‘Class’d with Tasso and Guarini’: Allan Ramsay’s The Gentle Shepherd

By Craig Lamont

Of Allan Ramsay’s many important works, *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725) remains his most revered. It was first performed in Edinburgh in 1729, going on to enjoy success across Scotland, England, North America and beyond over the next two centuries.[1] New productions in the mid-to-late twentieth century brought the story back into Scotland’s cultural consciousness, with new work and research leading the way in the past 20 or so years. Above all, the work is celebrated for its success as an innovative pastoral with an identifiable locale (as opposed to an anonymous rural idyll); its use of the Scots language; and its vision of a restored nation. The main characters of the play are Patie, a poor but contented and kind-hearted shepherd, his companion Roger, and their respective loves Peggy and Jenny. The laird of the land is Sir William Worthy, exiled during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, but due to return now that ‘Cromwell’s gane to Nick’.[2] and Charles II has restored the Stuart line. Sir William Worthy returns but has disguised himself as a fortune-teller predicting that Patie’s situation will be greatly changed. When he reveals himself, and Patie (the gentle shepherd) as the heir to his lands, there is concern that Patie’s marriage to Peggy will be prevented due to her low station. Peggy is then revealed to be Worthy’s niece, and the story reaches a happy conclusion, not just for the lovers, but for the future prosperity of the land.

As Pittock has shown, the return of an exiled royalist in *The Gentle Shepherd* ‘offers a clear analogy with another possible Stuart return, and this equation was itself commonplace in Jacobite propaganda’.[3] This, and the likelihood that William Worthy (W.W.) invoked William Wallace, following the 1722 edition of *Wallace* by Ramsay’s companion William Hamilton of Gilbertfield, brings us closer towards Ramsay’s projected utopia for Scotland based on pre-Union life and culture. This is why Ramsay’s *Ever Green* project (1724) was based on literature *Wrote by the*

Ingenious before 1600, *ie.* before the Union of the Crowns (1603). This is also why Ramsay's 'faux medieval' poem 'The Vision' locates 'the tradition of Scottish national culture in the context of both the Wars of Independence and the more recent conflict of the Jacobite era'.[4] In *The Gentle Shepherd*, the context is not the medieval wars, but the Restoration era: a glance into the more recent past, a sort of lowland Arcadia specific to Scotland as it was before the eighteenth century. More specifically, the returning Stuart will symbolically restore Scotland's dilapidation. Towards the end of the play, Worthy says:

> *I never from these Fields again will stray;*
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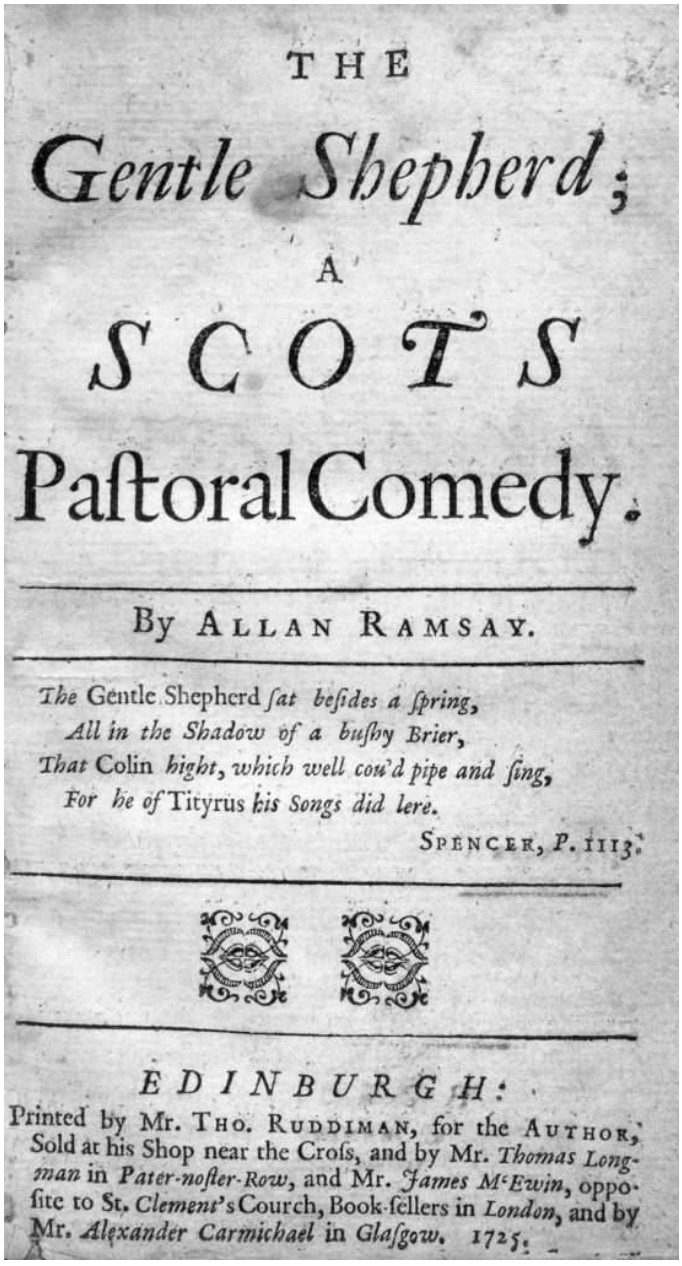
Ramsay's utopia can be seen as a reimagining of history, with a prototypical example of country life to be found in the Pentland Hills. In a letter from 1724, Ramsay complained of feeling like a 'laborious insect of a smoaky city,' scurrying from 'place to place in one eternal maze of fatiguing cares,' longing to return to gushing springs and fragrant fields.[6] In this time, it seems, his composition of *The Gentle Shepherd* was not simply an extension of his ideal, independent Scotland, but an Arcadian way of life we so often find in the classics and in Augustan poetry. Elsewhere, I have traced the heated debates in the press over exactly where Ramsay's drama was set, beyond his vague reference to 'a Shepherds Village and Fields some few Miles from Edinburgh'.[7] The importance of this to Ramsay's projected Arcadia is that, contrary to tradition, he locates it at all. Rather than leave the landscape unnamed, or merely geographically implied, Ramsay 'transformed the genre of the pastoral drama by bending it in a more "realistic" direction'.[8] This is where Ramsay enters a rather heated and complicated British context.



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SPENCER, *P.* 1113.

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Title-page of the 1725 edition. Reproduced courtesy of the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

The epitaph on the title-page of *The Gentle Shepherd* is taken from Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579), which, according to Steve Newman in the new edition of *The Gentle Shepherd*, 'situates Ramsay as part of a long pastoral genealogy that extends back to the roots of English verse'.[9] By the eighteenth century, poets such as Alexander Pope and Ambrose Philips argued about using the 'idealised' Golden Age setting where mythical creatures might also abound, or, instead; a localised, identifiable place where the shepherds and superstitions are recognisable to their readers. This 'pastoral war' was epitomised in John Gay's *The Shepherd's Week* (1714), a condensed evocation of Spenser, and clearly, if satirically, in the 'realistic' mode. In composing *The Gentle Shepherd*, Ramsay carved a niche for Scottish literature with the tools his English

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In a letter dated 8 April 1724, Ramsay describes his work on *The Gentle Shepherd.* 'If I succeed according to my plan,' Ramsay writes, 'I hope to cope with the authors of *Pastor Fido* and *Aminta*.'[12] The latter is a pastoral play by Torquato Tasso (written in 1573, published in 1580), featuring a shepherd and poet (Aminta) and his efforts to win over a nymph (Silvia). *Il Pastor Fido* – or *The Faithful Shepherd* – by Giovanni Battista Guarini was published in 1590. Set in Arcadia, Guarini's play was the more influential work, indebted to *Aminta* in part for its themes and plot. As Nigel Leask has said, Ramsay 'successfully domesticated and vernacularized' these plays, and editors such as Alexander Fraser Tytler, in his 1800 edition of Ramsay's works, likened *The Gentle Shepherd* more with Tasso than Guarini.[13] In the Dedication for Susanna, Countess of Eglinton in *The Gentle Shepherd* Ramsay makes subtle reference to the recent 'pastoral war' between the English poets ('the *Shepherds* speak as they ought'), but essentially circumvents the entire affair with the final sentence, and the 'hope to be class'd with *Tasso* and *Guarini*, and sing with *Ovid*'.[14] Just as Ramsay rewound the clock to the sixteenth century for Scottish Literature's renaissance in *The Ever Green*, he has in the front matter to *The Gentle Shepherd* rewound to the same century for both English (Spenser's *Shepheardes Calendar*)

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Five years after Ramsay's death, *The Gentle Shepherd* was parodied in a famously spiteful attack by the English poet Charles Churchill. *The Prophecy of Famine, a Scots Pastoral* (1763) used Ramsay's mode of a pastoral dialogue in Scots to portray 'two starving Scottish shepherds, Jockey and Sawney, and their visit to the Cave of Famine, whose grim personification foresees for them rich pickings south of the border, and a better future for hungry Scotsmen in London'.[15] A typically anti-Jacobite tract casting general stereotypes about the disloyalty of Scots, *The Prophecy of Famine* looked also to portray the 'green and pleasant land' of England as the desirable setting for any pastoral drama, and therefore the best venue for social progress on all fronts.[16] Ramsay's Scots drama was Churchill's model, but a contemporary target was the Celtic world of Macpherson's Ossian: another example of Scotland's writers looking elsewhere for the genesis story of their literature. Another target was John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute, and Prime Minister from 1762–63. Stuart is such a suitable emblem for Churchill's tirade that he becomes the centrepiece of the prophecy made to Jockey and Sawney: that Scotland will be cursed but that fertile soil in England will be opened to them:

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Plate 1, from the 1788 Foulis edition of *The Gentle Shepherd*. Reproduced by permission of University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections (Sp Coll BD12-b.14)

As Beatty put it, the English 'will be deceived into giving honors to the former adherents of the Stuarts, who, however loyal they may seem to be, are, nevertheless, traitors at heart'.[17] We might think of Churchill's poem as a vision of dystopia for Britain from the perspective of a few xenophobic English commentators: England being overrun by hungry Scots fleeing a cursed and infertile landscape. It is a little ironic, then, that Ramsay's utopia – if we can label it as such – is Scotland before Britain, happy at home and building plans to improve the damage wrought by civil war and neglect. In other words: neither side are content with rural 'Britan' as a suitable Arcadia. In her book *Utopian Imagination and Eighteenth Century Fiction* (1996) Claire Rees makes the interesting point that writers in the middle of the eighteenth century were casting 'the family unit both as a political paradigm and as a structure of social well-being', borrowing from the Horatian ideal to portray an ideal society like that of an independent country. The desired balance of a society 'large enough to be self-sufficient, but small enough to be under the proprietor's eye'[18] is remarkably close to the family-oriented utopia laid out in *The Gentle Shepherd*: Sir William Worthy returns to restore the damaged lands and directly oversee the marriage of the

Patie and Peggy as the new heads of the family. Grounding this particular utopia in more realism is the notion that Patie will be taken off for an education, with a route through Edinburgh, London, and France. As a figure of the early Scottish Enlightenment – who, as we know, had grown tired of city life – Ramsay sustains the importance of education for the improvement of rural life, yet also likens the fashion and dancing lessons of such places as 'monkey tricks'.[19]

This brings us to the unique place that Ramsay holds in literature. The plaque to Ramsay in Carlops read: 'Founding Father of Romanticism | & Modern Scottish Poetry | Author of the Pastoral Drama | The Gentle Shepherd | Set Near This Place'. Ramsay's founding of romanticism will undoubtedly be met with opposition, particularly by those who would rather locate it elsewhere and fix it in a later period. But these literary lines are always shifting as debates continue. Ramsay's pioneering role in the arts, as a co-founder of St Luke's in Edinburgh and with noted innovation in subscription library services and theatre ticketing, place him at the heart of early Enlightenment Edinburgh. Out of this same environment emerged some of the most famous works of the Enlightenment. This begs the question whether imagined utopias are suitable only for Ramsay's romantic credentials, rather than his role as an innovator in the early Enlightenment. Tracing a line from the Scottish Reformation through the Covenanters to the likes of David Hume and Adam Smith, Craig Smith has argued that the figures of the Scottish Enlightenment were particularly pessimistic about utopian schemes. More specifically, the violence of the Covenanting period revealed the incompatibility of religious ideals with progressive societies. Paraphrasing Hume, Craig Smith says that 'utopias have a value as a guide rather than as a blueprint: that by having a concept of what is perfect we might be able to direct our gradual reformations towards that goal'.[20] Ramsay, working before this period of moral inquiry, can be said to fit this mode well in his foremost work. After all, he proposed only a starting point for an idealised Scotland, one which *might* be, rather than setting out the machinations of a realised Scotland the likes of which a sequel to *The Gentle Shepherd* might contain.

To what extent Ramsay wanted his play to be remembered in this way is reduced, in the end, to speculation. All we know for sure is that his desire to be classed with the Italian poets of the sixteenth century was realised in the works of many editors and critics. Later editions of the play, especially the 1788 edition by Andrew Foulis, containing the engravings of David Allan, rejuvenated Ramsay's

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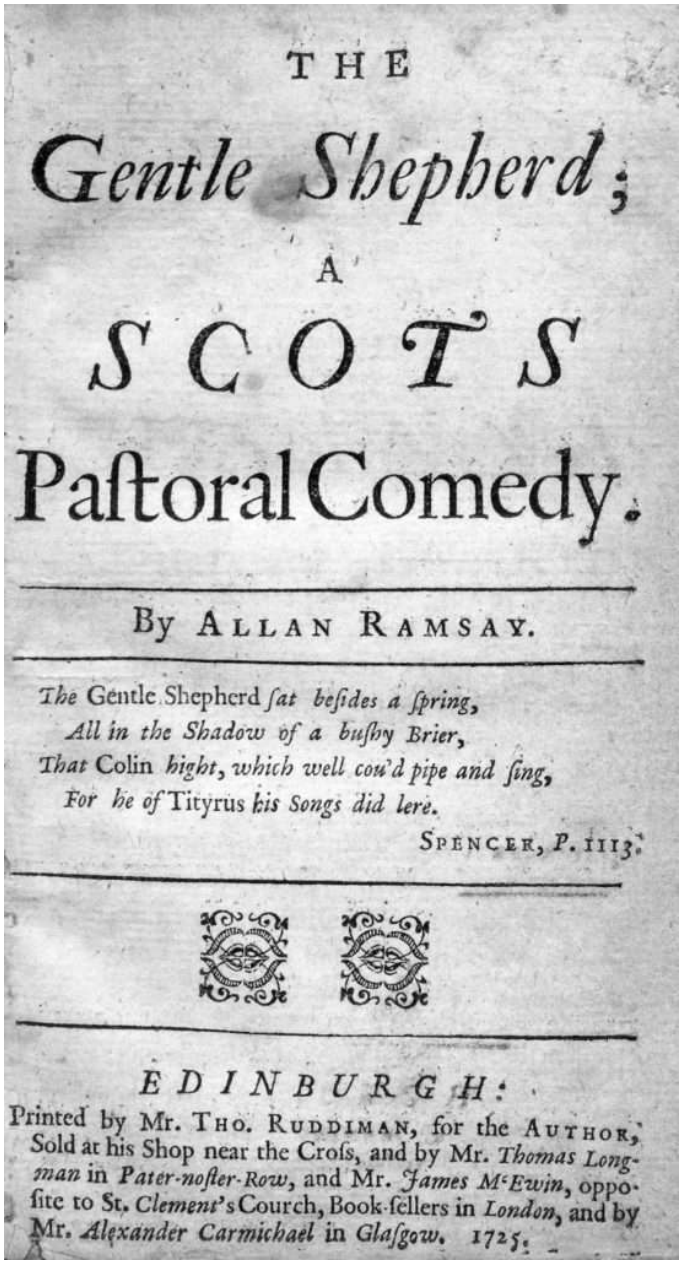

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(c) The Bottle Imp