

ROBERT BURNS AS A LYRIC WRITER.

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Could we give Adam a warm welcome folks?

Right it's good afternoon now I think, ladies and gentlemen. A few words of introduction or warning before I begin. I am by no stretch of the imagination a musician; I am a words man. So much of this talk will deal with text. I am, however, accustomed to fitting words to Scottish instrumental music. In doing so I probably show less respect to the tunes than Burns did, but it gives me a keen appreciation of the art that Burns displayed in the 360 or more songs that he produced. This morning I will ask Gordeanna to start off with two contrasting songs to demonstrate the range of Burns's song creation; I will then look at what Burns had to say about song-making and I apologise to those who have attended talks on Burns's songsmithing before, because speakers on the subject work from the same small base of information in Burns's letters, commonplace books and notes on the Scots Musical Museum. So it will consist mainly of quotations that you will have heard before. You may wish to take the chance to escape after Gordeanna's songs. I'll then take a closer look Burns's art in two or three songs which I know are strong enough to stand being taken to bits and put together again.

One reason I don't do Burns Suppers is that all the conclusions are foregone. You are expected to find that Burns is the greatest poet, the greatest songwriter and the greatest lover that the world has ever known; you will decide that he was as good a farmer as his neighbours but he was unlucky in his choice of farms. For some reason, you must also note that he did not write about the sea and he did not mention the Island of Arran. There, I've noted it. I will not conclude that Burns was the world's greatest songwriter because my knowledge of the world's songwriters is sadly limited, and even among his contemporaries there are a couple of challengers in terms of the number of songs written and the number that are remembered by their countrymen to this day. Thomas Moore in Ireland and Carl Michael Bellmann in Sweden. Both of them, as Burns did, set their words to existing tunes, but both of them also made tunes of their own. There is no evidence that Burns did, which is why my talk is entitled Burns as a Lyric Writer. Gordeanna!

Ye Banks and Braes. The Jolly Gauger.

As I said, these are contrasting songs. "The Jolly Gauger" which was included in "the Merry Muses of Caledonia", published after Burns's death is firmly in the folk tradition of encounter ballads. It has the seven-stress couplet of the ballads with only one rhyme in each verse, set to a one-strain tune, which had previously been used for other ballads. There is a syllabic match

between text and tune – one note one syllable. “Ye Banks and Braes” uses a two-strain instrumental tune, giving an eight-line verse, though it still only has one rhyme in each four lines. The first song is meant for singing by the Folk; the latter is written to preserve a melody by fitting it for singing by the popular singers of the Edinburgh concert rooms and assemblies such as Signora Corri and Signor Tenducci. Their singing of Scots songs had been the inspiration for George Thomson to start his publishing enterprise: A Select Collection of Scottish Airs. Though “Banks and Braes” includes the imagery much used in folk-song of the rose and the thorn, its presentation with the address first to the River Doon and then to the birds belongs very much to art poetry. In folksong, if you spoke to birds they spoke back to you, whether it was the parrot in “The Outlandish Knight” or the bird that witnessed the murder in “Young Hunting” or the carrier goshawk in “The Gay Goshawk”. Somewhere in between Thomson’s collection and the Merry Muses came the third publication to which Burns contributed songs: James Johnson’s six-volume Scots Musical Museum. The two editions of Burns’s poems published in his life-time contained 16 songs. The three songbooks included over 360 songs supplied by him.

Any look at Robert Burns’s musical ability must start from his schoolteacher, John Murdoch’s remark that in learning church-music Gilbert Burns and his brother

“were left far behind the rest of the school. Robert’s ear, in particular, was remarkably dull, and his voice untunable. It was long before I could get them to distinguish one tune from another.”

This must rank with Fred Astaire’s first screen-test: Can’t act. Can’t sing. Can dance a little. In later life various acquaintances were to remark on the musicality, the sonorousness of Burns’s speaking voice. Burns, however, remained diffident about his singing ability throughout his life. When invited to sing one of his songs at a party he would instead recite. I suspect that this was at parties where the mixed company were accustomed to hearing the Tenduccis and Urbanis. I can’t believe that Burns, in the all-male company of the Crochallan Fencibles or at a Masonic “Harmony” would have hesitated to give them a song or to join robustly in the choruses.

Similarly with James Dick’s statement that there was “one melody which he composed for a song of his own at the age of about twenty-three, and this melody displeased him so much that he destroyed it and never attempted another.” What Burns actually wrote was

“ ‘Twas at this time I set about composing an air in the old Scotch style. I am not musical scholar enough to prick down my tune properly, so it can never see the light, and perhaps ‘tis no great matter. The tune consisted of three parts so that the verses just went through the whole air.” [O Raging Fortune’s Withering Blast]

It was about that age that Burns acquired a fiddle and it’s tempting to speculate that he got it precisely to enable him to “prick down the notes”. It appears that he never became a proficient player, but with two fiddling friends, John Lapraik and David Sillar, he must surely have played in the odd session. Certainly by the time he began to collect songs and to set words to airs for the Museum in 1787, he was able to distinguish tunes on the page and had started to purchase Scottish tune books. By 1791 he had an extensive familiarity with instrumental music and he could write to Johnson that he had all the Music of the country except Anderson’s Collection of Strathspeys, which had been recently published. He had long had a practical knowledge of the dance music. Dancing had been one of his pleasures from his early days. His first rebellion

against his father's strict Presbyterian rule had been to attend a dancing class when he was sixteen.

That information we have from the long autobiographical letter which he wrote to Dr John Moore in 1787, aged 28. There also we learn that he wrote his first love-song at the age of fifteen to his girl's favourite reel. It was then that he began to study songs in a book of English songs, probably "The Lark", though Larks, Linnets, Nightingales and Blackbirds came out every year from the cheap publishers. "I pored over them, driving my cart or walking to labor, song by song, verse by verse; carefully noting the true tender or sublime from affectation and fustian." So he served a long apprenticeship before song-writing became the passion of his later years.

The two people he wrote for, James Johnson and George Thomson, had very different objects. Burns regarded Johnson, a working engraver, as a kindred spirit. He wanted to print as many songs as possible because he loved Scots songs and wanted to preserve them. Hence his work is called "The Scots Musical Museum". There was no idea of profit; indeed he subsidised the project himself. Thomson, on the other hand, did hope for a wide sale, and was aiming at a fashionable readership. A £70 a year clerk in a government office during the day, he was an accomplished musician and played violin in the concert orchestra at the St Cecilia's Hall concerts in Edinburgh. It was hearing the singing of Signora Corri and Signor Tenducci there that inspired him to start his collection of songs.

Not everyone approved of the Italian influence on the Edinburgh music scene. Robert Fergusson had written his ode on the Death of Scots Music some years earlier:

Nae lasses now on simmer days
Will lilt at bleaching o' their claes;
Nae herds on Yarrow's bonnie braes
Or banks o' Tweed,
Delight to chaunt their hameil lays,
Sin' music's dead.

Now foreign sonnets bear the gree,
And crabbit queer variety
O' sounds fresh sprung frae Italy,
A bastard breed!
Unlike that saft-tongued melody
Whilk now lies dead.

Thomson, however, was impressed by Tenducci's singing of Scots songs. As late as 1844, fifty years after the singer's death, he was still enthusing:

The most judicious charmingly expressive singer of Scottish songs I ever had the pleasure of listening to was Signor Tenducci, whose passionate feeling and exquisitely touching expression of the melody was not more remarkable than his marked delivery of the words, which he spoke as effectively as a Kemble would have recited them. If I were to live ever so long I could not forget the effect of his performance of "Roslin Castle", "Lochaber" or "The Braes of Ballenden".

George Thomson involved European composers to make arrangements of the music. It was perhaps unfortunate that his first collaborator was Ignace Pleyel; the early 1790s were not an easy time to be working with an associate based in revolutionary France. Beethoven and Haydn were among the others asked to arrange Burns's songs. Burns was not opposed to the general aim of having concert versions of Scots songs; he had probably heard Signora Corri during his stay in Edinburgh and he had a high opinion of Pietro Urbani as a performer: "He sings so delightfully that whatever he introduces at your concert, must have immediate celebrity."

When, however, it came to matters of musical and poetic taste on individual items, Thomson and Burns were frequently in disagreement and to that we are indebted for our knowledge of Burns's methods and criteria.

" 'Laddie Lie Near Me' must lie by me for some time. I do not know the air; and until I am complete master of a tune in my own singing (such as it is), I can never compose for it. My way is: I consider the poetic sentiment correspondent to my idea of the musical expression; then choose my theme; begin one stanza; when that is composed, which is generally the most difficult part of the business, I walk out, sit down now and then, look out for subjects in nature around me that are in unison and harmony with the cogitations of my fancy, and workings of my bosom, humming every now and then the air with the verses I have framed. When I feel my muse beginning to jade, I retire to the solitary fireside of my study, and then commit my effusion to paper; swinging at intervals on the hindlegs of my elbow-chair, by way of calling forth my own critical strictures as my pen goes on. Seriously, this at home is almost invariably my way."

In other words, Burns is starting from the music and shaping the words to fit. (I usually start from a line of text that has come into my head, and where necessary I bend the tune to fit.) In spite of being told of the care, consideration and cogitation that went into a Burns composition, Thomson felt that his better command of formal music gave him a right to suggest alterations and improvements. Which he frequently did. This led to further correspondence. Sometimes Thomson got his way as with his change of air and therefore words for "Scots Wha Hae"; sometimes, as with "Scots Wha Hae", the public let him know that Burns was right and the original was reinstated.

Urbani, when Burns let him hear the tune, asked Burns to make some "soft" verses to it. This is a reminder that a series of notes is a very imprecise way of conveying meaning. The original words "Hey tutti Taiti, hey tutti taiti, hey tutti taiti, wha's fou noo" give a very different mood from "Scots Wha Hae" but would still not be classed as soft; it took Lady Nairne to put "I'm wearin' awa' John, like snaw wreaths in thaw John." To provide the kind of sentiment Urbani was looking for.

On another occasion Burns gave a different hint about how he improved his songs:

Whenever I want to be more than ordinary in song; to be in some degree equal to your diviner airs; do you imagine I fast and pray for the divine emanation?—Tout au contraire! I have a glorious recipe, the very one that for his own use was invented by the Divinity of Healing and Poesy when erst he piped to the flocks of Admetus.—I put myself in a regimen of admiring a fine woman; & in proportion to the adorability of her charms, in proportion you are delighted with my verses.

Burns's irritation with Thomson occasionally comes through:

Dainty Davie I have heard sung nineteen thousand, nine hundred and ninety nine times, & always with the chorus to the low part of the tune; and nothing, since a highland wench in the Cowgate once bore me three bastards at a birth, has surprised me so much as your opinion on this subject. If it will not suit, as I proposed, we will lay two of the stanzas together, & make the chorus follow that.

I can see all the singers trying it out.

The feature which Burns repeatedly stressed was "Simplicity". Songs are made to be heard, not read and re-read on the page. Complex figurative language does not work at a hearing.

Give me leave to criticise your taste in the only thing in which it is in my opinion reprehensible: (you know I ought to know something of my own trade). Of pathos, Sentiment & Point you are a compleat judge; but there is a quality more necessary than either, in a Song, & which is the very essence of a ballad, I mean Simplicity—now, if I mistake not, this last feature you are a little apt to sacrifice to the former.

He was aware that the best poetry does not always make the best songs: Nobody has ever explained the magic by which an ordinary prosaic line set to music can sing so beautifully.

If you mean my dear sir, that all the Songs in your Collection shall be Poetry of the first merit, I am afraid you will find difficulty in the undertaking more than you are aware of. — There is peculiar rhythmus in many of our airs, a necessity of adapting syllables to the emphasis, or what I would call the feature notes of the tune, that cramps the Poet, & lays him under almost insuperable difficulties. For instance, in the air, My Wife's a Wanton Wee Thing, if a few lines, smooth & pretty, can be adapted to it, it is all that you can expect.

Where Thomson was all for having words in the most elegant English style, Burns was insistent that he should write in Scots.

These English songs gravel me to death.—I have not that command of the language that I have of my native tongue.—In fact I think that my ideas are more barren in English than in Scottish.

There is a naivete, a pastoral simplicity, in a slight intermixture of Scots words and phraseology, which is more in unison (at least to my taste& I will add, to every genuine Caledonian taste), with the simple pathos, or rustic sprightliness, of our native music, than any English verses whatever.

Again and again in his letters to Thomson, he insists that the language must be Scottish, but equally he refers to a "sprinkling" of Scots words. That was a part of the "simplicity". He knew both that the urban audiences would shut off if a song was too broad; he knew also that Scots

folksongs were seldom heavy with dialect. In many cases they were localised versions of songs sung throughout the British Isles. As Hamish Henderson said: “Ballad Scots grazes ballad English along its whole length.”

His sources were varied. I have already mentioned that he possessed all the collections of instrumental music. When he first began working with Thomson, he told him he need only send the first line of any song he wanted Burns to amend, because he already had recourse to all the collections of Scottish songs. He also collected from singers in Ayrshire, the most important being his wife who, he claimed, knew all the ballads in the country and had the finest wood-note wild he ever heard. On his tours to different parts of Scotland in 1787-88 he not only visited locations mentioned in the songs he already knew, he also learned Highland tunes and picked up Scotch songs. He refers to getting a song viva voce from a young lass, and it’s unlikely his fiddle playing allowed him to prick down the notes as they were sung. Usually he got someone else, like his co-worker, Stephen Clarke, to note down tunes, as he did from the Reverend George Clunie. His note to Thomson in 1794 about “Ca’ the Yowes” gives some idea of his practice with regard to editing:

I am flattered at your adopting “Ca’ the Yowes to the Knowes”, as it was owing to me that it ever saw the light.-- About seven years ago, I was well acquainted with a worthy little fellow of a clergyman, a Mr Clunzie, who sung it charmingly; & at my request, Mr Clarke took it down from his singing. – When I gave it to Johnson, I added some stanzas to the song & mended others, but still it will not do for you.- In a solitary stroll which I took today, I tried my hand on a few pastoral lines, following up the idea of the chorus, which I would preserve.- Here it is, with all its crudities and imperfections on its head.

Not quite. Gordeanna will sing the first set, from the Musical Museum.

Ca’ the Yowes

These remarks to Thomson about the treatment of that song conflict rather with the letter he wrote to William Tytler, author of a history of Scottish Song, about his editing practice in 1787.

Sir, Inclosed I have sent you a sample of the old pieces that are still to be found among our peasantry in the West. I once had a great many of these fragments and some of these here, entire; but as I had no idea then that anybody cared for them, I have forgot them.—I invariably hold it sacrilege to add anything of my own to help out with the shattered wrecks of these venerable old compositions; but they have many various readings.

With Thomson he changed the perspective by saying that he wouldn’t alter a song –unless he felt he could AMEND it.

Another feature on which his practice diverged from his theory, or at least his speculation in the first Commonplace Book, was rhyme:

There is a degree of wild irregularity in many of the compositions and fragments which are daily sung to [old airs] by my compeers the common people – a certain happy arrangement of Old Scotch syllables, and yet, very frequently, nothing, not even LIKE rhyme, or sameness of jingle at the ends of the lines. This has made me sometimes imagine that perhaps, it might be possible for a Scotch Poet, with a nice, judicious ear, to set compositions to many of our most favourite airs, particularly that class of them mentioned above, independent of rhyme altogether.

Now, to Robert Burns, rhyme was second only to breathing:

Leeze me on rhyme! It's aye a treasure,
My chief, amaist my only pleasure,
At hame, afield, at wark or leisure,
The Muse, puir hizzie!
Tho' rough and raploch be her measure,
She's seldom lazy.

I am nae poet in a sense,
But Just a rhymer like by chance,
An' hae to learnin nae pretence,
Yet, what the matter?
Whene'er my muse does on me glance
I jingle at her.

His use of rhyme is one of the things that marks his songs as different from folksongs. As I pointed out at the start, the great body of folksong favours the four-line verse with a rhyme on the second and fourth lines. That is no challenge to a born rhymers. He may not in the songs use rhyme itself for comic effect as he does in the verse epistles, though he comes close in songs like "What Can a Young Lassie Dae wi' an Auld Man?" or "The Deil's Awa'" where the word "exciseman" summons up: "Prize, man", "Strathspeys, man" and "Rejoice, man". Perhaps the greatest rhyming challenge he set himself in verse and song was in his cantata from late 1784, "Love and Liberty" or "The Jolly Beggars" when every piece of recitative was in a different stanza form, including all the complex rhyme patterns of Scottish tradition, Standard Habbie, Ballad Royal, Christ's Kirk on the Green and Cherrie and the Slae; and in the songs he covered all the dance rhythms of the day, jig, slip-jig, strathspey and reel. It is hard to believe that when Thomson asked him about it eight years later, Burns claimed he had forgotten all about it, except for some lines of the last song.

A different sort of challenge was set by the first song I'll look at in more detail, though perversely I'll not examine the marriage of text and tune. Most people now know Mary Morison to a modern slow air, but Burns wrote it to the reel tune "Duncan Davison". In the old song with that title in the Merry Muses, the name Duncan Davison occurs once only in the rhyming position and is matched with the line: she gaed o'er the muir to spin. The name "Morrison" did not make

rhyming any easier. The only word that springs to mind being the Shakespearian “orison”. The coward’s way out would have been to tuck it at the beginning of a line out of rhyme’s way.

O Mary at thy window be,
it is the wish’d, the trysted hour;
Those smiles and glances let me see,
That make the miser’s treasure poor:
How blithely wad I bide the stoure,
A weary slave frae sun to sun,
Could I the rich reward secure,
The lovely Mary Morison!

Burns puts the name in the prominent position and makes the name stand out further when he scorns rhyme on the stressed antepenultimate syllable leaving the last two syllables unstressed with assonance on the sixth line’s last stressed syllable each time: sun, toun, shown. The stanza is the Ballad Royal, which as well as the single rhyme at lines 1 & 3, demands the quadruple at lines 2, 4, 5 & 7 in each verse. But if the rhyme is complex, the other features meet Burns’s demands for simplicity and a sprinkling of Scots. Instead of metaphor or simile, the imagery is that of hyperbole, always acceptable in folksong. The second stanza in particular uses single words to conjure a vivid picture, the trembling string, the lichtit ha’, recalling for a listener in the 21st century the flambeaux of a world before electricity. Hugh MacDiarmid, asked to select Burns’s best line of poetry, chose “You arena Mary Morison,” which is given greatness by its context.

Yestreen when to the trembling string
The Dance gaed through the lichtit ha’,
To thee my fancy took its wing;
I sat, but neither heard nor saw;
Though this was fair and that was braw,
And yon the toast o’ a’ the toun,
I sighed, and said amang them a’:
Ye arena Mary Morison.

O Mary, canst thou wreck his peace
Wha for thy sake wad gladly die?
Or canst thou break that heart o’ his
Whase only faute is loving thee?
If love for love thou wilt na gie,
At least be pity to me shown.
A thought ungentle canna be
The thought o’ Mary Morison.

Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation.

I realise that many of you here are familiar with the song and its background, but I'll summarise for those who are not. To prepare the ground for an Act of Union between Scotland and England, 31 Scottish commissioners were nominated by Queen Anne in 1704 from the Members of the Scots Parliament, to meet with the English Commissioners. Thirty of the Scots belonged to the Whig Party, which supported the Queen and the Hanoverian Succession. Many of them also benefited from the payment of £20,000 which was provided by the English Government ostensibly in payment of outstanding debts, but widely viewed as a bribe to see the Act of Union through. The first article of the Act was passed by a majority of thirty three. In the political pamphlets of the day the Scots Commissioners were referred to as "the parcel of rogues".

In at least two of the published collections of music which Robert Burns owned, *The Caledonian Pocket Companion* and *McGibbon's Collection of Scots Tunes*, there was a tune called "Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation". In one of his letters Burns says that whenever he met with a tune with some facetious idea in its title, he felt the inclination to try a couple of verses on that idea.

Burns wrote his song in 1792. That was the year when the Scottish Radical, Thomas Muir was sentenced to fourteen year's deportation for distributing Tom Paine's "Rights of Man" and for sympathising with the aims of the French Revolution, a year in which Burns himself was to be threatened with loss of his livelihood as a gauger for demonstrating similar sympathies., a year in which he encouraged the editor of the *Edinburgh Gazetteer* to "lay bare, with undaunted heart and steady hand, that horrid mass of corruption called Politics and Statecraft." It is tempting to speculate that he may have had the Scots politicians of his own day in mind when he wrote "Such a Parcel of Rogues" but there is no hint of that in the song, and he certainly didn't know about our day.

Fareweel to a' our Scottish fame,
Fareweel our ancient glory;
Fareweel even to our Scottish name,
Sae fam'd in martial story.
Now Sark rinso'er the Solway Sands
And Tweed rins to the ocean,
To mark where England's province stands,
Such a parcel o' rogues in a nation.

As in many of Burns's songs, this is a dramatic piece: the voice we hear is not that of Robert Burns. The great artistic achievement of the song is the creation of the I-figure, of the old Scottish patriot sunk in dismay at the loss of his nation's independence but with anger smouldering just below, and with his hatred and scorn for the traitors bursting out at intervals. Burns's text has the resignation and dismay in the low first part of the tune, the anger coming to the surface in the high second part, and the hissing hatred in the last-line refrain, which has no connection with the rest of the stanza in terms of grammar or meaning, though it is linked by rhyme. The use of "now" in stanzas 1 & 2, and "thus" in stanza 3 gives a sense of the proximity of the disaster. We can perhaps picture the old man as speaking on 25th of March 1707, the very day when the Scots Parliament voted itself out of existence and the Chancellor, the Earl of Seafield, could say, "Now, there's ane end of ane auld sang."

The mood of despair and powerlessness is particularly marked in the first stanza. There are six lines without a single plosive – I don't just mean there are no words beginning with a "p" or a "b" – there is not a "p" or a "b" in the whole song until you come to the word "province", into which the singer can pack all the old man's anger, following it with the sibilant disgust of the refrain line. The stress on "province" is an extra one because the musical emphasis in line 7 is on the fourth and eighth syllables. This serves to point up the old man's primary objection to the Act, that the Union does not treat England and Scotland as equal sovereign states but reduces the ancient kingdom of Scotland to a dependency.

The match of text and tune is also important in the repeated despondent "Fareweel" of the opening lines. Burns departs from his usual syllabic lyric-writing to give four notes to each of the three "Fareweels". The third: "Fareweel even to the Scottish name", prophetic in 1707, is aimed at the fact that by 1792 Scotland was widely referred to as "North Britain" and probably there were already people referring to the whole island as England. "Now Sark rins ower the Solway Sands and Tweed rins to the ocean" as Sark and Tweed had always done, the difference being that they no longer mark the boundary of an independent country but of a mere province of England.

What force or guile could not subdue
Thro' many warlike ages,
Is wrought now by a coward few
For hireling traitors' wages;
The English steel we could disdain,
Secure in valour's station,
But English gold has been our bane;
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation.

Stanza two is the one which makes direct reference to the villains of the refrain and in a single couplet brands them as "Hirelings", "cowards" and "traitors" who have sold out the tradition of "countless ages". The antithesis of the metals, steel and gold, is typical of the clear imagery and patterning that Burns liked in his lyric-writing, though it is perhaps one step away from the simplicity of folk-song. The meaning of this stanza is also less clear, with its elliptical reference to Scottish nationhood which "force or guile could not subdue" but which is now "wrought" – worked or twisted by the commissioners into whatever shape they, or the English, want.

O would , or I had seen the day
That treason thus should sell us,
My auld grey head had lain in clay,
Wi' BRUCE and loyal WALLACE!
But pith and power, till my last hour,
I'll mak this declaration;
We are bought and sold for English gold,
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation.

The third stanza invokes the names of the Scottish freedom fighters, Bruce and Wallace, despairing that they are dead, as the speaker wishes he had been before this disastrous event. Again the rising second part of the tune brings him back to defiance, this time given extra

emphasis by internal rhyme on lines 5 and 7. It is clear from the musical stress that “But” in line 5, is a conjunction and not, as some commentators have suggested, the preposition meaning “without”. “But pith and power” means “But with all my might”.

This is not as close to folk-song as “John Anderson” or “Auld Lang Syne”. It shows sophistication in its two-strain melody, in the imagery of the second stanza and in its rhyme. The final word “nation” of the title means that the running rhyme is a feminine one, over two syllables, and this is alternated with a male rhyme, “fame/name”, “sands/stands” etc. The feminine rhyme (or assonance) is used particularly boldly in “sell us/ Wallace”. The song demands historical knowledge of its listeners, whether in 1792 or 2009.

In writing a song the poet must also have regard to singability. Here every stressed syllable, with three deliberate exceptions, falls on a naturally open or long vowel sound (No “cut” or “hit”). The masculine end-rhymes of the odd lines, in particular, are on open syllables or syllables closed with a nasal. (fame, sands, subdue, bane, day) The exceptions are the occurrences of “England” or “English” always occurring the angry part of the tune with stress on the first syllable with its slack [i] sound of the Scottish pronunciation, the ugly sound contributing to the scorn of the speaker.

Burns began song-writing at the age of fifteen, by 1792 he refers to it as his hobby-horse, in his arguments with Thomson he points out that he ought to know about it because it is his trade. I hope you all agree that in the hands of Burns it was an art.