



Scottish Poets and Poetry

To a Louse

Ha! whare ye gaun, ye crowlin ferlie?
Your impudence protects you sairly;
I canna say but ye strunt rarely
Owre gauze and lace,
Tho faith! I fear ye dine but sparely
On sic a place.

Ye ugly, creepin, blastit wonner,
Detested. shunn'd by saunt an sinner,
How daur ye set your fit upon her -
Sae fine a lady!
Gae somewhere else and seek your dinner
On some poor body.

Swith! in some beggars hauffet squattle:
There ye may creep, and sprawl, and sprattle,
Wi ithers kindred, jumping cattle;
In shoals and nations;
Whare horn nor bane ne'er daur unsettle
Your thick plantations.

Now haud you there! ye're out o sight,
Below the fatt'rils, snug an tight,
Na, faith ye yet! ye'll no be right,
Till ye've got on it -
The vera tapmost, tow'rin height
O Miss's bonnet.

My sooth! right bauld ye set your nose out,
As plump an grey as onie grozet:
O for some rank, mercurial rozet,
Or fell, red smeddum,
I'd gie you sic a hearty dose o't,
Wad dress your droddum!

I wad na been surpris'd to spy
You on an auld wife's flainen toy;
Or aiblins some bit duddie boy,
On's wyliecoat:
But Miss's fine Lunardi! fye!
How daur ye do't?

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O Jeany, dinna toss your head.
An set your beauties a' abroad!
Ye little ken what cursed speed
The blastie's makin!
Thae winks an finger-ends, I dread,
Are notice takin!
O wad some Power the gift tae gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An foolish notion:
What airs in dress an gait wad lea'e us,
An ev'n devotion!

Meaning of unusual words: crowlin ferlie=crawling marvel; strunt=strut; fit=foot; Swith!=Off!; hauflet squattle=temples squat; sprattle=scramble; fatt'rils=falderols; grozet=gooseberry; ozet=resin; fell=deadly; smeddum=powder; droddum=backside; flainen toy=flannelcap; aiblins=perhaps; dud-die=small; wyliecoat=ragged vest; Lunardi=balloon bonnet.

Burns wrote this poem upon seeing a louse in a lady's bonnet at church.

Once again Burns turns an incidental event into a philosophical observation "*O wad some Power the gift tae gie us, to see oursels as ithers see us!*"

The poem was probably written in 1785, the year after James Tytler made the first manned balloon flights in the British Isles. Tytler was the editor of the Encyclopaedia Britannica and collaborated with Burns on the collection of Scottish Songs known as the "Scots Musical Museum."