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Notes and Documents

A New Song for the Burns Canon

It is well known that Burns was not always completely frank about how much of a song he had written—"Auld Lang Syne" being the most notable among these. He and his editor James Johnson were at some pains to conceal his authorship of several of the works which he contributed to *The Scots Musical Museum*; when the songs appeared some were credited to Burns, some were signed with an initial (not necessarily Burns's), and as often as not they were unsigned. Several of these were later identified as Burns's when Johnson reissued the first five volumes of his *Museum* and published the sixth in 1803, but by this time the poet had been dead for seven years.

One song which I believe to have been written almost entirely by Burns, and which therefore should be admitted to the canon, is the untitled work which opens "Deluded swain, the pleasure," to the air "The Collier's bonie lassie," which the poet referred to as "The Collier's Tochter."¹ The song was first published as No. 33 in George Thomson's *Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs* in 1798, and was also included in James Currie's edition of the poet's works in 1800. Burns had sent the text to Thomson in September 1793 with the following short comment: "As for 'The Collier's Tochter,' take the following old Bacchanal" and he then wrote out the sixteen lines which appear below (*Letters*, II, 251). Subsequent editors have accepted the Bard at his word, most of them claiming that Burns did little or nothing more than transcribe the song and sent it to Thomson. It does not appear that Burns ever referred to it again. James C. Dick says, somewhat ambiguously, "No one has

¹*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), II, 251. Henceforth *Letters*.

discovered any previous song of the kind: the presumption is that Burns had no wish to father it."²

William Scott Douglas was ambiguous also in what he wrote about the work. His note on the text of "Deluded swain" reads: "This clever Bacchanal, furnished to Thomson in September 1793, is merely an improvement on an old English song."³ But he appended a footnote to the song which preceded "Deluded swain" in the poet's letter: "This pretty little piece has been so much altered from the original that, like the bacchanalian verses which follow, it may almost be reckoned as Burns's own" (Douglas, VI, 290). The half-hearted acceptance of the song went unchallenged in Henley and Henderson, where the only comment by Henderson is, "The ideas and sentiments are common enough; so is the phrasing; and 'old bacchanal' is probably a figure of speech."⁴ Although the song continued to be included in collected editions of the poet's works, such as J. Logie Robertson's oft-reprinted 1904 Oxford University Press volume, where it appears without any note, editors were obviously not entirely convinced of its authenticity.

J. DeLancey Ferguson would have us believe that no part of the song was by Burns, and that he merely collected it. In a footnote to the song Ferguson wrote, "Anonymous song in *Watts' Musical Miscellany* (1729-31), vol. iv, p. 98."⁵ J. W. Egerer apparently accepted the idea that the song was not by Burns, because he did not include it among the titles which he listed as published in George Thomson's *Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice* (1793-1818).⁶ Citing Scott Douglas; Chambers-Wallace,⁷ where Burns's letter to Thomson is printed without comment; Henley and Henderson; and Ferguson as his authorities, James Kinsley dismisses the work as "an early

²James C. Dick, *The Songs of Robert Burns, Now first Printed with the Melodies for Which They were Written: A Study in Tone-Poetry* (London, 1903), p. 432.

³*The Works of Robert Burns*, ed. William Scott Douglas, 6 vols. (Edinburgh, 1877-9), III, 158. Henceforth Douglas.

⁴*The Poetry of Robert Burns*, ed. W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1896-7), III, 454.

⁵*The Letters of Robert Burns*, [1st edn.], ed. J. DeLancey Ferguson. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1931), II, 209.

⁶J. W. Egerer, *A Bibliography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1964).

⁷*The Life and Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Robert Chambers, rev. William Wallace, 4 vols. (Edinburgh and London, 1896), IV, 53.

eighteen-century song."⁸

John Watts published in London *The Musical Miscellany; Being a Collection of Choice Songs, and Lyrick Poems* in six volumes between 1729 and 1731. Volume IV (1730) contains on pages 98-9 the following:

Boast no more, fond Swain, of Pleasure
That the fickle Fair can give thee:
Believe me, 'tis a Fairy Treasure,
And all thy Hopes will soon deceive thee.

Sweet's the Morn, but quickly flying;
Her Smiles I've known, and her Disdaining:
The Flow'r is fair, but quickly dying;
And *Cloe* still will be complaining.⁹

On the other hand Burns sent Thomson these words:

Deluded swain, the pleasure
The fickle Fair can give thee,
Is but a fairy treasure,
Thy hopes will soon deceive thee.—

The billows on the ocean,
The breezes idly roaming,
The clouds' uncertain motion,
They are but types of Woman.—

O! art thou not ashamed
To doat upon a feature?
If Man thou wouldst be named,
Despise the silly creature.—

Go find an honest fellow;
Good claret set before thee:
Hold on; till thou art mellow,
And then to bed in glory.— (*Letters*, II, 251).

A look at these two texts makes it pretty certain that Burns had seen the words in Watts or elsewhere. It is unfortunate that we do not know precisely

⁸*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), II, 919.

⁹John Watts, *The Musical Miscellany*, IV (1730), 98-9. The song is without title. On pp. 97-8 there appear words and music entitled "There's my Thumb, I'll ne'er beguile thee" and the song quoted above reads "To the afore-going Tune."

what books were in the poet's library, because when it was disbursed at auction only a broadside listing the holdings in the most general terms was printed before the sale. Thus we cannot verify that Burns owned a copy of Watts' *Musical Miscellany*, but even if he did not he could easily have borrowed it—he borrowed music and miscellanies quite frequently.

We must therefore assume that Burns found the words for his song in Watts, altered the first four lines and discarded the second four. There is a strong case for us to accept as Burns's own twelve of the sixteen lines in his version of the song.

GRR

Maurice Ravel's Setting of Burns

In 1910 the French composer Maurice Ravel, already famous, was invited to participate in an international competition devoted to harmonizing folk melodies from several countries. This was at the invitation of the Russian singer Marie Olénine d'Alheim; she and her husband had recently founded the *Maison du Lied* in Moscow. The purpose of this enlightened organization was to make folk melodies available to young singers and indeed to interest the musical public in Moscow and elsewhere in these songs. Four of the seven prizes were won by Ravel (for Spanish, French, Italian, and Hebraic songs), and these comprise the well-known *Chansons populaires*. They have been frequently sung by Victoria de los Angeles and others, and they were published in 1911, soon after the competition. What of Ravel's other harmonizations of songs in Russian, Flemish, and Scottish? Two of them have not been traced, but the sketch for the "Chanson écossaise" survives. (It is in the private collection of Madame Alexandre Taverne.) More than twenty years ago the song was reconstructed, on the basis of the sketch, by Arbie Ornstein. It was first performed by Sheila Schonbrun, soprano, with Ornstein at the piano, on February 23, 1975, at the Charles S. Colden Auditorium in Flushing, New York. There is no record of subsequent performances, nor is there any known recording. But the "Chanson écossaise" was published by Editions Salabert in Paris in 1975 (this house brought out a number of previously unknown works by Ravel), and until recently one could find the music in New York and London as well as Paris. It is probably out of print now. A brief commentary on the song, together with a reproduction of Ravel's sketch, was published by Ornstein in *The Music Forum*, 3 (1973), 311-14.

The “Chanson écossaise” is in fact “The Banks o’ Doon” (Version B—Ye banks and braes o’ bonie Doon), written by Robert Burns in 1791. In 1910 Ravel and the others competing for the prizes in Moscow were given the traditional Scottish tune to harmonize along with the text of Burns’s poem. One would suppose that Ravel, a composer of great sophistication, would not have much interest in the simplicities of such a tune, but on a number of occasions he showed considerable sympathy for the music of other cultures. At moments the harmony (as one can tell by the original sketch) approaches that of *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, which was indeed Ravel’s next work, finished in 1911. He has an introduction of sixteen bars of piano accompaniment as an introduction to Burns’s lyric, and at the halfway point—where Burns makes a break between his two stanzas of eight lines each—he repeats four bars of the same accompaniment. In short, the general structure of the “Chanson” is close to Burns’s lyric.

The Salabert edition publishes a French translation along with Burns’s text; the “Chanson” could be sung in either language. The French text isn’t an exact translation; aside from everything else, it doesn’t reproduce the rhyme scheme of the original. And the “bonie Doon” is never mentioned. All the same, readers with some French might be at least amused by the translation, which I reproduce here from the Salabert edition:

Vallons, côteaux du fleuve ami,
 Vous êtes frais et si fleuris!
 Ton chant est gai, petit oiseau,
 Mais moi j’en souffre et sens mon deuil! [for deuil]

Sautèle, oiseau, parmi ces fleurs,
 Ton cri fait mal, il dit l’hiver,
 L’hier flambant, l’hier éteint,
 L’amour vainqueur, l’amour d’antan.

J’errais au bord du fleuve ami,
 Rivant mes yeux aux lacs des fleurs;
 L’oiseau joyeux chantait l’amour,
 L’amour chantait au fond de moi.

Le coeur léger j’étends la main,
 J’atteins la rose en ses piquants.
 L’amant perfide a pris la fleur,
 L’épine, hélas, reste en mon coeur.

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