'Life is All a Variorum': Thoughts on a New Burns Edition

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Thoughts on Burns and a New Burns Edition

What would Burns himself have thought about the plans for a new multivolume collected edition of his work, edited from Glasgow University and to be published by Oxford? He seized the chance in 1786 to try his work “in guid black print” in the Kilmarnock edition, but the word ‘edition’ never crops up in his poetry, except in the title of a poem, when he’s writing an inscription into a printed book.

When William Creech started planning the last major expanded edition of Burns’s poetry, the two-volume edition in 1793, Burns had hoped to be his own editor and revise all his poems, sheet by sheet, as it went through the press, though it’s doubtful he actually did so.

Those great editorial words “amend” and “collate” and “annotate” do crop up in Burns’s letters, but not in connection with his own work: he writes to Mrs. Dunlop he’s been annotating John Moore’s novel Zelucy and he agrees with Thomson that he will amend and collate Scottish songs for the Select Collection. Even for the this, though, Burns remained more author than editor.

The one editing word in Burns that perhaps retains its full force is in the least proper or academic of his major works, The Jolly Beggars, where the concluding chorus asserts: “Life is all a variorum”.

Maybe it seems natural that Burns should liken existence to the most learned kind of scholarly editing, an editioncum notis variorum, with the opinions of the various critics, not just with the textual variants. But would even a well-read twenty-four-year Ayrshire farmer in 1785 have encountered an editioncum notis variorum? As my father used to warn me, quoting another Scottish poet whom Burns had read, “the commentators each dark passage shun, and hold their farthing candle to the sun,” and none of them, from Kinsley down, provide much help. The first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, edited by a Scotsman, defined variorum only as a scholarly edition, though the recent revision allows that Burns reused the term metaphorically, the example being this line. The Scottish National Dictionary notes variorum as used in Burns’s time to mean simply a miscellany or hodge-podge. That’s closer to the way the word is used by Burns’s contemporary John Skinner, in his song “Tullochgorum,” where he disdains the fancy-variourum style of Italian music for the honesty of Scottish song, but perhaps Skinner chose the word because there are precious few rhyme-words for Tullochgorum, and he’d already used jorum. But in The Jolly Beggars Burns uses variorum, not disdainfully but positively, and I prefer to think that he did indeed have in mind the original sense and asserted that in life comment comes at us from many different directions.

But whichever Burns meant when he wrote “Life is all a variorum” for the next decade or more, for Gerry and his co-editors, Life will indeed BE all a Variorum in the strictest sense, and we wish him and them well in this great undertaking.

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