

ODE WRITTEN IN THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR 1746

1 How sleep the brave who sink to rest
 2 By all their country's wishes blest!
 3 When Spring, with dewy fingers cold,
 4 Returns to deck their hallowed mold,
 5 She there shall dress a sweeter sod
 6 Than Fancy's feet have ever trod.

 7 By fairy hands their knell is rung,
 8 By forms unseen their dirge is sung;
 9 There Honor comes, a pilgrim grey,
 10 To bless the turf that wraps their clay,
 11 And Freedom shall awhile repair,
 12 To dwell a weeping hermit there!

NOTES

Note the eight occurrences of the sound of “there” (five of which mean what the sound means when we spell it “their”). Note particularly the trio made by “their knell” in line 7, “their dirge” (8), and “*there* honor” (9).

- 1 “*How*” starts the sentence off as a question. Later it becomes evident that “*how*” is an intensifier (like the “*how*” of Psalms 99:97: “O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day”) and asserts satisfaction and wonder at the extent of the action modified. (Later on, the poem’s repeated suggestions of uneasiness and insecurity come close to confirming the question context brushed aside by line 2: Can the dead rest peacefully, content with their sacrifice for whichever cause they fought?)
- The use of the negative, non-heroic word “sink” counters the promise of pure patriotic celebration in “the brave.”
- 1–2 “By” in “to rest / By” momentarily indicates the place where the brave sleep. The progressing line makes “by” an indicator of agency, a modifier of “blest,” not “rest.”
- 3–6 The Spring — traditional agent of the rebirth of nature after winter — here is said to cause the graves of the honored dead to bloom with new plant life, but the conceit also presents Spring (whose fingers are not only appropriately *dewy* but just as appropriately *cold*), in the figure of a worker preparing a body for the grave (an idea echoed later by “wraps” in line 10).

The conflation of appropriate but contrary ideas is as powerful as it is casual in manner. Something similar, though less impressive, occurs in line 8 when the “forms unseen” (and their grim suggestions of graveyard ghosts — suggestions vaguely echoed by “gray” in “pilgrim gray”) are presented as effectively interchangeable with the prettily fanciful “fairy hands” in line 7.

- 4 *mold* = (1) “ground”; (2) “rotted remains”
- 6 As a phrase in an ostentatiously fanciful poem, “Fancy’s [that is, Imagination’s] feet” makes quietly witty reference to metrical feet.
- 7 “Hands” makes a substantively irrelevant pair with “feet” in line 6, the line that gave the first stanza closure. Similarly, “fairy,” the second and third syllables of line 7 echo “fancy,” the second and third syllables of the (structurally final) preceding line.
- 7-8 The first and fifth and seventh syllables of the lines are identical, and “forms unseen” in effect repeats the substance of “fairy hands” (in which the “f”/“r” pair in “fair-” is echoed in “forms”). “Dirge” (syllable 6 of line 7) is nearly a synonym for “knell,” its opposite number in line 6. And “sung” not only rhymes phonically with “rung,” its sense is so closely related to that of “rung” that, as “sound words,” the two are in a rhyme-like relationship substantively as well.
- 9-10 Note that this middle couplet of the second stanza echoes that of the first: both concern a visitor to the graves of the honored dead (presumably from the Bonnie Prince Charlie revolt [the revolt in support of James Stuart’s grandson] of July 1745–April 1746).
- Note too that in these paired middle couplets — lines 3 and 4 and lines 9 and 10 — the poem seems to be taking cues from “Lycidas.” In substance, lines 3 and 4 resemble the opening of “Lycidas” and the sense of lines 9 and 10 is reminiscent both of Milton’s lines about a poetic passer-by pausing at his bier and of the three mourners in paragraphs 7, 8, and 9 of “Lycidas.”
- 11 *repair* = “go”; note, however, the general relevance here of the verb “to repair” — “to mend” — a sense locally excluded by the particular substance and syntax of the last clause (note the interplay between the shadowed idea of mending and the poem’s insistence on the decay of the bodies of the dead).
- 11–12 The last couplet insists that what it reports is temporary. Indeed, the whole poem reeks of the apprehension that underlies (as it were) its celebration of the buried heroes. Moreover, though in a different dimension of value, the idea that freedom has withdrawn even temporarily from action in the world is disturbing.