

‘Cant About Decorum’: George Thomson’s Singular Edition of Robert Burns’s ‘The Jolly Beggars’

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Robert Burns’s song editor George Thomson (1757–1851) issued the poet’s cantata ‘Love and Liberty’, also known as ‘The Jolly Beggars’, for the first time with music in 1818 (a setting of Burns’s text for narrator, solo singers, choir, and piano trio). The musical score was by London theatre composer Sir Henry Bishop and the text was edited by Thomson in line with his strict policy of decency and politeness. This essay tracks Thomson’s editorial curation of Burns’s text in the context of polite ‘improvement’ and argues that while pursuing apparent ‘decorum’, Thomson’s treatment struggles to negotiate the unruliness at the centre of what is now considered one of Burns’s most important works. The article pays particular attention to the complicated publication history of this work, revealing a chronology of popular print editions in advance of Thomson’s own, as well as the notable influence of Walter Scott’s remarks on the piece in the *Quarterly Review*. Examining the musical context of Thomson’s ‘Jolly Beggars’ alongside the text reveals a similar aspiration for elevation and the article presents the conversation between Thomson and Bishop, from manuscript correspondence.

‘Love and Liberty: A Cantata’, or, as it would come to be known, ‘The Jolly Beggars’, has an unusual place in Robert Burns’s oeuvre.¹ As the nearest the poet comes to a dramatic work, this bawdy cantata sits alongside ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ among the most formally ambitious examples of his writing and has often been valued by critics as Burns’s other great masterpiece. Matthew Arnold, for example, proclaimed that

When the largeness and freedom of Burns get full sweep, as in *Tam o’ Shanter*, or still more in that puissant and splendid production, *The Jolly Beggars*, his world may be what it will, his poetic genius triumphs over it. In the world of *The Jolly Beggars* there is more than hideousness and squalor, there is bestiality; yet the piece is a superb poetic success. It has a breadth, truth,

Research for this article was encompassed by the AHRC-funded project ‘Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century’, 2011–16 (AH/I003738/1); Principal Investigator, Gerard Carruthers.

¹ For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising. The 1818 edition of ‘The Jolly Beggars’, which is the focus of this article, appears as ST 134 in *Robert Burns’s Songs for George Thomson*, ed. Kirsteen McCue, *The Oxford Edition of the Works of Robert Burns*, vol. 4 (Oxford, 2021), 241–76.

and power which make the famous scene in Auerbach's Cellar, of Goethe's *Faust*, seem artificial and tame beside it, and which are only matched by Shakespeare and Aristophanes.²

'The Jolly Beggars' was authored as early as 1785 in the flurry of creativity that preceded Burns's first published collection of poems and songs. Yet, to some, it offers a tantalizing glimpse into what might have been, had Burns only lived beyond 1796. In reality, the poet was increasingly focused on standalone lyrics in the 1790s, but there is evidence that he seriously considered creating another theatrical work.³ Thus, in the very first number of the *Quarterly Review* in 1809, Walter Scott regretted how much of Burns's talent had been 'frittered away' on 'the monotonous task of writing love verses'. Contributing to 'musical collections' proved a 'constant waste of his fancy and power of verse in small and insignificant compositions', a 'slavish labour' that 'diverted the poet from his grand plan of dramatic composition.'⁴

Notwithstanding Scott's complaint about 'slavish' song-writing, Burns's status as the 'king of song' became integral to his nineteenth-century apotheosis as Scotland's national bard.⁵ His role in the development of Scottish song was indeed momentous, but his involvement in a wider British and European culture of national song that was ascendant in the late eighteenth century has been less often recognized. 'The Jolly Beggars' plays a distinctive role in this aspect of Burns's achievement, embodying a tension around decorum in the development of modern song. The cantata immortalizes a group of underworld characters, Burns's 'randie gangrel bodies', on a drunken night in 'Poosie-Nansie's', a real-life tavern in Mauchline, Ayrshire, that Burns himself frequented. A soldier, an old maid, a Highland widow, a fiddler, a tinker and a bard all tell each other (with the help of a narrator) the stories of their lives, voicing their radical political views and graphically describing their sexual antics, thus balancing the 'Love and Liberty' of Burns's original title. Its first public appearance with musical notation (as far as we can deduce) was the edition published by the Edinburgh-based editor George Thomson in 1818 with a new musical score by the English theatre composer Henry Bishop.⁶ Celebrated, at that point, as Musical Director of Covent Garden, Bishop was adept at providing scores and incidental music for a wide range of dramatic and operatic productions. He had also recently become house-composer to the London music publisher Goulding D'Almaine & Co., where he led on a range of productions (including several national song projects) for the domestic music market.⁷ Via Thomson's editorial hand, Burns's subversive early dramatic work set amongst the disreputable underclass of Ayrshire was at once refashioned for the British stage and parlour.

The cantata is a puzzling choice for Thomson. In his first, unsolicited approach to Burns, Thomson made very clear his intentions for the song project that would become the unwieldy

² See 'The Study of Poetry' [1880], in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, vol. 9: *English Literature and Irish Politics* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1973), 161–88 (186). Carol McGuiRK comments of 'Tam o' Shanter' that some critics may 'prefer Burns's other, less obviously artful masterwork, "Love and Liberty" in *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Tavistock, 1997), 151.

³ Burns wrote in 1788 that he was 'thinking of something, in the rural way, of the Drama-kind'. See 'To [Ro]bert Graham Esq., Sept' 10th 1788', in *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson, 2nd edn: ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols (Oxford, 1985), 1. 313–15 (314). Hereafter cited as 'Letters'. James Currie's 1800 edition prints a letter in which it is claimed that in 1790 Burns had settled on a subject, with the projected play titled *Rob Macquechan's Elshon*. See *The Works of Robert Burns; with An Account of his Life* [...], ed. James Currie, 4 vols (Liverpool, 1800), 1. 200–2. Hereafter cited as 'Currie'.

⁴ Review of *Reliques of Robert Burns*, ed. R. H. Cromek (London, 1808), *Quarterly Review*, 1 (1809), 19–36 (32).

⁵ William McDowall, *History of the Burgh of Dumfries* (Edinburgh, 1867), 733. On Burns and song, see *The Scots Musical Museum*, ed. Murray Pittock, The Oxford Edition of the Works of Robert Burns, vols 2 and 3 (Oxford, 2018); and *Songs for George Thomson*, ed. McCue.

⁶ See B. Carr and N. Temperley, 'Sir Henry (Rowley) Bishop (1786–1855)', in *Oxford Music Online* (January 2001) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40027>> accessed 19 July 2022. Bishop was Musical Director at Covent Garden from 1810 to 1824 at which point he moved to the same position at Drury Lane. Not long after this he took up a key position at Vauxhall Gardens. He was a founding director of the Philharmonic Society and held the Reid chair of music in Edinburgh from 1841 to 1843.

⁷ For further details about Bishop and Goulding see *James Hogg: Contributions to Musical Collections and Miscellaneous Songs*, ed. Kirsteen McCue (Edinburgh, 2014), 323–4. Bishop requested that Thomson ask permission from Goulding & D'Almaine for Bishop's involvement with 'The Jolly Beggars'. Bishop to Thomson, 30 January 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,264, f. 282.

Select Collection, published in a variety of forms between 1793 and 1846. Criticizing the extant Scottish song tradition, he wrote: ‘We are desirous to have the poetry improved, wherever it seems unworthy of the music [...] some charming melodies are united to mere nonsense and doggerel, while others are accommodated with rhymes so loose and indelicate, as cannot be sung in decent company.’⁸ This question of delicacy remained paramount throughout Thomson’s career: in 1850 we find an elderly Thomson boasting that among the hundreds of songs he had published, ‘there is not one of a vulgar character, or which may not be sung by the most delicate of the sex.’⁹ This was partly a business decision, reflecting Thomson’s view of his audience as centring on middle- and upper-class women. That said, there was an ideological edge to Thomson’s quest for lyrics that would ‘do for singing in the company of ladies’, reflecting a mission of ‘improvement.’¹⁰ Recent work has underlined the extraordinarily varied culture of improvement in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as it continued to evolve from a core concern with the management of land to embrace a whole range of commercial, political and cultural activities.¹¹ Improving national songs, in this context, meant aiming at a polite standard of aesthetic and moral purity. Renovated virtue would characterize a newly mature song tradition; one that Thomson sought to manifest through a large group of contemporary writers he commissioned, including Burns, Joanna Baillie, Walter Scott, James Hogg, Thomas Campbell, Anne Hunter, David ‘Macbeth’ Moir, Allan Cunningham and Lord Byron, along with musical arrangements by leading continental composers including Joseph Haydn, Leopold Koželuch, Ludwig van Beethoven, Carl Maria von Weber and Johann Nepomuk Hummel.

‘Four nations’ and archipelagic histories have mounted a sustained challenge to the Anglocentrism of British cultural studies in recent decades, and Thomson’s work reminds us that cultural production across the turn of the nineteenth century could be highly internationalized at the same time that it was regionally and nationally oriented.¹² Still, how do we account for Thomson’s inclusion in his project of ‘The Jolly Beggars’, a work described by Thomas Crawford as a ‘tribute to instinct and libido’, or by Nigel Leask as ‘centrally concerned with hedonistic pleasure’?¹³ Thomson suggested to Burns in 1794 that he attempt ‘a comic opera in three acts’, presenting drama as ‘a field worthy of your genius.’¹⁴ This never materialized, and ‘The Jolly Beggars’ was a challenging substitute. In his letter of invitation to Bishop, Thomson explained that ‘The scene indeed is laid in the very lowest department of low life, the actors being a set of strolling vagrants, met to carouse and barter their rags and plunder for liquor in a hedge ale house.’¹⁵ Burns had himself been dissuaded from publishing it in 1787 by the rhetorician Hugh Blair, who was actively involved in an advisory capacity with Burns’s Edinburgh edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* that year. Blair found the poem ‘much too licentious’, and it only resurfaced in full in a sequence of posthumous pirated editions beginning in 1799.¹⁶

Strange as it might seem, Thomson had long had his eye on the work. He apparently queried Burns about it in 1793, only to be told: ‘I have forgot the Cantata you allude to, as I kept no

⁸ ‘Mr Thomson to Mr Burns, Edinburgh, September, 1792’, in Currie, 4. 1–3 (1–2). Currie’s edition is the only surviving source for the bulk of Thomson’s half of his correspondence with Burns and the texts are not entirely reliable.

⁹ ‘To Robt Chambers Esq^{re} Edinb^{gh}, Aug^r 1850’, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,269, ff. 141–5 (f. 144).

¹⁰ ‘Mr Thomson to Mr Burns, Edinburgh, 27th October, 1794’, in Currie, 4. 185–6 (185).

¹¹ See Gerard Lee McKeever, *Dialectics of Improvement: Scottish Romanticism, 1786–1831* (Edinburgh, 2020).

¹² See for example Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, NJ, 1997); and John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603–1707* (Oxford, 2009). On Burns’s European reception, see Murray Pittock (ed.), *The Reception of Robert Burns in Europe* (London, 2014).

¹³ Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh, 1965), 132; and Nigel Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford, 2010), 238.

¹⁴ ‘Mr Thomson to Mr Burns’, in Currie, 4. 167–9 (168).

¹⁵ Thomson to Bishop, 27 January 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,268, ff. 11–12.

¹⁶ See J. De Lancey Ferguson, ‘Burns and Hugh Blair’, *Burns Chronicle and Club Directory*, 2nd series, 7 (1932), 94–101 (96). The first of the unauthorized tracts in which the poem appeared is, *The Jolly Beggars: A Cantata* (Glasgow, 1799). Thomson published an excerpt, the song beginning, ‘A Highland lad my love was born’, in 1805 with a setting by Haydn. See *Songs for George Thomson*, ed. McCue, ST120.

copy, & indeed did not know that it was in existence; however, I remember that none of the songs pleased myself, except the last – something about, | “Courts for cowards were erected, | Churches built to please the priest”.¹⁷ Taking Burns at his word, this is a striking dismissal of what would become one of his signature works. It is possible that Hugh Blair’s criticism continued to resonate with a poet who certainly distinguished between works appropriate for publication and private bawdry. Still, across 1794 and 1795 Burns was perfectly happy to send Thomson poems as outrageous as ‘Ode to Spring’, ‘Cumnock Psalms’ and ‘When Princes and Prelates’ (or ‘Why should na poor folk mowe’)—the latter of which Thomson annotated with, ‘What a pity this is not publishable’.¹⁸ These and several other ‘outrageous’ lyrics were published in *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, but only for private circulation, in 1799. Regardless, twenty-two years after Burns’s death, in 1818, Thomson did eventually publish ‘The Jolly Beggars’ with Bishop’s musical score as a one-off appendix to volume five of his *Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs*.¹⁹ It thus occupies a privileged formal position in Thomson’s work; and, even following a severe, censorious editing process, remains at the bolder end of the material he published.

Widespread critical resentment of Thomson as an editor gained pace in the early twentieth century: J. De Lancey Ferguson savaged him on the grounds of having exploited Burns financially, while James C. Dick characterized him as an editor who ‘meddled and muddled’.²⁰ James Kinsley’s Oxford University Press edition of Burns, for decades the standard text and only now being replaced by a new Oxford edition, remains impatient throughout with Thomson’s ‘moralistic nervousness’ and ‘gratuitous tinkering’.²¹ Such aesthetic criticisms of Thomson are not unfounded but they tend to obscure both the nuance and context of his work. Thomson mobilized a remarkable network of poets and composers in his goal to meet what he felt was the appetite for affective—but inoffensive—national song material among affluent Britons. This was taking place in a competitive publishing environment; one in which the posthumous reception of Burns was increasingly a Scottish national imperative, as Enlightenment emphases on ‘the moral, political and even patriotic importance of pursuing the polite arts and sciences’ were retooled for the celebrity popular culture of the nineteenth century.²² Thomson’s own collections may not have been particularly lucrative, but he played a role in enabling the cultural and commercial powerhouse of Burns as a standard of taste in Scotland and around the British Empire. Rather than dismissing the editor as a foolish prig, then, closer investigation of ‘The Jolly Beggars’ can help us to unpack the way in which Thomson’s work—like Burns’s—develops an important, watchful combination of the polite and the impolite, leaving the cantata’s bristling energy pulling against a stringent editing process.

BURNS FOR THE DRAWING ROOM

As he outlined in his first preface of 1793, Thomson was dismayed by the quality of production, as well as much of the content, of existing collections of Scottish song. In short, he wished to create a product in every way superior to those of his immediate competitors, and this was

¹⁷ ‘To [George Thomson], [early Sept. 1793]’, in *Letters*, 2. 239–48 (244).

¹⁸ See ‘To Mr George Thomson, [Jan. 1795]’, ‘To [George Thomson], [Sept. 1794]’, and ‘To [George Thomson], [July 1794]’ in *Letters*, 2. 335–7 (336), 306–10 (308–9), and 302–3 (302).

¹⁹ See George Thomson (ed.), *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs [...] With Select Verses adapted to the Airs, including upwards of One Hundred new Songs by Burns, Together with his celebrated Poem of The Jolly Beggars Set to Music by Henry R. Bishop* (Edinburgh, 1818). The cantata appears with its own pagination as the second part of the volume (preface and text only 1–6 followed by the musical score with Burns’s text underlaid paginated 1–30).

²⁰ See J. De Lancey Ferguson, ‘Cancelled Passages in the Letters of Robert Burns to George Thomson’, *Burns Chronicle and Club Directory*, 2nd series, 4 (1929), 90–103; and *The Songs of Robert Burns: A Study in Tone-Poetry*, ed. James C. Dick (London, 1903), xviii.

²¹ See *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols (Oxford, 1968), 3. 990, 1409. Hereafter cited as ‘Kinsley’. For a more recent attack on Thomson, see Carol McQuirk, ‘George Thomson and Robert Burns: With Friends Like These ...’, *Eighteenth-Century Scotland*, 9 (1995), 16–20.

²² Nicholas Phillipson, ‘The Scottish Enlightenment’, in Roy S. Porter and Mikuláš Teich (eds), *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1981), 19–40 (19).

not lost on Burns.²³ While seeking to create a collection of inherent value for future generations, however, Thomson had an eye on a growing market for domestic performance, musical skills and literary appreciation amongst the new ‘middling sort’. Indeed, Thomson’s antiquarian project was driven in part by the commercial opportunities presented by new production methods for music and text. In contrast to one of his chief competitors—James Johnson, whose *Scots Musical Museum* was Burns’s other national song project—Thomson’s volumes were produced in larger folio format, like those of the Edinburgh-based Italians Pietro Urbani and Domenico Corri.²⁴ The superior quality of his paper (from Cowans of Penicuik), the engravings (by Balbirnie, Lizars and others), the newly commissioned illustrations of songs by artists such as David Allan and R. T. Stothard, alongside his stellar line-up of poets and composers, set Thomson’s volumes apart from those of any of his Scottish contemporaries. While the aforementioned *Scots Musical Museum* sold for six shillings a volume, Thomson’s volumes, priced at a guinea, cost almost four times as much.

Thomson’s own story was one of upward mobility.²⁵ Having come to Edinburgh as a schoolmaster’s son from northeast Scotland in the early 1770s, he had made his way in the city, rising to the role of Senior Clerk to the Board of Trustees for the Arts and Manufactures in 1780. His attendance at concerts of the Edinburgh Musical Society across the ’70s and ’80s introduced him to the newest music from Europe and also to the sophisticated soundscape of Europeans singing Scots songs.²⁶ Contemporary European musicians who had arrived in Edinburgh to perform for the Society, including the aforementioned Urbani and Corri, produced their own sophisticated Italianate arrangements of Scots songs. Thomson, however, developed a liking for music from the Austro-German school, and a particular fondness for the chamber music of Joseph Haydn. He boldly contacted leading poets directly or arranged for their contributions through their publishers. Furthermore, maximizing his professional links with a Scottish diplomat working for the British Legation in Vienna and utilizing foreign banking networks via the London firm Coutts & Co., Thomson contacted composer after composer, inviting each of them to ‘set’ or arrange melodies that he sent for voice and forte piano, along with separate parts for violin, violoncello and even (in some of the later volumes) for German flute.

Thomson aimed for a similar sense of decorous elevation with musical content as with texts. He complained that some contemporary collections omitted ‘many charming Airs’ while others included too many ‘trifling and inferior Airs’. Even the use of the term ‘Air’ implied raising the humble tune or melody to something more sophisticated.²⁷ Musical brilliance would be in vain if it could not be reproduced by amateurs, however. Thomson commented that ‘The Through Bass’ was too often ‘denoted by figures’ (a system which indicated to the player, through a combination of the bass line and a series of figures, the harmonies they might use for their accompaniments), which players for the most part did not understand.²⁸ Thomson wanted his musicians to be presented with something they could play and which would in turn challenge their musical skills and develop their musical knowledge. There was thus a continuous thread of ‘improvement’ in Thomson’s attitude to both music and verse, with his customers—like the national song tradition—subject to a process of polite amelioration. Subsequently, by choosing

²³ Burns’s first letter to Thomson refers to Thomson’s collection as of ‘very superior merit’; while in April 1793, Burns writes that his ‘own vanity is flattered, when you give my works a place in your elegant & superb Work’. See ‘To M^r George Thomson, 16th Sept 1792’ and ‘To M^r George Thomson, Ap. 26 [1793]’, in *Letters*, 2. 148–50 (149) and 210–11 (211).

²⁴ The *Museum* included 600 songs and was published in six volumes of 100 songs each between 1787 and 1803.

²⁵ See Kirsteen McCue, ‘George Thomson (1757–1851)’, *ODNB* (September 2004) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/27302>> accessed 19 July 2022. See also James Cuthbert Hadden, *George Thomson: The Friend of Burns* (London, 1898).

²⁶ See Thomson’s essay on ‘St Cecilia’s Hall’ in Robert Chambers, *Traditions of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1868), 272–9; and also the chapter he wrote for John Wilson and Robert Chambers (eds), *The Land of Burns: A Series of Landscapes and Portraits Illustrative of the Life and Writings of the Scottish Poet*, 2 vols (Glasgow, 1840), 1. 38–42.

²⁷ The introduction to *Songs for George Thomson*, ed. McCue, xxxiii–lxiii addresses Thomson’s editorial policy and Burns’s responses to it in more detail.

²⁸ ‘Preface’ to the first set of twenty-five songs of Thomson’s *Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs* (London, 1793), 1.

to commission Bishop to set 'The Jolly Beggars', Thomson made clear his intention to lift the tunes Burns had listed for each of the songs in his cantata to new musical and theatrical heights, refurbishing it as an appropriate middle-class entertainment. Still, the evidence of Burns's stimuli for the work, which included John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* (1728), suggests that this was not entirely alien to the original.²⁹

Furthermore, what might seem like alternative popular/polite strains of Burns's reception history in the early nineteenth century were deeply interwoven. This is revealed by the publication history required to grapple with Thomson's idiosyncratic 1818 edition. Following their series of pirated chapbooks of the piece, begun in 1799, Stewart and Meikle of Glasgow collected it with other chapbook material in *The Poetical Miscellany* in 1800.³⁰ Alongside other contentious works suppressed by James Currie for his first major edition of Burns produced the same year, 'The Jolly Beggars' was then republished by Thomas Stewart in both *Poems Ascribed to Robert Burns* (1801) and *Stewart's Edition of Burns' Poems* (1802).³¹ The selection of a few songs from the cantata in the 1799 *Merry Muses of Caledonia* reveals the involvement of the work in the circulation of Burns bawdry, marking how porous the dividing line between the mainstream and illicit or 'reserved' canon of Burns material could be.³² The piece also appeared in a number of other editions prior to Thomson, including Robert Hartley Cromek's *Select Scottish Songs* (1810) and the edition of *Poems by Robert Burns* (1811) to which Josiah Walker contributed his 'Life'.³³

Thomson included a footnote to his 1818 'Preface to the Jolly Beggars', which has generated a degree of confusion about his text:

*The Editor has seen one Manuscript of the Poem, and one only, in which a Quack Doctor was introduced, but whose Song seemed to him less happily conceived than any of the other Songs: And that Song not having been included in the Manuscript communicated to him, he presumes that the Poet, on re-considering it, had not deemed it worthy of making a part of the Work.*³⁴

This posits that the editor had access to a manuscript, although Thomson does not make clear that the sender in question was the poet himself.³⁵ It would certainly have been out of character for a man who went to lengths to secure his legal claim to many of Burns's songs to have left any ambiguity about his possession of such a treasure.³⁶ In 1818, we find the poet's brother Gilbert Burns writing to Thomson: 'I meditate an application to M^r Lumsden for the manuscript of the Jolly Beggars through the means of my Son William who I expect will soon be settled in Glasgow or it's [*sic*] neighborhood'.³⁷ This again suggests that Thomson did not have his own copy of the cantata, which we could expect to be mentioned while his friend Gilbert considers sending to Glasgow for one.

²⁹ For further details of the influences on Burns with regard to 'The Jolly Beggars' see Thomas Crawford, *Society and the Lyric* (Edinburgh, 1979), 198–201; and Leask, *Burns and Pastoral*, 236–46. W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson also give a detailed note on this context in their edition of *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, 4 vols (London, 1896), 2. 291–313.

³⁰ *The Poetical Miscellany; containing Posthumous Poems, Songs, Epitaphs and Epigrams by Robert Burns, the Ayrshire Poet; and several other Poetical Pieces Original and Selected* (Glasgow, 1800), 1–14.

³¹ *Poems Ascribed to Robert Burns, the Ayrshire Bard, not contained in any edition of his works hitherto published* (Glasgow, 1801), 1–19; *Stewart's Edition of Burns' Poems, including a number of Original Pieces, never before published [...]* (Glasgow, 1802), 289–301.

³² Robert Burns, *The Merry Muses of Caledonia; A Collection of Favourite Scots Songs, Ancient and Modern; Selected for Use of the Crochallan Fencibles* (1799; facsimile repr.: Columbia, SC, 1999).

³³ R. H. Cromek (ed.), *Select Scottish Songs, Ancient and Modern; with Critical Observations and Biographical Notices, by Robert Burns*, 2 vols (London, 1810), 2. 227–55; *Poems by Robert Burns; with an Account of his Life, and miscellaneous Remarks on his Writings [...]*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1811), 2. 169–89.

³⁴ See, *The Jolly Beggars in A Select Collection* (Edinburgh, 1818). This quotation is from Thomson's 'Preface', 2.

³⁵ See, for example, Hadden, *George Thomson: The Friend of Burns*, 356.

³⁶ Burns sent Thomson a 'Deed of Assignment' in August 1793 and a 'Certificate' in May 1796, the latter of which has not survived. See '[Deed of Assignment of Copyright to George Thomson]' & 'To M^r George Thomson, [About 18 May 1796]', in *Letters*, 2. 227 & 380–1. De Lancey Ferguson makes a damning judgment of Thomson over the copyright issue in, 'Cancelled Passages' (99–102), though he appears to disregard the earlier 'Deed of Assignment'. See also the introduction to *Songs for George Thomson*, ed. McCue, xli–iv.

³⁷ See 'Gilbert Burns to M^r George Thomson, 16th July 1818', in London, British Library, Add. MS 35,265, ff. 35–6.

Two manuscript copies now survive, held at the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum in Alloway and the David Laing collection at the University of Edinburgh respectively (the Laing collection also has a mysterious transcription in another hand).³⁸ Of these, Thomson's text is significantly more consonant with the first, which was that used by Stewart for the chapbooks and subsequent printings. Besides many minor details, Thomson's printing contains material which is not found in the Laing MS. Thomson's explanation of having omitted the 'Merry Andrew' (or 'Quack Doctor') section of the text on grounds of taste, but also because it was missing from 'the Manuscript communicated to him', could indicate that he was referring to the Laing MS, which does not include this section. In general, however, nothing in Thomson's text actually requires him to have seen a manuscript first-hand and we can detect the influence of Stewart's editing.

Stewart's text of the cantata was modified to varying degrees for the different printings across 1799 to 1802, and his 1801 edition appears a plausible base text for Thomson. Strikingly, Stewart's 1801 text was adopted with very little alteration for the 1811 edition of Burns with Josiah Walker's 'Life'. That edition would have been especially attractive to Thomson since it was complementary of him and his 'great musical work'; while the printing of 'The Jolly Beggars' there cites extensively from Scott's *Quarterly Review* article, which is a strategy repeated by Thomson.³⁹ Cromeck is another possible source.⁴⁰ Yet the coincidence of relatively few variants ('shew' instead of 'show' at line 26 is among the most significant) in Thomson and Cromeck, that are not in Stewart/Walker, tends to moot that option. One exception is line 83, where Thomson and Cromeck both give 'Departed joys, that ne'er return' where Stewart (following the Alloway MS) has 'The pleasures that will ne'er return'. Yet Thomson's own 1805 publication of the song 'A Highland lad my love was born' may well be the first use of this variant, which then recurs in Cromeck.

It is evident that manuscript copies of the cantata are now missing: J. C. Weston concludes that Cromeck must have seen a lost manuscript and highlights an 'early draft', sold at auction in 1861 and now unaccounted for.⁴¹ Still, while remaining open to Thomson's use of a manuscript or manuscripts, the prior handling of Stewart—possibly filtered through Walker—may reasonably be construed as his key source. This is somewhat ironic, given that Thomson had written to Currie in 1799 to express concern over the popular chapbook printings of Burns's works, requesting that Currie ask his publisher, Cadell & Davies, to 'threaten a prosecution if they do not instantly stop' and complaining that 'they sell 50 copies of Holly Willy [Holy Willie's Prayer] per diem, and nearly as many of the Jolly beggars.'⁴² What emerges is an instructive view of the publishing environment, with textual conventions building across the pirated versions of 'Beggars' and into more 'respectable' editions. William St Clair describes the book trade's practice of 'tranching down', in which texts moved progressively into cheaper and smaller-format editions.⁴³ The early publication history of 'The Jolly Beggars' effectively inverts that trajectory, with a polite elevation of the cantata following the original chapbook versions. More generally, the cultural manufacture of Robert Burns as Scotland's national poet involved a delicate process of framing and recuperating the 'low'. This moved from the poet's highly self-aware 1786 publishing debut in the pastoral guise of a 'Simple Bard, unbroke by rules of Art', all the way to posthumous legacy projects in which Thomson was an important figure, not least Currie's expensive and 'immensely

³⁸ See Alloway, Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, object no. 3.6233; and La.III.586, ff. 40–51.

³⁹ See Walker's 'Account of the Life, Character, and Writings, of Robert Burns' in *Poems by Robert Burns*, 1. xiii–cxxix (cv); the Scott essay is cited in a footnote to 2. 169–72.

⁴⁰ *Songs for George Thomson*, ed. McCue, posits that Cromeck was used by Thomson on several occasions as the copy text for Burns's songs in the *Select Collection*, for example ST151.

⁴¹ See J. C. Weston, 'The Text of Burns' "The Jolly Beggars"', *Studies in Bibliography*, 13 (1960), 239–47 (242).

⁴² Thomson to James Currie, 8 September 1799, in *The Letters of James Currie*, ed. Gerard Carruthers, Kenneth G. Simpson and Pauline Mackay <<https://jamescurrie.gla.ac.uk>> accessed 29 June 2020.

⁴³ William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), 32–4.

popular' edition, the concluding fourth volume of which is given over to the Burns-Thomson correspondence.⁴⁴

'VIGOUR UNTOUCHED'

The preface to Thomson's 1818 printing of 'The Jolly Beggars' stresses the intervention of a most distinguished Poet and Critic, namely Walter Scott, who had complained in 1809 about the omission of the work in both Currie (1800) and Cromek's *Reliques of Robert Burns* (1808).⁴⁵ Scott presented the cantata as an exceptional piece of work that had been unfairly ignored. Indeed, he argued that 'for humorous description and nice discrimination of character, the cantata was 'inferior to no poem of the same length in the whole range of English poetry.'⁴⁶ Cromek responded to this criticism by publishing the text in 1810, paired with a feisty response in which he nodded to Scott's 'great authority' but described much of the other Burns material praised by Scott as either 'rubbish' or requiring 'suppression.'⁴⁷ The debate again flags up the contested nature of Burns's legacy at this period, as editors negotiated between narrowly expedient models of the poet and his work, and more challenging or complete representations.

Whether or not inspired by Walker, Thomson's citation of the exchange between Scott and Cromek provided a way to couch his edition in the security of canonical authority, perhaps betraying (to borrow Kinsley's phrase) a 'moralistic nervousness' about the cantata. Scott, already in correspondence with Thomson as a contributor to the *Select Collection*, was hyper-canonical as a poet by 1818 regardless of the veil of professional anonymity he retained in his fiction as the 'Author of Waverley'. He provided Thomson with an iron-clad means of establishing both the quality and legitimacy of 'The Jolly Beggars'. Much of the focus in Thomson's preface remains on 'decorum': the editor explains that he has 'long had an anxious desire to bring [the work] forward, freed of the indecorous passages'. Bearing out the 'anxious' quality of that 'desire', moral austerity is presented as Thomson's unique selling point, in an edition 'formed chiefly for the use of his fair countrywomen'. On the 'indecorous passages', Thomson declares 'the satisfaction he felt when he saw the practicability of excluding those passages, without depriving the Poem of its unity, its raciness of humour, or its interest.'⁴⁸ Thomson had been preoccupied with decency in his 1817 letter of invitation to Bishop, where he explains that:

Even in describing the movements of such a groupe [*sic*] the mature task of the Poet has never suffered his pen to slide into any thing coarse or disgusting. Nor is the art of the Poet less conspicuous in the individual figures than in the general mass; the festive vagrants being distinguished from each other by personal appearance and character as much as [*by*] any fortuitous assembly in the high orders of his life.

Still, rehearsing his anxieties, Thomson presents Bishop with the same rationale found in his printed preface the following year, that he is keen to edit the work to the satisfaction of 'the most fastidious reader' while, at the same time, leaving its 'vigour untouched'.⁴⁹

Thomson's is ultimately a strenuous editing of the text, though he goes to some lengths to downplay his editorial decisions in his 1818 preface:

⁴⁴ Burns, 'Epigraph to the Kilmarnock Edition' [1786], in Kinsley, 3, 970; Leask, *Burns and Pastoral*, 276. On Thomson's role in commemorative dinners and Burns statuary, see the introduction to *Songs for George Thomson*, ed. McCue, lxxiv.

⁴⁵ *The Jolly Beggars* (1818). Thomson's 'Preface', 2.

⁴⁶ Review of *Reliques of Robert Burns*, *Quarterly Review*, 20.

⁴⁷ See Cromek (ed.), *Select*, 2, 232, 252.

⁴⁸ *The Jolly Beggars* (1818). Thomson's 'Preface', 2.

⁴⁹ Thomson to Bishop, 27 January 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,268, ff. 11–12.

He trusts it will not be supposed that he could for a moment entertain the presumptuous idea of *improving* the verses of Burns! He would feel as if he were profanely plucking a leaf from the consecrated holly that shades the Poet's tomb, were he to permit himself to alter any of his never-dying lyrics, on any other consideration but that which is due to the delicacy of the sex, and the decencies of society.⁵⁰

In reality, the editor was rarely backward in making changes to Burns's texts (or those of his other poets) without any basis other than his own aesthetic judgement. In this case, Thomson's handling is precisely an instance of '*improving* the verses' in terms of polite amelioration—or, as the editor himself had put it in 1792, an eradication of the 'loose and indelicate'. Thomson's perceived edge in a competitive marketplace was his text's suitability for drawing-room performance, where it could offer a calibrated degree of lingering 'raciness'. Thomson aims to convince his reader that he has retained the 'unity' of the work, while he omits key elements of the text. Collated against Stewart (1801), Thomson removes the whole song beginning, 'I once was a Maid tho' I cannot tell when'. Sometimes referred to as the 'Martial Chuck's song', this lyric is a catalogue of the protagonist's sexual encounters, while ultimately endorsing her unflinching love for her 'sodger laddie'. Thomson also omits the 'Merry Andrew' section mentioned above and found in both the Alloway MS and several editions including Stewart (1802).⁵¹

Other edits reveal the same prudential pattern. For example, following line 156 Thomson leaves out the wonderfully unrestrained conclusion to the night's sexual intrigue (cited here from the Alloway MS) between the fiddler and the tinker over the drunken Highland widow: 'But hurchin Cupid shot a shaft, | That play'd a Dame a shavie— | The Fiddler rak'd her, fore and aft, | Behint the Chicken cavie'. Such graphic sexual description clearly struck Thomson as inappropriate for ladies. Politically, the editor's discomfort with the cantata is apparent in his edit to the final line of the chorus of the original text, where he waters down 'Churches built to please the priest' to 'Jails, to be our scorn and jest'. This edit becomes all the more glaring when we recall that this was the only part of the cantata Burns claimed to remember when Thomson asked him about it in 1793. Thomson masks such decisions with his deferential comments about the holly leaves around Burns's tomb and his claim to have made almost no changes at all.

Linguistically, Thomson's editorial policy was to provide, on most occasions, a Scots song text for each melody or air in his Scottish collection, alongside an alternative choice in standard English. Thus he produced a standalone 'Glossary of the Scottish Words' only once across his Scottish collection (with volume 4 in 1805).⁵² The debate about using Scots versus English in the correspondence between Burns and Thomson is well-rehearsed, with Burns passionately voicing his wish to write with 'at least a sprinkling of my native tongue'.⁵³ In the case of the rustic masterpiece 'The Jolly Beggars', Thomson knew that providing English alternatives or fully anglicizing the text was not feasible, even though in the preface he states (disingenuously on both counts) that the recitatives are in 'the very broadest Scottish dialect', with the songs and choruses 'wholly English'. Thomson provides the text alone as a preface to the fully scored musical edition of the work (where the song texts are underlaid to music) in 1818. His decision to gloss the more obscure Scots words at the foot of the page below the prefatory text bolsters an impression of wanting to preserve Burns's original where possible. But his discomfort with the text, as expressed in his correspondence with Bishop, was likely rooted in its linguistic as well

⁵⁰ *The Jolly Beggars* (1818). Thomson's 'Preface', 2.

⁵¹ The 'Merry Andrew' passage was omitted from the earliest editions and probably first appeared in *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Glasgow, 1801). For a discussion of the history of this section, see Weston, 'The Text'. Weston's article erroneously cites Cromek in 1810 as the first publication of the cantata to include the section (241), though he corrects this in his edition of the work. See Robert Burns, *The Jolly Beggars—A Cantata*, ed. John C Weston (Northampton, 1963), 'Textual Notes and Variants'.

⁵² This is provided as an appendix to *Songs for George Thomson*, ed. McCue, 651–7.

⁵³ 'To M^r George Thomson, 16th Sept 1792' in *Letters*, 2. 149. While Burns argued vehemently for Scots, he was also skilled at finding and creating English songs for Thomson. See the introduction to *Songs for George Thomson*, ed. McCue, lv–vii.

as moral and political character. He explained to Bishop that it would be 'too ludicrous' to set the recitatives to music, and that he would engrave them to be 'read or recited', 'merely for the purposes of connecting the subject of the Poem'.⁵⁴ While this is an accurate view of the drama of the piece—after all, the narrator does act as the link-man, or Master of Ceremonies—Thomson explained to Bishop that 'were the six recitatives set to music in the ordinary way I cannot help thinking that when sung they wd. seem like a burlesque on recitative'.⁵⁵

Thomson's anxiety about mediating Burns's text for his target clientele is further suggested by his choice of title. Rather than selecting 'Love and Liberty: A Cantata', which might have sat more comfortably within the *Select Collection*, Thomson followed Stewart et al. by choosing instead the plain-speaking alternative title of 'The Jolly Beggars'. Arguably this choice enabled Thomson to place Burns's 'festive vagrants' at the centre of his edition: promoting the singers rather than the content of the songs, as it were, which with the help of Bishop's jolly scoring, may have downplayed the cantata's more controversial qualities. The exclusion of 'Liberty', of course, wards off potential associations with revolutionary class politics, just as omitting 'Love' distracts from the risqué sexuality of the piece. Tellingly, while Thomson's preface includes a comment about Burns having 'trespassed on decorum' in some of his songs (thus excusing Thomson's omissions), it also addresses the fact that, for Thomson and his clientele, 'the sole aim of the Poet' was 'to portray Characters in a class of society that rarely or never fall under our particular observation': at once underlining, distancing and disarming the cantata's 'festive vagrancy'.

METRONOMIC TIME

Bishop was not unaware of Burns's celebrity, nor of the popularity of the national song traditions across the British Isles at this time: he is still best known for his ubiquitous domestic anthem 'Home Sweet Home' and he provided settings for Scots, Welsh and Irish songs alongside those of his native England. Working closely with Goulding & D'Almaine to produce musical lollipops, or entertaining pieces for home enjoyment, Bishop understood the culture of domestic performance, and the desire for polite interaction with songs that might, in their respective home nations, be differently received or have risen from more lowly beginnings. Unlike some of Thomson's composers who were arranging the airs and interacting little with texts, Bishop went to some lengths to work 'in compliance with the character of the words' of Burns's songs.⁵⁶ Collaborating around Thomson's policy for decorous, accessible music, he enthusiastically accepted the brief to create a score that would be an equal fit for what Thomson termed this 'most exquisite Cantata of Burns' and which would also be easy enough for amateurs to play.⁵⁷ He reassured Thomson that 'simplicity has been the principal study; not only in the melody & Harmony, but also in the arrangement of the parts, as well for the Vocal as the Instrumental Performer'.⁵⁸ He discussed in detail his attempts to ensure that the range or compass of the vocal parts was comfortable for the voice, and emphasized that he had foregrounded the melodies for Burns's songs within his settings.⁵⁹ Thomson explained that Bishop need only supply the incidental music for the piece and that Thomson could retain settings of some songs that he had to hand—as mentioned already, Haydn had set 'A Highland lad, my love was born' and he had also provided settings of the tunes 'Whistle o'er the lave o't' (the air for 'The Fiddler's Song') and 'For a' that

⁵⁴ Thomson to Bishop, 27 January 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,276, f. 186.

⁵⁵ Thomson to Bishop, 27 January 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,276, f. 186.

⁵⁶ Bishop to Thomson, 6 May 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,264, ff. 298–9. Thomson's letter of 27 January 1817 makes mention of sending the full poem to Bishop: London, British Library, Add. MS 35,264, f. 186.

⁵⁷ Thomson to Bishop, January 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,264, f. 279.

⁵⁸ Thomson did complain about the difficulty of some of the piano writing in his letter of 29 May 1817: London, British Library, Add. MS 35,268, f. 2.

⁵⁹ Bishop to Thomson, 6 May 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,264, f. 298.

and a' that' (the air for 'The Bard's Song')—but Bishop was keen to deliver all the songs and choruses.⁶⁰

Thomson discussed the right approach to the music in some depth with Bishop in regard to the instrumental introduction, or overture, to the work. Bishop envisioned this opening as a musical 'painting' that would present 'the situation of the parties concerned at the time of the commencement of the Poem' and he even wished to incorporate the striking of the clock to set the time of the gathering as eight in the evening.⁶¹ Thomson argued with Bishop about the level of detail here, stating that as 'the Poem is from beginning to end full of Mirth and Glee and Revelry', so this opening 'will naturally be expected to characterize that general spirit of the opera' and Bishop reluctantly removed the striking clock.⁶² In the end, Thomson was generally delighted with the work and, having hosted a play-through of the piece amongst friends in Edinburgh when he first received the score, he wrote to Bishop that his original music was 'full of that hilarity and joyous spirit, for which the poem is so remarkable' and that the 'finale' was 'particularly rich and brilliant'.⁶³ Bishop had chosen to set the final section of Burns's text for three of his soloists and chorus to generate a rousing ensemble number to close the work.

To some extent, Thomson's operatic ambitions for 'The Jolly Beggars' match and extend Burns's own aspiration, for the poet had already chosen to label the work a 'cantata', a form which gained much popularity in Britain from around 1710, partly in response to the vogue for Italian opera. Burns nods to this context in the narrator's gleeful enunciation of the Fiddler's 'arioso' and 'giga' and his use of the Italian musical term 'allegretto'. The usual format for a literary cantata had been displayed to Burns in Allan Ramsay's 'A Scots Cantata', in the *Tea-Table Miscellany*, which Burns knew well, where the Cantata consisted of a pattern of two airs or 'arias' each preceded by a recitative.⁶⁴ Thomson's elevation of the piece, which Bishop interestingly referred to as a musical 'Ode' in his early letters to Thomson, was thus arguably following a logic already inherent to it. Tantalizingly, while Bishop successfully created an entertaining musical score that supports the drama of Burns's text, it would appear that he was not Thomson's first choice.⁶⁵ The first part of the fifth volume of the *Select Collection* included the first commissioned settings of Scottish airs by Beethoven, who had already set many of the songs for Thomson's *Select Collection of Original Irish Airs* in 1814 and 1816. Thomson even mentioned the prospect of an operatic realization of 'The Jolly Beggars' with the working title 'Les Gueux joués' to Beethoven in his letter of 20 December 1816.⁶⁶

There were practical considerations around Bishop's simple musical settings and incidental music but this also marks the way that simplicity, counter-intuitively, very often represented the ideal state of tasteful improvement in the period.⁶⁷ At the same time, Bishop paid close attention to the tempi, or speeds, which musicians were recommended to follow in performing the work, and here he was using state-of-the-art technology. In his letter of 6 May 1817, he explained to Thomson that he was particularly concerned about 'the time of the National Airs', namely the speeds for the tunes Burns had listed for each of his songs in the cantata. In order

⁶⁰ Bishop to Thomson, 6 May 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,264, f. 298. Thomson asked specifically for the choruses of 'The Widow's Song', 'The Bard's Song' and 'The Fiddler's Song' to be set for chorus and not simply for a soloist.

⁶¹ Bishop to Thomson, 6 May 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,264, f. 298.

⁶² Thomson to Bishop, 29 May 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,268, ff. 1–3.

⁶³ Thomson to Bishop, 29 May 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,268, f. 1.

⁶⁴ Allan Ramsay, *The Tea-Table Miscellany: or, a Collection of Choice Songs, Scots and English*, 4 vols (London, 1740), 1. 24–5.

⁶⁵ The AHRC 'Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century' project enabled a modern performance with period instruments of the complete Thomson-Bishop edition of Burns's cantata. The full audio-visual performance is accessible at: *Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century* <<https://burnsc21.glasgow.ac.uk/the-jolly-beggars/>> accessed 19 July 2022.

⁶⁶ 'Les Gueux joués' was first mentioned in Thomson's letter to Beethoven of 20 December 1816: London, British Library, Add. MS 35,267, ff. 183–4. The opera was also discussed in another letter in the letterbooks (London, British Library, Add. MS 35,269, f. 154). There is no evidence that this letter, which probably dates from 1814–1815, was more than a draft of a letter which was never sent, though normally such correspondence is marked in the letterbooks. It is included at the back of Thomson's last letterbook and has consequently often been overlooked by scholars. It does not appear in D. MacArdle, 'Beethoven and George Thomson', *Music & Letters*, xxxvii (1956), 27–49.

⁶⁷ On the specific association of 'simplicity' with Burns, see McKeever, *Dialectics of Improvement*, 38–65.

to develop a suitable tempo for each one, Bishop was utilizing a new gadget that he described in detail to Thomson: 'a small machine, the invention of a German named Maelzel, which has lately, & very deservedly, become extremely popular in London, as it has been some time past in Paris, Vienna &c, & has the patronage of all the first composers of the present time on the Continent & here!'⁶⁸ The machine was the metronome, a clockwork-driven device for establishing musical tempi. It had been invented in 1812, but was patented in 1815 by Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, and, as Bishop recounts, quickly gained traction.⁶⁹ Thomson was unsurprisingly interested by this development, responding to Bishop that 'the Metronome has not yet found its way to Edinb^r but from what you say of it I am satisfied that it will prove very useful.'⁷⁰ The final printed score thus included brand new metronome markings to establish the tempi for each section of the work, stating alongside the Italian musical term 'Andante sostenuto' (at a steady walking pace) beside the opening bars of the Introduction: '[symbol for musical crotchet] = 72 of Maelzel's Metronome'. Even at its most fundamental level, then, Thomson's new edition was recasting Burns's work for the 'improved' cutting edge of European musical culture, laid out with the new precision of metronomic time, albeit Bishop removed his desired chronological motif of the tolling of the hour.

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A lingering critical tendency to dismiss Thomson has held back research on Burns's song-writing.⁷¹ Thomson's vision of Burns's 'comic opera in three acts' was never realized, yet this complicated masterpiece, 'The Jolly Beggars', strangely peripheral to both Burns's oeuvre and Thomson's project, provides a constructive means of rethinking their collaboration. As suggested above, in his correspondence with Bishop, Thomson refers to 'The Jolly Beggars' as an 'opera' as if, after all, it was the substantial work he had desired.⁷² Described by Kinsley as 'an anti-pastoral—or a "true" pastoral—that is, an *impolite* view of lower-class life—it is a work of anarchic subversion in which, as Liam McIlvanney puts it, 'sexual love forms a standard of measurement', outweighing 'seemingly weighty matters.'⁷³ There are other pieces with relatively bold content published by Thomson—he declared that the bawdy 'Muirland Willy' was perhaps his favourite song—so his prudish veneer is inconsistent.⁷⁴ But as the most controversial text he handles, 'The Jolly Beggars' does function as an exceptional feature of Thomson's collections, its publication an abnormality that he chose not to repeat after 1818. And yet, in its bowdlerized final state, it is also the quintessential expression of Thomson's cultural programme, which possessed a clarity of purpose sufficient to justify 'improving' even this most implacable of works.

The Thomson-Bishop arrangement harkens back to an established tradition of high-low culture-clash most obviously represented by Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. More generally, it can help us to confront the interpenetration not only of high and low, but also of Scottish, British and European cultures within a historical period that was saturated by a 'robust culture of song'.⁷⁵ Certainly Thomson's reimagining of the work played an under-appreciated role in the process of relocating 'Beggars' in the acceptable mainstream of the Burns canon, just as Thomson's

⁶⁸ Bishop to Thomson, 6 May 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,264, f. 299.

⁶⁹ See David Fallows, 'Metronome' in *Oxford Music Online* (January 2001) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.18521>> accessed 19 July 2022.

⁷⁰ Thomson to Bishop, 29 May 1817, London, British Library, Add. MS 35,268, f. 3^r.

⁷¹ In a recent study, Corey E. Andrews describes Thomson as 'perhaps the least-qualified' of those 'to comment publicly in print on the death of Robert Burns'. See *The Genius of Scotland: The Cultural Production of Robert Burns, 1785–1834* (Leiden, 2015), 145.

⁷² London, British Library, Add MS 3,535,268, ff. 1–3.

⁷³ See Kinsley, 3. 1150; and Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton, 2002), 165.

⁷⁴ An example here would be 'My love she's but a lassie yet', published by Thomson in *A Select Collection* [...], 2nd Set (1798), 35. *Songs for George Thomson*, ed. McCue, ST 16.

⁷⁵ Ian Newman, Gillian Russell, 'Metropolitan Songs and Songsters: Ephemerality in the World City', *Studies in Romanticism*, 58 (2019), 429–48 (430).

larger contribution to the poet's formidable popularity in the nineteenth century cannot be overlooked. An 1832 copy of the text gives us a published record of a performance or performances of an adapted version of the Thomson-Bishop 'Jolly Beggars' by the Leith Philharmonic Society within Thomson's lifetime.⁷⁶ Equally, while arguing that the poem's 'social critique is largely pre-political', Leask traces out a Tory appropriation of 'The Jolly Beggars' that progressed from Scott's article into John Gibson Lockhart's description of a performance of the piece in *Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk* (1819), all of which tended to generate 'a romantic ideology of the aesthetic'.⁷⁷ Lockhart explains that the cantata 'has lately been set to music' and is evidently referring to Thomson's edition in this fictionalized performance at an early Burns supper, which is interrupted by uproarious toasts and by the protagonist Peter Morris himself, unable to resist 'singing a Scottish song', while Lockhart takes the initiative to offer his own praise of the cantata's unmatched 'collection of true, fresh, and characteristic lyrics', now recuperated as a national treasure.⁷⁸

Thomson's 1818 printing of 'The Jolly Beggars' represents his most elaborate attempt to smooth the rough edges of the poet for the drawing-room context, but it also signals the degree to which those rough edges were what made Burns such an exciting commodity. In his preface to 'The Jolly Beggars', Thomson stresses his eagerness to print the work, yet his text ends up signalling a different kind of 'anxious desire'. Its riotous sexual and political energy is pared back by close editorial attention, but would remain an unavoidable presence for many of Thomson's customers in 1818, leaving the poem carrying a barely shrouded innuendo. Indeed, by so prominently flagging up the questionable aspects of the cantata in his preface, Thomson tries to have the best of both worlds. In general, his collections mine the canon of Scottish song in order to mediate it into a polite form considered appropriate for an apparently sensitive, even naïve female audience. Pairing this material with elaborate settings by continental composers, Thomson's engagement with the sometimes unruly regions of song walks an intellectual tightrope, dressing up the rustic as the polite without—he hopes—eradicating its authenticating simplicity and indeed 'raciness'. This tightly curated treatment of the song tradition is exemplified nowhere better than in 'The Jolly Beggars', where the necessary, ebullient and bracing elements remain just below the surface, imperfectly occluded.

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⁷⁶ See Burns' *Jolly Beggars*, as performed at *The Private Concerts of the Leith Philharmonic Society, the music composed by Bishop, the instrumental accompaniments arranged for the Society by R. B. Stewart* (Leith, 1832).

⁷⁷ Leask, *Burns and Pastoral*, 239, 244–6.

⁷⁸ J. G. Lockhart, *Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1819), 2. 132–7.