

1998

Poetic Genre and National Identity: Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns

Kenneth Simpson

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



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

Recommended Citation

Simpson, Kenneth (1998) "Poetic Genre and National Identity: Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 30: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol30/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Kenneth Simpson

Poetic Genre and National Identity:
Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns

One of the distinctions of Scottish literature is that it has given the world the elegy in which the elegist is sick—not sick with grief, as might just be permissible in respectable elegies, but sick from an excess of alcohol. The poem in question is Allan Ramsay's "Elegy on Maggy Johnston." In conventional pastoral elegy one of the ways the speaker mourns is by offering personal testimony to the dead person's qualities and achievements. So it is with Ramsay's mourner:

Ae simmer night I was sae fou,
Amang the riggs I geed to spew;
Syne down on a green bawk, I trow
 I took a nap,
And soucht a' night balillilow
 As sound's a tap.

And whan the dawn begoud to glow,
I hirsl'd up my dizzy pow,
Frae 'mang the corn like wirricow,
 Wi' bains sae sair,
And ken' nae mair than if a ew
 How I came there.¹

¹*Poems by Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson*, ed. Alexander Manson Kinghorn and Alexander Law (Edinburgh and London, 1974), p. 5. Henceforth Ramsay-Fergusson.

What greater tribute can he pay to the dead woman than by testifying to the strength of her brew and its subsequent effects?

Outsiders may be forgiven for wondering what the problem is with the Scots. Why the apparent compulsion to be reductive? Why the tendency of Scottish writers to reproduce the patois of the street? Do they do so deliberately to shock? Is there a tradition of gratuitous coarseness in Scottish writing?

Maggy Johnston died 1711. Ramsay was writing in 1711/12. What was the literary climate? The critical war between the Ancients and the Moderns had intensified in France in the sixteen-eighties and rumbled on into the eighteenth century in Britain. Paradoxically, the Moderns were in general more rigorous than the Ancients in their application of the rules of writing. The central issue was that of correctness, focusing in particular on the conventions of genre and decorum. For the neoclassic critics there was a hierarchy of literary types, or genres; there should be no mixing of genres, e.g., tragedy and comedy; there were rules to designate the subject-matter, style, structure, and emotional effect appropriate to each genre; and the hierarchical ranking of the genres related to the ranking of social classes from royalty and the nobility to peasantry. The principle of decorum demanded a consonance of subject-matter, characters, action, and style. Here is George Granville in his *Essay upon Unnatural Flights in Poetry* (1701):

Roscommon first, then Mulgrave rose, like light,
To clear our darkness and to guide our flight;
With steady judgment, and in lofty sounds,
They gave us patterns, and they set us bounds²

In his *Laws of Poetry* (1721) Charles Gildon observed that rules are “more essential to Poetry than to any other Art or Science.”³ The expression of individual inspiration is to be strictly regulated. The poem is good or bad according to the degree of conformity to the rules of the particular genre. It is scarcely decorous to be sick in an elegy.

The mock-elegy was of course not a new or an exclusively Scottish literary phenomenon. Under the rules of rhetoric styles were used as signing means across all levels.⁴ Inversion of signs was permissible within the rules as consciously understood; hence elegy accommodates mock-elegy. The mock-elegiac mode found particular favor with the poets of the vernacular revival for

²Cited in W. Jackson Bate, *From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York, 1961), p. 34.

³*Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴I am indebted to Professor R. D. S. Jack for advising me on this point.

whom Robert Sempill of Beltrees, with "The Life and Death of Habbie Simson," formed an inspirational precedent.

Authority is perhaps inimical to the Scottish character. From the Makars onwards one of the characteristics of Scottish poetry is the juxtaposition of vernacular Scots and formal English; the former undermines the latter, the effect of such reduction generally being realism of representation and realism of assessment. The opening stanzas of "Elegy on Maggy Johnston" typify the mode with their interplay of vernacular Scots and stock pastoral diction:

Auld Reeky! Mourn in sable hue,
Let fouth of tears dreep like May dew,
To braw Tippony bid adieu,
Which we with greed,
Bended as fast as she cou'd brew.
But ah! she's dead.

To tell the truth now Maggy dang,
Of customers she had a bang;
For lairds and souters a' did gang
To drink bedeen,
The barn and yard was aft sae thrang,
We took the green. (Ramsay-Fergusson, p. 3)

Ramsay and, later, Fergusson and Burns intensify the realistic effect by juxtaposing the implicit conventions of the genre and the actual subject-matter of their poems. In doing so they are not exemplifying mock-heroic in the manner of their English contemporaries (e. g., Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, or—later—Gray, "On a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of gold Fishes"), where the principal interest is stylistic and the basis from which the poets work is one of endorsement of the hierarchies. Rather, the additional dimension achieved by the Scottish poets is that of rendering and celebrating ordinary human experience. This realist, populist quality is often associated with Scottish literature and, rightly or wrongly, with the Scottish character. It finds its fullest and most triumphant expression in "Tam o' Shanter," and it helps explain the universal appeal of both that poem and the values with which Burns is traditionally identified: "a Man's a Man for a' that."

Ramsay, Fergusson, and Burns make a major contribution to the process of the democratization of literature, challenging the old literary hierarchies and the traditions of genre and decorum, and extending the expressive capacities of inherited poetic forms. They do so as Scots, Scots within Britain. Their body of poetry expresses a cultural nationalism, which in itself may serve as a channel for the expression of an otherwise thwarted political nationalism.

Their resourcefulness may be construed as a determination on the part of Scottish writers to participate as active cultural partners in the Union. Several of Ramsay's poems reveal the poet consciously contributing to the new-found

We have to wait until Kurt Wittig for the observation that the poem is “cannily mock-heroic.”⁸ The vernacular Scots adds a degree of particularity that produces an authenticity lacking in English pastorals, which maintain decorum; and once again the range of reference is noteworthy:

Sandy: His Fame shall last: last shall his Sang of Weirs
While *British* Bairns brag of their bauld Forbears (*Works*, I, 109).

This is but one of a number of Ramsay’s poems that claim the legitimacy of vernacular Scots in British poetry.

In an important essay, “Augustan Influences on Allan Ramsay,” Carol McGuirk comments, “In using a selectively Scots diction in forms such as verse-epistle, pastoral, and satire, Ramsay was emulating (and extending) the work of the popular London Augustans, Matthew Prior and John Gay, who pioneered in the use of English rustic diction to spice up the ‘lower’ literary kinds.”⁹ While agreeing, I would contend that at times the intention is to do more than “spice up”: the implicit agenda is to challenge neoclassical constraints and free poetry to become a means of rendering real human experience. “Epistle to James Arbuckle” reveals a brilliant synthesis of modes: the flyting formula is adapted to enable Ramsay, not to berate his rival, but to introduce himself in terms of appearance, personality, and beliefs, while his actual target is rhetoricians to whose formulaic, hierarchical ordering of material he feigns adherence, only to show its absurdity. In “To Robert Yarde of Devonshire” Ramsay begins by offering the stereotypes by which Scotland and its writers are known in the south. There follows a lengthy verse-essay on moderation—“Yet ae extreme should never make / A man the gowden mean forsake.” This he applies to love:

Yet Love is kittle and unruly,
And shou’d move tentily and hooly:
For if it get o’er meikle Head,
'Tis fair to gallop ane to dead (*Works*, II, 60).

Ramsay can preach moderation in all things, like a true Augustan. Then the homily is deftly undermined:

Then wale a Virgin worthy you,
Worthy your Love and nuptial Vow;
Syne frankly range o’er a’ her Charms,
Drink deep of Joy within her Arms;

⁸Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh, 1958), p. 167. Henceforth Wittig.

⁹Carol McGuirk, “Augustan Influences on Allan Ramsay,” *SSL*, 16 (1981), 98.

Be still delighted with her Breast,
And on her Love with Rapture feast (*Works*, II, 60).

Rules are abstractions, meaningless generalities; real human beings are individuals, a point further underlined by the poet's own practice within the poem. Burns makes the same point in "The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie." A proponent of Rousseau's theories on the unfettered education, Mailie changes her tune when she comes to consider her own offspring: her son is warned to "stay content wi yowes at hame," while her wish for her daughter is

O, may thou ne'er forgather up,
Wi' onie blastet, moorlan toop;
But ay keep mind to moop an' mell,
Wi' sheep o' credit like thysel!¹⁰

Theories are fine as abstractions; woe betide them as soon as individuals get their hands on them! This element in Ramsay and Burns accords with the humanizing and secularizing thrust of Scottish Enlightenment thought.

The inference of such poems is that poetry must take account of individual difference and must accommodate the range of human experience. Robert Fergusson is adept at depicting on a broad canvas the diversity which comprises society (especially urban society), and his resourcefulness in the adaptation of modes matches that of Ramsay. "Leith Races" in its opening stanzas is evocative of the ballads: the speaker meets and converses with an attractive young lady. By stanza four she has identified herself: Mirth, a stock neoclassical personification, speaks a homely vernacular Scots. A bargain is struck (another detail redolent of the ballads): he can test her mirth-raising power if he will agree to take her to the races, which he does, enabling him to render the social panorama in all its bizarre diversity.

In "The King's Birthday in Edinburgh" the national element is foregrounded. Fergusson deliberately chooses an occasion which, since the Union, was a common holiday throughout Britain. Noting the affinities of such events with the carnivalesque, C. A. Whatley comments, "They were extraordinary occasions when normal restraints on behaviour were temporarily removed."¹¹ The restraints whose removal Fergusson seeks are those of slavish adherence to neoclassical poetic convention. The title seems to promise a formal poem written for a national occasion, but the diction—and especially

¹⁰*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 33. Henceforth *Poems*.

¹¹C. A. Whatley, "'The Privilege which the Rabble have to be Riotous': Carnivalesque and the Monarch's Birthday in Scotland, c. 1700-1860," in J. Blanchard, ed. *Labour and Leisure in Historical Perspective* (Stuttgart, 1995), p. 89.

the rhymes—of the opening stanza instantly undermine formality. In an ironic reversal of the norm the poet's persona takes care of the Muse, feigning concern for her on the grounds of her limited capacity for both whisky and inspiration; he, by contrast, offers a vivid account of the vibrant communal celebrations. By its own example the poem makes the point: poetry can be refashioned to accommodate the bizarre particularities of human experience. For Kurt Wittig, Fergusson introduces into Scottish poetry "a metropolitan spirit...which is the antithesis of kailyard parochialism; it is a poetry that looks ahead"; and he alludes to Fergusson's "disappointed nationalism" (Wittig, p. 182). Paradoxically, in its innovativeness and sophistication, Fergusson's poetry exemplifies a forward-looking nationalism, even though the tone and substance of its nationalist references are those of regret or nostalgia.

It is in Burns that the democratic tenor of Scottish poetry finds its fullest expression. Egalitarian sympathies are conveyed courtesy of reductive juxtaposition and—one of Burns's favorite techniques—inflation of the local, specific, individual, and deflation of the national, general, universal. As "Elegy on the Year 1788" demonstrates, the interplay of language levels is instrumental in the leveling process:

For Lords or kings I dinna mourn,
E'en let them die—for that they're born!
But oh! prodigious to reflect,
A Towmont, Sirs, is gane to wreck!
O Eighty-eight, in thy sma' space
What dire events ha'e taken place!
Of what enjoyments thou has reft us!
In what a pickle thou has left us!

The Spanish empire's tint a head,
An' my auld toothless Bawtie's dead;
The toolzie's teugh 'tween Pitt an' Fox,
An' our guidwife's wee birdy cocks;
The tane is game, a bluidy devil,
But to the hen-birds unco civil;
The tither's dour, has nae sic breedin',
But better stuff ne'er claw'd a midden! (*Poems*, I, 454-5)

In the eyes of the peasant farmer the death of his old farm-dog is at least as important as that of the Spanish emperor. He understands politics in his terms: the cut and thrust between Pitt and Fox is the fight to determine who will be cock of, not the walk, but the midden.

Burns ranges wide in his familiarization of the remote and abstract. The most striking example is "Address to the Deil." Anything but the "Prince/Chief of many throned pow'rs/ That led th' embattl'd Seraphim to war," the devil is a well-known local, a crony of the speaker (and, as Burns's letter to

James Dalrymple shows,¹² there is a kinship: poets are the Devil's men). He is also, simply, a pest, a right wee devil—splashing boiling water about in the kitchen; quacking like a duck; draining the milk from cattle; incapacitating the young husband's "wark-lume." The vernacular Scots in which these activities are rendered familiarizes them and so weakens their force. The speaker takes pity on his crony:

But fare you weel, auld Nickie-ben!
 O wad ye tak a thought an men'!
 Ye aiblins might—I dinna ken—
 Still hae a stake—
 I'm wae to think upo' yon den,
 Ev'n for your sake! (*Poems*, I, 172)

Even the Devil doesn't deserve to be consigned permanently to the torments of his black pit (cf., "Tam o' Shanter" where even the witches are allowed a night off and a party). The Devil has been demystified and brought within the community, whose spokesman, very much Burns's ordinary man, finds resources of compassion that encompass Satan himself. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Adam Smith had stressed the important of sympathy as a component of our moral sense. Even earlier, in concerning *Moral Good and Evil*, Francis Hutcheson had advocated acting benevolently towards rational and moral beings "in the most distant planets."¹³ Burns's speaker takes the doctrine of sympathy to its ultimate, and most practical, extreme: no one is in greater need of sympathy and redemption than the Devil; no one's redemption could better serve man than the Devil's. If only the Devil could be saved: here Burns anticipates the redemptive strain in high Romanticism.

The speaker in "Death and Doctor Hornbook," again Burns's ordinary man, encounters on his way home from the pub "something" that "put me in an eerie swither." A grotesque figure with a scythe over one shoulder and a fishing-spear over the other, it is greeted familiarly by Burns's ordinary man at his most sociable, who comes to terms with the unknown by means of the known:

Its stature seem'd lang Scotch ells twa,
 The queerest shape that e'er I saw,
 For fient a wame it had ava,
 And then its shanks,
 They were as thin, as sharp an' sma'
 As cheeks o' branks.

¹²*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 93. Henceforth *Letters*.

¹³Francis Hutcheson, *Concerning Moral Good and Evil*, 5th edn. (London, 1753), p. 165.

Eneados (1710) showed, national pride embraced literary, as well as martial, heroes.

For the literati Scotland's right to cultural partnership with England would be assured if it had its representatives of the highest genres: William Wilkie bid for the mantle of Scotland's epic poet with *The Epigoniad* (1757), based on an obscure episode in the history of Thebes as related in *Iliad*, Book IV. Wilkie is inflexibly neoclassical: "I would have it understood as a rule, that the subjects of epic poetry should be taken from tradition only"; and he had a problem with *Paradise Lost*: "A work altogether irregular...the subject of it is not Epic but Tragic."¹⁶ Even for Lord Kames, in some ways one of the more flexible of the literati as critics, "familiarity" is the curse of the epic, "the peculiar character of which is dignity and elevation."¹⁷ The only other contenders for the title of Scottish epic were Macpherson's *Fingal* and *Temora*, essentially conflations of elements of classical epic and Celtic history and mythology to meet the needs of the vogue of sensibility.

In "Tam o' Shanter" Burns mimics features of classical epic: Tam, the errant husband with a price to pay, evokes Odysseus; Kate's prophecy as to his fate recalls the prefiguring of classical epic; abstract Care, here personified, is familiarized. "Care, mad to see a man sae happy/ E'en drown'd himsel amang the nappy" (*Poems*, II, 559)—Burns conveys a great deal here: in the context of human fellowship neoclassical abstractions have no place (they may as well go drown themselves!); his poem is about the vibrancy of real human experience, not arid abstraction. Likewise, the mock-formal apostrophe indicates that if anything in the real world warrants apostrophe it is whisky—why?: "Wi' usquabae, we'll face the Devil!" (*Poems*, II, 560). Other features mimicking epic are the wonderfully expressive mock-epic simile: "As bees bizz out wi' angry fyke...As open pussie's mortal foes...As eager runs the market-crowd...So Maggie runs, the witches follow" (*Poems*, II, 563), and the catalogue of horrors, in confronting which Tam is truly "heroic Tam."

Critical discussions of mock-heroic allude to the aggrandizing, or even mythopoeic, effect of the mode: ordinary mortals rendered in mock-heroic assume representative or mythical status. So the fight between Mr. and Mrs. Partridge in *Tom Jones* becomes *the* domestic quarrel. Thus "Tam o' Shanter" is *the* example of the Wild Ride and Tam, "heroic Tam," is our representative in confronting the supernatural. Part of Burns's immense achievement in "Tam o' Shanter" is in both rendering and transcending the local dimension (all those landmarks) and the national dimension. Thomas Crawford has suggested that, after "The Vision," "Tam o' Shanter" is "the most genuinely *na-*

¹⁶William Wilkie, *The Epigoniad*, 2nd edn. (London, 1759), p. xiv.

¹⁷Cited in G. Gregory Smith, p. 104.

tional of all Burns's poems."¹⁸ Perhaps Tam's journey is emblematic of the life of the Scot. In one short verse-paragraph, for instance, ("Weel mounted on his gray mare, *Meg*...Whare ghaists and houlets nightly cry"—*Poems*, II, 559-60), Tam is contextualized in terms of several of the determinants of his existence—weather, song, church, and the supernatural. In one respect Tam may be heroic because he not only embodies but confronts his Scottishness. But Tam is most representatively heroic because of the universality of his experiences and the authenticity of his responses. Buoyed up by alcohol, fascinated, sexually excited, "*Tam* tint his reason a' thegither" (*Poems*, II, 563): his reactions are life-threatening but perfectly natural. "*Tam o' Shanter*" is the most genuinely international of Burns's poems because it celebrates recognizable human responses and instincts. With the ordinary man as hero, the epic is democratized.

But what, if anything, is *mocked*? Tam is not mocked; he is subjected to a benign irony, certainly: "Kings may be blest, but *Tam* was glorious/ O'er a' the ills o' life victorious" (*Poems*, II, 559). It's Tam who finds that mellow, alcohol-induced state "glorious." It has to be recognized that the vernacular poets establish a certain distance at times. Ramsay is not the persona in "Elegy on Maggy Johnston"; Burns is not the speaker in "Elegy on the Departed Year 1788"; he is at a distance from the beggars in "The Jolly Beggars." But in recognizing that "Kings may be blest, but Tam was glorious" is Tam's viewpoint we are not qualifying Burns's celebration of the common man: quite the reverse—Tam is authentic precisely because of such responses. This is art, not politics or ideology, but perhaps for that reason it is more subtly effective as politics.

Following on the achievement of Ramsay and Fergusson, Burns has extended the range of mock-heroic; indeed he has transformed it in that mock-heroic has become extended/innovative/democratized heroic. What originated as a cultural nationalism manifesting itself through challenge to, and engagement with, literary hierarchies, has, in Burns, conjoined with political radicalism. Thus the basis of Burns's universal appeal lies in the inter-relationship between the democratization of literary modes and political and social democratization.

How revealing that it was Byron, half-Scottish, who wrote:

Poets are classed by the power of their performance, and not according to its rank in a gradus...of what *order*, according to the poetic aristocracy, are Burns's poems? There are his *opus magnum*, '*Tam o' Shanter*', a *tale*; the '*Cotter's Saturday Night*',

¹⁸Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 222.

42 Kenneth Simpson

a descriptive sketch; some others in the same style: the rest are songs. So much for the *rank* of his *productions*; the rank of *Burns* is the very first of his art.¹⁹

For Wordsworth, “It is as a human being, eminently sensitive and intelligent, and not as a Poet, clad in his priestly robes and carrying the ensigns of sacerdotal office, that Burns interests and affects us” (*Critical Heritage*, p. 404). For the Romantics, as for us today, it is as the poet, not of Nature, but of Human Nature, that Burns is of such importance.

University of Strathclyde

¹⁹Donald A. Low, ed. *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston, 1974), p. 326. Henceforth *Critical Heritage*.