

To A Mouse

Robert Burns

November, 1785

Contents

The poem	3
In other media	5
See also	5
External links	5

"To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest With the Plough, November, 1785"¹² is a Scots-language poem written by Robert Burns in 1785. It was included in the Kilmarnock Edition³ and all of the poet's later editions, such as the Edinburgh Edition. According to legend, Burns was ploughing in the fields at his Mossgiel Farm and accidentally destroyed a mouse's nest, which it needed to survive the winter. Burns's brother, Gilbert, claimed that the poet composed the poem while still holding his plough.⁴

The poem

Side by side comparison

¹ Burns, Robert. "To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest with the Plough, November, 1785".

² Burns, Robert. "To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest with the Plough, November, 1785"..

³ Burns, Robert (1786). *Poems, chiefly in the Scottish dialect*. Kilmarnock: John Wilson. p. 138. Retrieved 13 February 2014.

⁴ Greenblatt, Stephen, ed. (2012). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 9th ed. Vol. D. New York: W. W. Norton. Print.

The original Scots

Wee, sleekit, cowrin, tim'rous beastie,
O, what a pannic's in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
Wi' bickering brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee,
Wi' murd'ring pattle!

I'm truly sorry man's dominion,
Has broken nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
An' fellow-mortal!

I doubt na, whiles, but thou may thieve;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen icker in a thrave
'S a sma' request;
I'll get a blessin wi' the lave,
An' never miss't!

Thy wee bit housie, too, in ruin!
It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!
An' naething, now, to big a new ane,
O' foggage green
An' bleak December's winds ensuin,
Baith snell an' keen!

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waste,
An' weary winter comin fast,
An' cozie here, beneath the blast,
Thou thought to dwell-
Till crash! the cruel coulter past
Out thro' thy cell.

Thy wee bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,
Has cost thee mony a weary nibble!
Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble,
But house or hald,
To thole the winter's sleety dribble,
An' cranreuch cauld!

But, Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,
In proving foresight may be vain;
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!

English translation

In other media

John Steinbeck took the title of his 1937 novel *Of Mice and Men* from a line contained in the penultimate stanza. The 1997 novel *The Best Laid Plans* by Sidney Sheldon also draws its title from this line, and so do the novel of the same name by Canadian author Terry Fallis and the film series based on it.

The first stanza of the poem is read by Ian Anderson in the beginning of the 2007 remaster of "One Brown Mouse" by Jethro Tull. Anderson adds the line "But a mouse is a mouse, for all that" at the end of the stanza, which is a reference to another of Burns's songs, "Is There for Honest Poverty", commonly known as "A Man's a Man for A' That".

Sharon Olds's poem "Sleekit Cowrin'" also references this poem.

In Douglas Adams's *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* series, mice are hyperintelligent pan-dimensional beings who are trying to find the Question to the Ultimate Answer of Life, the Universe, and Everything. When their plans fail they lament that "the best laid plans of mice" don't always work out.

The Monty Python sketch 'Word Association' references the first line of the poem, and replaces the simple word "We" with "Wee sleekit cowerin' timorous beastie".⁵

In book 2, chapters 9, 11, and 13 of *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White, several allusions to the poem are made. The most notable is on p. 291, where a draw-bridge man says to the fleeing Sirs Grummore and Palomides,⁶ "Wee sleekit, cow'ring timorous Beastie... Oh, what panic's in thy breastie!"

The first line of the poem is frequently used by P. G. Wodehouse in his Jeeves stories and novels. Typically, a woman who has broken off her engagement uses it to describe her former lover, who has been ejected due to his cowardice. An example from *The Cat-Nappers*, Chapter 16⁷ (Orlo Porter speaking): "Potty little lovers' quarrel my left eyeball. She called me a lily-livered poltroon. And a sleekit timorous cowering beastie."

The poem was alluded to in Ben Rector's song *Living My Best Life*.

See also

- To a Louse

External links

Wikisource has original text related to this article:

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⁵ "Monty Python: Word Association". *www.montypython.net*.

⁶ Pastoureau, Michel (2009). *L'Art de l'héraldique au Moyen Âge*. Paris: éditions du Seuil. ISBN 978-2-02-098984-8.

⁷ Wodehouse (1974). *The Cat-Nappers*. Simon and Schuster.

- McGown, George William Thompson. *A Primer of Burns*, Paisley : A. Gardner, 1907. Fully annotated version of *To a Mouse*, with historical background. pp. 9–20
- Text of the poem can be found at 76. To a Mouse

The Ted K Archive

Robert Burns
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<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_a_Mouse>
Rhyming scheme: AAABAB

www.thetedkarchive.com