supply Nor put poor
- 23-30. *omitted by G, A, O*
- 31-42. *omitted by G*
31. fouk] folks *A, O*
32. he] be *A, O*
33. withoutten] without'en *A, O*
35. ay] aye *A, O*
37. Therfor] Therefore *A, O*
43. mair] more *G, A, O*
44. baith] both *G, A*
after dry] *G, A, O* supply and deep (which breaks the
rhyme)
46. frae] from *G, A, O*
47. *G, A, O* only give no night

The language of the poem, and Thomson's corrections to it, are of some interest, for he not only uses the formulas of the Ramsay style, but also makes substantive use of colloquial Scots, in his attempt to use colloquial verb-forms (lines 5, 10, 17 and 32), and in drawing on such words as *gipe*, *greet*, *jobb'd*, *yelp*, and *skelp* (lines 18, 24, 32, 39 and 41). The phrase "should he jobb'd" (line 32) is particularly interesting, both lexically and because the unusual elliptical syntax has misled earlier editors. In Scots, the verb "to job" has the meaning "to have illicit sexual intercourse," as in Allan Ramsay's description of "a clap / Which by oft jobbing grows a pox."¹¹ Thomson uses the word here for Therburn's sexual activity within marriage, however unsatisfactory. Since in other recorded instances, the verb is used with the male active rather than passive, the reading of previous editions, that the husband "should be jobb'd on," seems improbable; the manuscript reads instead, "should he jobb'd on," an elliptical version of "should he have jobb'd on." Such omission of "have" from the perfect after "should" is recorded in Ramsay and earlier Scottish writers.¹² In this reading, lines 31-32 are a subordinate (conditional) clause to the main clause in lines 33ff., rather than being an independent sentence as usually punctuated. Of course, Thomson's Scots is intermingled with such Augustan abstractions as "Pale Sorrow" and "Meagre death" (lines 2 and 14).

The most intriguing aspect of the language, however, is Thomson's own revision; although the manuscript was a fair-copy intended for presentation or circulation, the poet made alterations to the text of several poems. In the *Elegy*, this correction took the form of a consistent Scotticizing, making the language more obviously Scots. Thomson, the prototypical Scottish Augustan, was in this instance actually trying to add Scots flavor to the mixed Scots-English diction of the poem. In the first line, he altered the elevated English expletive "O," to the colloquial Scots "Wow" (found also, for example, in Ramsay's *John Cowper*, line 86); in line 2, he tried to lighten one of the most formal lines, "Pale sorrow broods on every [face]," by changing "every" to "ilka"; and in line 41 he made a similar correction of "such" to "sic." It was usually the case that in eighteenth century Scotland, Anglo-Scottish writers like Thomson were striving to regulate the freer usages of speech in conformity with the standards of formal written English. In this instance, however, Thomson seems to have been consciously working to make his written Scots strong enough, and "translating" English forms on the model of the written Scots in contemporary mock-elegies.

This intention has not really been fully acknowledged by

Thomson's editors. Though the text of the poem has been printed several times since the manuscript was first made public by the bookseller William Goodhugh, in 1818, the editorial treatment it has received has been in some respects misleading. The reasons for this seem to have been the editors' desire to improve the poem's language (often by reversing Thomson's own corrections, and anglicizing the Scots), a wish to repair the gaps left in the text by the manuscript damage, and a deep reluctance to associate the author of *The Seasons* with the fierceness and bawdry of the elegy. A typical instance is the way all previous editors have read Thomson's careful Scots "Wow" for the opening word, as a mere filler-word "Now." The first editor, Goodhugh himself, was perhaps also influenced by his need to make the manuscript look as complete as possible, so he would subsequently be able to sell it. Goodhugh seems not even to have recognized that the poem's stanza-form was the standard habbie, for he completed line 3 non-metrically, and simply left out the fragment of line 4, to leave a very irregular first stanza. His completion of line 44 violates the habbie's rhyme scheme. He omitted, without comment, all three of the more obviously bawdy stanzas (5, 6 and 7), making the elegy's focus drink rather than sex. He silently modified Scots spellings (in lines 6, 43, 44, and 46), and a colloquial verb-form (in line 17), as well as introducing some simple misreadings (lines 1, 11, and 19). Sir Harris Nicolas, for the Aldine edition, re-examined the manuscript and retrieved stanzas 6 and 7 (though not stanza 5), but he only occasionally corrected Goodhugh's misreadings in the other stanzas (e.g. lines 5 and 11). Indeed, he introduced misreadings of his own, again the result of anglicizing, in lines 6, 31 ("folks" for Thomson's "fouk"), 33 and 35. In 1901 Hans Schmidt-Wartenberg published, in German, his list of corrections to these earlier editions; the list was a great improvement, but, simply from ignorance of Scots, he missed several variants, and he did not provide a full text. The strangest procedure of all is that followed by J. Logie Robertson, for his Oxford Standard Authors edition of 1908. Robertson was himself, under the pseudonym "Hugh Haliburton," a writer of Scots verse, and the commentary to his earlier edition of *The Seasons* eagerly annotates the traces of Scottishness in Thomson's writing. Robertson recognized the stanza-pattern, and introduced clear signs for textual *lacunae* to make this pattern visible. For his text, however, he took over Nicolas's Aldine version more or less wholesale, and simply emended at will. Though one of his spelling alterations introduces a Scots form (line 44, "baith" for "both"), others

seem merely a kind of prettifying of the language (line 5, "alace" for "alas"; cf. line 6). In line 10, he eliminated another colloquial verb-form. This cavalier attitude towards the text (seen also in a wildly conjectural emendation to line 19) may be related to Robertson's reluctance to admit that a poem in such a mode could really be by Thomson; in his preface, he denied the authenticity of these "doggerel stanzas in the Scottish dialect," and to the text itself he appended a note, "It is scarcely possible that this is Thomson's."¹³ Perhaps it was because they did not want to look too hard at such a stanza that these editors missed the clear manuscript reading for the "jobbing" phrase, in line 32. This dismal editorial record seems to have been the result not just of the ordinary carelessness of earlier and less professional days, but of a basic unwillingness by the editors to see even a single Thomson poem, as being lewd in content, or Ramsay-like in style.

While James Thomson's *Elegy upon James Therburn* is an early work, it is certainly deserving of re-examination, and of some attempt to prune out the textual tangle which has grown around it over the years. Some at least of the metrical incompetence attributed to Thomson has been the result of editorial mistakes, and the verse shows how easily editors with an English literary background can be led astray in handling the unfamiliar forms of literary Scots. It demonstrates Thomson's early interest in and close contact with the vernacular movement in Scots literature, and in particular his early debt to Allan Ramsay, also manifested in other juvenilia and, more subtly, in several of his mature works.¹⁴ Significantly, the corrections to the *Elegy* suggest that Thomson, and his Anglo-Scottish contemporaries, though they spoke Scots freely, often found in writing that English forms came more naturally to their pens, and that written Scots was a difficult and self-conscious language, with which they had to struggle.

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NOTES

¹John Ramsay of Ochtertyre, *Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Alexander Allardyce (Edinburgh, 1888), I, 25-26.

²For a discussion of provenance, see Alan D. McKillop, "Two Eighteenth Century 'First Works'," *Newberry Library Bulletin*,

4 (November 1955), 13-23; the text here is printed by courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.

³Letter of J. Brown to the Earl of Buchan, September 30, 1818, quoted in Hans Schmidt-Wartenberg, "Das Newberry Manuscript von James Thomsons Jugendgedichten," *Anglia*, 23 (1901), p. 131. McKillop (p. 19, n. 8) argues that the name should be read "Thorburn," on the grounds that that form is commoner in Scotland.

⁴McKillop, p. 17.

⁵Schmidt-Wartenberg, pp. 135-8; McKillop, p. 20. Léon Morel, *James Thomson, sa vie et ses oeuvres* (Paris, 1895), p. 20n., conjectured that the manuscript was a much later memorial fair copy.

⁶Matriculation rolls, and Professor William Hamilton's "Notebook (1707-1727)," in the Reid Bequest, Manuscript Department, Edinburgh University Library.

⁷*The Works of Allan Ramsay*, ed. Burns Martin and John W. Oliver, I (Edinburgh, Scottish Text Society, 1945), 10-13, 14-17, 18-21; for the republication, see *Works* (1974), VI, 2, item 9.

⁸*James Watson's Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems*, ed. Harriet Harvey Wood, I (Edinburgh, Scottish Text Society, 1977), Part I, 32-35, 36-38, 68-70; Part II, 67-70.

⁹See, e.g., Thomas Bayne, "Thomson and Allan Ramsay," *Notes and Queries*, 12th series, 2 (1916), 72.

¹⁰The editions collated are: William Goodhugh, *The English Gentleman's Library Manual* (London, 1827), pp. 292-3, collated as *G*; Sir Harris Nicolas, ed., *The Poetical Works of James Thomson* (London, the Aldine edition, 1847), I, 73-74, originally published in 1830, and collated as *A*; J. Logie Robertson, ed., *The Complete Poetical Works of James Thomson* (Oxford Standard Authors, 1908), pp. 507-8, collated as *O*; Schmidt-Wartenberg as in note 3 above, collated as *S-W*.

¹¹*Scottish National Dictionary*, ed. William Grant and David D. Murison, V (Edinburgh, 1960), 336, citing Ramsay, *Works*, I, 180. No such English usage is recorded in *O.E.D.*

¹²*O.E.D.* notes parallel instances under "shall," B, II, 15b; 18b (including a citation from Ramsay's "The Wife of Auchtermuchty," st. 15, in *The Ever Green*); 19b; 19e (from *Christis Kirk on the Grene*, st. xvii, also in *The Ever Green*); and 22c.

¹³J. Logie Robertson, pp. xiii and 508.

¹⁴Mary Jane Scott, "James Thomson, Anglo-Scot: A Reconsideration of his works in relation to the Scottish Background," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 2 vols. (Edinburgh University, 1979), esp. chs. III and IV.