

1-1-1984

# The Sonsie Muse: The Satiric Use of Neoclassical Diction in the Poems of Robert Fergusson

Jerry O'Brien

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

O'Brien, Jerry (1984) "The Sonsie Muse: The Satiric Use of Neoclassical Diction in the Poems of Robert Fergusson," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1.

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol19/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu).

*Jerry O'Brien*

The Sonsie Muse: The Satiric Use of Neoclassical Diction  
in the Poems of Robert Fergusson



Modern criticism of Scots literature has provided us with many fine studies on the poetry of Robert Fergusson.<sup>1</sup> Among the revelations disclosed, the influence of Fergusson's Scots poems on the imagination of Robert Burns is of great significance. We know now with certainty that Burns's discovery of Fergusson's poems toward the latter part of 1784 marked the turning point in the development of his poetic sensibility from the neoclassical and sentimental strains of the eighteenth century to the forms and subjects of his native Scots. By the spring of 1785 the influence of Fergusson can be clearly felt in Burns's work, and the intensity of his creative development during the next twelve months at Mossgiel to the spring of 1786 brought forth the greatest poems of the Kilmarnock edition and some which were not printed until later.<sup>2</sup> Although Burns's letters have helped little in fixing the exact date of his introduction to Fergusson (his poems provide us with more reliable evidence), they do indicate the dramatic importance the poems had for him. In his letter to Dr. Moore of August 2, 1787, Burns wrote, "Rhyme, except some religious pieces which are in print, I had given up; but meeting with Fergusson's Scotch Poems, I strung anew my wildly-sounding, rustic lyre with emulating vigour."<sup>3</sup> And in verse, Burns remembered the debt he owed to Fergusson: "O thou, my elder

brother in Misfortune, / By far my elder Brother in the  
muse."<sup>4</sup>

Both Burns and Fergusson faced the dilemma in their creative lives of having to choose between English and Scottish poetic models. Both were keenly aware of the neoclassical tradition--Fergusson through his education at St. Andrews, Burns through his intense self-education--and both had come under the spell of the Scots literary revival initiated by Allan Ramsay in the first two decades of the century. But Ramsay himself had stopped writing by 1728, and until Fergusson's emergence no other poet had managed to keep alive the verse forms and language that Ramsay had retrieved from the medieval "makaris" with equal success. Edinburgh itself symbolized the conflicting allegiances of literary artists: on the one hand, Watson's and Ramsay's popular anthologies of Scots verse brought the native tradition back to life, and on the other, the continued popularity of Pope and the sentimentalist Shenstone made English the only acceptable language for the genteel literati.

One of the many traces of the poetic diction and sensibility of the neoclassical can be found in Fergusson's use of classical imagery. In his Scots poems these images are invariably used for satiric purposes; the artificial language of the English poets becomes a witty, self-conscious statement on the inadequacies of that language for true expression. The self-important grandeur of the classical figures of speech contrasts strongly with the "hamely" subjects and style of Scots vernacular verse. A tension is created between the two modes which could not go unnoticed and unappreciated by the poet's audience. But it also has the inverse effect at times: it can be a way of creating a formalized continuity between the two, bestowing a mock literary validity on the Scots verse by uniting it with an "approved" longstanding tradition. Fergusson's personal battles with neoclassicism as an inappropriate language for his unique creative impulses were Burns's battles, too. For each of them, the satiric use of these images becomes one way of exorcising the neoclassical demon.

Fergusson's first surviving attempt in Scots is a translation of "Horace, Ode 11, Lib. I" from Latin, and the deft juxtaposition of Scots colloquial expressions with the exalted regard demanded of the ancient model creates a delightful tension which seems to comment upon both:

Ne'er fash your *thumb* what *gods* decree  
To be the *weird* o' you or me,  
Nor deal in *cantrup*'s kittle cunning

To speir how fast your days are running.  
(ll. 1-4)<sup>5</sup>

And later:

The day looks *gash*, toot aff your *horn*,  
Nor care yae *strae* about the *morn*.  
(ll. 13-14)

The poem may be derivative in its choice of language, but it reveals a keen awareness of alliteration, assonance, and the beauty of a smooth and easy rhythm.<sup>6</sup>

Fergusson's next Scots poem, "Elegy, on the Death of Mr David Gregory, Late Professor of Mathematics in the University of St Andrews," is a comic elegy in the line of Robert Semp-hill's "Life and Death of Habbie Simson," and like its model is written in the Habbie stanza. There are two classical references in the poem, and in each case the effect is one of contrast for the sake of gentle satire on the late professor. In the third stanza, Gregory's abilities are compared to those of Euclid, the Greek master of geometry, but only to reveal that Gregory could divine "That *three* times *three* just made up nine; / But now he's dead" (ll. 17-18). In the fifth stanza, the effect is the same; we are told that Gregory can lecture equally well in architecture and "the nature o' the sector," and that "Of geometry he was the *hector*; / But now he's dead" (ll. 26, 29-30). The association of Euclid and Hector with Gregory is used to upbraid him in a mocking but affectionate way. In each case, part of the tension rests in the incongruity of the classical reference with the more common subject of the poem.

Fergusson left the safety of St. Andrews for Edinburgh in 1768, following the death of his father. Sufficiently unsure of his poetic abilities, he turned from Scots to English, and over the next three years produced a fair amount of miserable, imitative, neoclassical verse. He continued to write English poems into 1772, but by the spring of 1773 he had forsaken the neoclassical style, and, in fact, began to attack it with a passion. This must have been the most difficult part of Fergusson's short life. Intimidated, if not awe-stricken, by the Edinburgh sophisticates, he made a sort of attempt to enter their rarefied atmosphere. His frustration must have been intense. The results make for grim reading today, but they are worth examining for what they tell us of his English and classical models, and of the development of his satiric perspective.

The titles alone give us an idea of the nature and scope of

Fergusson's English verse: there are pastorals in one part and pastorals in three parts; there are pastoral dialogues and pastoral monologues; there are pastoral elegies; there is an ode to hope, an ode to pity, an ode to horror, and an ode to disappointment; there are dirges, lyrics, and songs. His later English poems are pointedly satiric in general, but in most of these earlier poems it is hard to find where sentiment stops and unintentional satire begins, so labored and insincere is the effect.

Compare, for example, these sections from Fergusson's "Pastoral III. Night." (which appeared anonymously in Ruddiman's *The Weekly Magazine, or Edinburgh Amusement* on February 21, 1771), with his first published poem in Scots, "The Daft-Days" (which appeared in the same publication, and with his name, on January 2, 1772), for a dramatic instance of his real poetic affinities:

1. While yet gray twilight does his empire hold,  
Drive all our heifers to the peaceful fold;  
With sullied wing grim darkness soars along,  
And larks to nightingales resign the song.  
(ll. 1-4)
  
2. Now mirk December's dowie face  
Glours our the rigs wi' sour grimace,  
While, thro' his *minimum* of space,  
The bleer-ey'd sun,  
Wi' blinkin light and stealing pace,  
His race doth run.  
(ll. 1-6)
  
1. The grassy meads that smil'd serenely gay,  
Cheer'd by the everburning lamp of day,  
In dusky hue attir'd, are cramp'd with colds,  
And springing flow'rets shut their crimson folds.  
(ll. 9-12)
  
2. From naked groves nae birdie sings,  
To shepherd's pipe nae hillock rings,  
The breeze nae od'rous flavour brings  
From *Borean* cave,  
And dwyning nature droops her wings  
Wi' visage grave.  
(ll. 7-12)
  
1. The weary ploughman flies the waving fields,  
To taste what fare his humble cottage yields:

As bees that daily thro' the meadows roam,  
 Feed on the sweets they have prepar'd at home.  
 (ll. 5-8)

2. *Auld Reekie!* thou'rt the canty hole,  
 A bield for mony caldrife soul,  
 Wha snugly at thine ingle loll,  
                     Baith warm and couth;  
 While round they gar the bicker roll  
                     To weet their mouth.  
 (ll. 19-24)

Could any contrast be more telling than this? To think that an artistic sensibility as unique and as confident as Fergusson's could be wasted for over three years on a poetic mode and language whose only redeeming value is his increasing dissatisfaction with it, is almost unbelievable. When we consider that he would live less than three more years, it becomes surely tragic.

In the tenth stanza of "The Daft-Days" there appears to be a lapse of style when Fergusson switches to English to express the "serious sentiment" of the poem, a weakness to which Ramsay often fell prey, and Burns, too, on occasion. The perceived inadequacies of Scots as a language fit for philosophy seemed to nag at the eighteenth-century poets, despite their enormous abilities to prove otherwise. But the neoclassical diction of the second stanza (quoted above: "od'rous flavour," "Borean cave," "visage grave") is less a weakness, I think, than a conscious point of contrast on the part of the poet. It directs us to the pastoral tradition which is an integral part of the poem's subject and tone. The terms are incongruous, true, but the effect is comic, and calls into question the very validity of the poetic mode as a means of expression. When compared with the "gusty gear" and "reaming ale" (ll. 28, 34), the pastoral mode is exposed as a contrived artifice, incapable of expressing the reality of Scots life. The invocation of the "great god of *Aqua Vitae* in the final stanza is a bit of humor in the same way: the effect is based upon the unexpected and implicitly critical use of neoclassical diction.

Fergusson's English verse is not without some quality; Burns incorporated quite a few of his lines into his own poetry, especially into "The Cottar's Saturday Night," and "The Epilogue" was a favorite in Edinburgh circles into the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> But it always seems that either Damon or Strephon is stealing away to some green umbrage, or Alexis is counting her pearly dew-drops, or some whispering zephyr



We can imagine the opening phrase, "Begin then, dame," recited with appropriate classical solemnity as we recall the "begin, my muse" of the Homeric, Virgilian, and Miltonic epics, but then the unexpected "ye've drunk your fill," spoken with the feigned naiveté of the experienced ladies' man. The effect is powerful, and in characteristic economy of expression Fergusson manages to undermine an entire literary tradition. "The limmer's fairly flung" (l. 5), but so are we: in his treatment of the traditional compliment to the king, the king is never even mentioned.

Our sonsie muse re-emerges in the last two stanzas, however, as the traditional austere muse of the neoclassical pastoral. Rather than hear the hyperbolic renderings of the day's events by "each hero" (l. 85),

She'll rather to the fields resort,  
 Whare music gars the day seem short,  
 Whare doggies play, and lambies sport  
   On gowany braes,  
 Whare peerless Fancy hads her court,  
   And tunes her lays.  
   (ll. 91-96)

Her "reversion" back to the traditional form is strikingly ironic; after having been introduced to the drinking muse, the conventional pastoral ending further questions the validity of the whole pastoral and ceremonial modes. She'd rather to the fields, and we'd rather let her go.

The facetious treatment of traditional poetic conventions is, of course, not new with Fergusson; it informs the artistic strategy of many poets throughout literary history. The Elizabethan sonneteers, for example, often tested the limits of the Petrarchan and classical conventions in an attempt to redefine the possibilities of a specific poetic mode. Sonnet I of Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* finds the poet unmoved by artificial sources of inspiration--the genuine source is elsewhere: "'Fool,' said my Muse to me, 'look in thy heart and write.'" And Sidney's sonnet XV suggests that poetic inspiration cannot be found in Parnassus, or the dictionary, or Petrarch, sighs, or wit; only the contemplation of the beloved can provide the satisfaction of love and fame. The beauty of this poem rests in the tension between the explicit criticism of the traditional conventions and the implicit establishment of Stella as an equally artificial source. Sidney well knows, as Fergusson himself would learn, that the true source of inspiration is within the poet himself.

In examining Fergusson's English verse, one is struck with

his increasing awareness of the satiric capabilities of the language and of neoclassical imagery and diction. The first hint of this occurs in "The Simile," which appears to be a traditional pastoral, but appearances are deceiving:

At noontide as *Colin* and *Sylvia* lay  
 Within a cool jessamine bower,  
 A *butterfly*, wak'd by the heat of the day,  
 Was sipping the juice of each flower.

Near the shade of this covert a young shepherd boy,  
 The gaudy brisk flutterer spies,  
 Who held it as pastime to seek and destroy  
 Each beautiful insect that flies.  
 (ll. 1-8)

The last two lines are completely unexpected, and although the fast-paced, waltz-like anapests are not traditionally associated with the pastoral mode, the comic intent here makes it all sound like a bawdy ballad. Colin develops an elaborate simile for Sylvia, in which he likens the youth's (Amyntor's) passion for her to his passion for the butterflies. The point is that Colin thinks Sylvia should comply with the youth before he loses interest and finds another. In the final stanza,

Says Sylvia, Colin, thy simile's just,  
 But still to Amyntor I'm coy;  
 For I vow she's a simpleton blind that would trust  
 A swain, when he courts to destroy.  
 (ll. 21-24)

In Fergusson's poem, any plaintive delicacy found in pastorals which deal with the loss of innocence (Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Passionate Shepherd" comes immediately to mind) is swept away by the grim satiric image of the "young shepherd boy" destroying "each beautiful insect that flies." More than insects are being destroyed here: one can almost imagine a smirking Fergusson slowly plucking the wings from the butterfly of pastoralism.

In "The Bugs," Fergusson creates an extended parody of the epic based upon the loss of Edenic innocence for lice, who have been forced from their happy home behind the drapery by the "UPHOLSTERER rude" (l. 99). Toward the end, the poem develops the moral lesson from which we all should learn: don't reach for the apple from the Tree of Knowledge; in the case of the bugs, don't aspire to the whiteness of Chloe's bosom:

Happy the Bug, whose unambitious views  
 To gilded pomp ne'er tempt him to aspire;  
 Safely may he, enwrapt in russet fold  
 Of cobweb'd curtain, set at bay the fears  
 That still attendant are on Bugs of state:  
 He never knows at morn the busy brush  
 Of scrubbing chambermaid....

(ll. 139-45)

Another interesting satire is "A Burlesque Elegy, On The Amputation of a Student's Hair, Before His Orders," which is based on Pope's "The Rape of the Lock":

O sad catastrophe! O event dire!  
 How shall the loss, the heavy loss be born?  
 Or how the muse attune the plaintive lyre,  
 To sing of *Strephon* with his ringlets shorn?

(ll. 1-4)

Other poems of this kind include "Good Eating," a hymn to epicurean delights ("Hail ROAST BEEF! monarch of the festive throng"), and "Tea," an attack on the use of tea as a feminine cosmetic and herbal beverage ("ye sipplers of the poison'd cup / From foreign plant distilled!"). Most of the English satires like these were written in the early months of 1773. About a dozen of his Scots poems had appeared in *The Weekly Magazine* by this time, and Fergusson enjoyed a good degree of popularity because of their success. It is in this context that he published his most important English poem, "The Sow of Feeling," on April 8, 1773.<sup>8</sup> A dramatic monologue in heroic couplets, "The Sow of Feeling" is a vigorous satire on the spectacularly popular sentimental novel, *The Man of Feeling*, by Henry Mackenzie, published in 1771. Fergusson's poem, in its title alone, reduced the cult of "feeling" to the level of pigs. The sow laments the loss of her husband and children to the "bloody stalls of butchers borne" (l. 14); she pines for the lost golden age of her happiness with her family when "floating odours hail'd the dung-cled ground" (l. 28); and in keeping with Mackenzie's overwrought ending, Fergusson has the sow resign herself melodramatically to her miserable condition, "to be number'd 'mongst the *feeling swine*" (l. 83).

We see, then, in Fergusson's English verse, an increasing dissatisfaction with the rigid and artificial trappings of the pastoral, and with the false and humorless morality of the sentimentalists. His increasing interest and experimentation in vernacular Scots forms and subjects during 1772 and 1773 paralleled his lack of interest, his satiric attacks, and his

almost complete rejection of English as a language fit for sincere poetic expression. Further, the situations, themes, and techniques in which Fergusson showed interest in his early Scots poems and more significant English poems had a long tradition in Scots vernacular verse. He most certainly found affinity with the *Christis Kirk* poems of the fifteenth century, particularly in their attention to characteristic detail, their tone of mild satire, and their fast-paced rhythms and economic expression. Fergusson's heart spoke in Scots; he had to learn to write in Scots, or more properly, he had to acquire the courage to do so. His early successes gave him the confidence, and with the publication of "The Sow of Feeling" Fergusson effectively kissed goodbye any chance he may have had at finding acceptance in the more genteel circles of Edinburgh--Mackenzie was simply too popular. So at some point, probably by the end of 1772, Fergusson returned to where he had begun: plain, braid Scots.

Fergusson's "Elegy, On the Death of Scots Music" shows the influence of the poet's trials with the neoclassical pastoral and his finer poetic bond with the Scots experience. The classicism is most clear in the second and third stanzas, in which the poet describes "the feather'd choir," "the zephyrs of the spring," and "the sunny hill and dowie glen" (ll. 7, 11, 14). But the lament for lost music becomes a means for something much greater, as evidenced in the ninth stanza:

Now foreign sonnets bear the gree,  
 And crabbit queer variety  
 Of sound fresh sprung frae *Italy*,  
   A bastard breed!  
 Unlike that saft-tongu'd melody  
   Which now lies dead.  
   (ll. 49-54)

The poet has developed the influence of the "foreign sonnets" himself in the opening stanzas; the poem then becomes a self-contained piece of literary criticism, almost a poem about writing poems, or, more to the point, about the creative dilemma of the contemporary Scoto-English artist. It is an extraordinary poem in its deft handling of the Scots and the English poetic experiences. As Allan H. MacLaine has written, "the 'Elegy' is a self-conscious expression of the eighteenth-century Scots revivalist spirit, of a culture in danger of being overwhelmed from outside--a culture fighting for its life, so to speak, wishing to preserve intact its ancient heritage and identity."<sup>9</sup>

Fergusson's assimilation of the pastoral tradition to his

native Scots received one of its finest expressions in "Caller Water," published in *The Weekly Magazine* on January 21, 1773. In the first three stanzas Fergusson depicts the prelapsarian golden age of the pastoral garden in terms of Scots rural life: "The bonny yeard of antient Eden" (l. 2). The careful juxtaposition of Christian and classical imagery with the distinctive, natural flavor of the Scots dialect creates a tension that is wry and humorous, but that tends to humanize the classical rather than expose its inadequacies. And playfully, the rhyme of "their lays / *Anacreontic*" with "As big's the Pontic" indeed suggests the pretensions of those "fuddlin' Bardies now-a-days" (ll. 21-22, 24, 19).

In Burns's epistle "To William Simpson of Ochiltree," there is a stanza that may well serve as an emblem for Fergusson's experience with neoclassicism:

The *Muse*, nae *Poet* ever fand her,  
Till by himsel he learn'd to wander,  
Adown some trottin burn's meander,  
                  An' no think lang;  
O sweet, to stray an' pensive ponder  
                  A heart-felt sang!  
                  (ll. 85-90)

Fergusson is Burns's source for the satiric application of classical imagery, and though this may be a lesser point of similarity between the two poets, it represents in miniature the greater tension that both felt in the most important crises in their artistic careers--the decision to abandon English in favor of Scots. Fergusson's rejection of the neoclassical mode taught him a lesson that only a mortal muse could provide: to look into his heart and write.

*University of Rhode Island*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See A.B.G. (Alexander Balloch Grosart), ed., *The Works of Robert Fergusson* (London, Edinburgh, and Dublin, 1851), pp. xxv-cxlv; Frederick Charles Green, *Robert Fergussons Anteil an der Literatur Schottlands* (Heidelberg, 1923); John Speirs, *The Scots Literary Tradition* (London, 1940), pp. 114-23; Sydney Goodsir Smith, ed., *Robert Fergusson, 1750-1774: Essays by Various Hands to Commemorate the Bicentenary of his Birth* (Edinburgh, 1952); Matthew P. McDiarmid, ed., *The Poems of*

*Robert Fergusson*, Scottish Text Society, 3rd Series, No. 21 (Edinburgh, 1954), pp. 118-98; David Daiches, "Eighteenth-Century Vernacular Poetry," in James Kinsley, ed., *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London, 1955), pp. 150-84; Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh, 1958), pp. 171-82; Allan H. MacLaine, *Robert Fergusson* (New York, 1965); Maurice Lindsay, *History of Scottish Literature* (London, 1977), pp. 187-98.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Stanford, 1965), p. 82.

<sup>3</sup>*The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson (Oxford, 1931), I, 113.

<sup>4</sup>*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1968), I, 323. All quotations are from this edition; line references follow in parentheses.

<sup>5</sup>*The Poems of Robert Fergusson*, ed. Matthew P. McDiarmid, Scottish Text Society, 3rd Series, No. 24 (Edinburgh, 1956), p. 223. All quotations are from this edition; line references follow in parentheses.

<sup>6</sup>William Hamilton of Bangour and Allan Ramsay had previously translated this Horacian ode, and certain of Fergusson's Scots words and rhymes recall Ramsay here. See MacLaine, pp. 23-4.

<sup>7</sup>McDiarmid, No. 21, 188.

<sup>8</sup>See Allan H. MacLaine, "Robert Fergusson's *The Sow of Feeling* and Buckingham's *The Rehearsal*," *Notes and Queries*, N. S. IV (November, 1957), 485-6.

<sup>9</sup>MacLaine, *Robert Fergusson*, p. 40.