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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 lan-
guage, 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 con-
stituted 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 cen-
tury, 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 col-
lection 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 Thom-
son.[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 of 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 Penne-
cuik, 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 drunk-
ard's impotence, is within the convention established by this
period, of using Scots for satire and "low" comedy. If any-
thing, 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 miss-
ing 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 [O] 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   [45]
        Free frae.....
    And may no wand'ring night.....
        Disturb.......

    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 cacth'd] had catch'd *G, A*; did catch *O*
11. e'en] e'er *G*
12. wacth] 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 interest-
ing, 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 inter-
mingled 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 edi-
torial 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 him-
self, was perhaps also influenced by his need to make the
manuscript look as complete as possible, so he would subse-
quently 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 misread-
ings (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 occasion-
ally 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 correc-
tions to these earlier editions; the list was a great improve-
ment, 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 in-
troduces 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 pre-
face, 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 mis-
takes, and the verse shows how easily editors with an English
literary background can be led astray in handling the un-
familiar forms of literary Scots.   It demonstrates Thomson's
early interest in and close contact with the vernacular move-
ment 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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<div align="center">NOTES</div>

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

[2]For 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.

[3]Letter of J. Brown to the Earl of Buchan, September 30,
1818, quoted in Hans Schmidt-Wartenberg, "Das Newberry Manu-
skript 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.

[4]McKillop, p. 17.

[5]Schmidt-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.

[6]Matriculation 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.

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

[10]The 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, origin-
ally 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.

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

[14]Mary 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.