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Burns's Use of Parody in "Tam O'Shanter"

Among the poems of accepted greatness which have remained largely unexplored by critics is Burns's *Tam O'Shanter*. Here is a work which has delighted and enthralled countless readers for more than one hundred and fifty years; yet no one until David Daiches in his *Robert Burns* (1950)¹ had ever tried to explain in detail how *Tam O'Shanter* works its unique magic. As a matter of course, the poem has been totally ignored by that large class of critics who seem to feel that a work which has no solemn message for the reader, no elaborate symbolism, and no abstruse philosophical meanings to be interpreted is unworthy of scholarly consideration. Even so, *Tam O'Shanter* has never lacked commentators; on the contrary, it has had scores of them. Every one of the numerous writers on Burns has something to say about this poem which Burns himself considered his "standard performance in the Poetical line."² The critical response, however, has also been "standard." Commentators explain the local allusions and underlying folklore, and praise the work in repetitious, general terms. They say, in effect, that the poem is magnificent, but fail to elucidate the complex and masterly poetic techniques which make it so.

Just why is *Tam O'Shanter* so effective and memorable? David Daiches has taken us a long way toward the answer in his fruitful analysis of the poem. Here Daiches stresses, quite properly, the broader

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¹(New York), pp. 280-292. An interesting but less penetrating analysis of the poem has recently appeared in Christina Keith's *The Russet Coat: A Critical Study of Burns' Poetry and of its Background* (London, 1956), pp. 93-103.

² See Burns's letter to Mrs. Dunlop, Apr. 11, 1791, in *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. DeLancey Ferguson (Oxford, 1931), II, 68. All quotations from *Tam O'Shanter* in this paper are taken from the standard Centenary Ed., *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, edd. W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson (Edinburgh, 1896-97), I, 278-287.

aspects of Burns's technique: his brilliant handling of the narrative, the devices used to build suspense, the deft control of tone throughout, the richness and appropriateness of Burns's style. In this paper I propose to supplement Daiches' excellent analysis by concentrating on a single aspect of the poem—its style; and, more particularly, by focusing attention on what seems to me to be a most important element in the style—the element of parody. By thus limiting my study to a close examination of how this single element of parody operates in *Tam O'Shanter*, I hope to come a step nearer to the secret of the poem's subtle power and artistry.

Actually Burns employs several different styles in *Tam O'Shanter*, shifting boldly and rapidly from one to another to reflect the varying moods and comic purposes of the poem. Much of the fun of the poem, its richly humorous quality, lies, I am convinced, in these shifting styles of which the reader may be only vaguely aware. So smoothly and naturally are these changes effected (seeming to rise inevitably out of the narrative situations) that there is no disjointed effect; the reader's mind is left with a unified, powerful impression of the whole. He laughs at this or that passage without understanding just why he finds it amusing. And it is precisely here that parody plays a vital and pervasive role.

Burns's most obvious use of parody in *Tam O'Shanter* occurs toward the end of the poem when Tam, stirred by the lively dance of the witches, roars out his tremendous cheer for the "Cutty-sark." The instant he does this the lights go out; and Tam flees, spurring his horse to a gallop, while hotly pursued by the whole congregation of spirits: "And scarcely had he Maggie rallied, / When out the hellish legion sallied." At this exciting point in the tale, Burns deliberately delays the action by inserting a full verse paragraph of descriptive similes followed by several lines of whimsical commentary on the situation. In thus breaking the narrative at such a critical moment, Burns adroitly builds up suspense, as Daiches has noted. But the passage has another function, which is more to our purpose here. It reads as follows:

As bees bizz out wi' angry fyke,
When plundering herds assail their byke;
As open pussie's mortal foes,
When, pop! she starts before their nose;
As eager runs the market-crowd,
When "Catch the thief!" resounds aloud:
So Maggie runs, the witches follow,
Wi' monie an eldritch skriech and hollo.

Now this is quite clearly and intentionally a parody of a rhetorical style associated with a kind of poetry very different indeed from *Tam O'Shanter*—namely, the heroic epic. The passage is, in fact, a mock-epic simile, or rather a cluster of similes patterned on the stereotyped structure of the Homeric simile. But Burns deviates from the classical form of the epic simile in one or two significant ways, as comparison with the following lines from Pope's version of *The Iliad* (X. 427-432) will show:

As when two skilful [sic] hounds the lev'ret wind,
Or chase thro' woods obscure the trembling hind;
Now lost, now seen, they intercept his way,
And from the herd still turn the flying prey:
So fast, and with such fears, the Trojan flew;
So close, so constant, the bold Greeks pursue.³

From this typical example of the epic simile we see that it is normally a single, elaborately developed comparison (most often drawn from external nature) expressed in the conventional "as-so" formula. Burns, however, in the passage cited varies this pattern by using three short comparisons instead of one long one, still retaining the "as-so" construction but tripling the "as" part of it: "As bees bizz out . . . As open pussie's . . . As eager runs . . . So Maggie runs."

What effects does this device have on Burns's paragraph? For one thing, it grossly exaggerates the contrived quality of the construction. Whereas in Homer the artificiality of the "as-so" formula may not be too obtrusive, here it is deliberately forced upon the reader's attention by the tripling of the simile. He cannot fail to be struck by the "as-as-as-so" pattern. And if he is a cultured reader, he will inevitably be reminded (consciously or not) of heroic epic poetry. The end result, of course, is a delightful mock-heroic tone, the humor rising out of the absurdity of using this dignified and overly conventional rhetorical structure (which is associated in the reader's mind with the epic struggles of warrior heroes) to describe a drunken Scots farmer being chased by a crowd of witches. At the same time, Burns is probably making fun of the stereotyped epic simile itself, at least

³ For evidence that Burns was thoroughly familiar with this kind of poetry long before he came to write *Tam O'Shanter*, and that he had, in fact, given careful study to both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in Pope's translation as well as to Dryden's rendering of *The Aeneid*, see his letters to Dr. John Moore, Aug. 2, 1787, and to Mrs. Dunlop, May 4, 1788, and Sept. 6, 1789 (in *Letters*, ed. Ferguson, I, 109, 221, 359).

as a device in modern poetry. And it should be noted, further, that Burns uses admirable restraint in not pushing the mock-heroic quality of this passage too far. The actual comparisons that he employs are homely and unheroic, drawn from local Ayrshire scenes within Tam's experience, and thus do not conflict with the folksy tone of the whole poem. The mock-heroic overtones come from the rhetorical structure alone. Thus we may conclude that this passage has more than one function in the poem. Not only does it delay the action to create suspense and, at the same time, give us a quite vivid picture of the actual scene; it also becomes amusing and distinctive in its own right through Burns's brilliant parody of the epic simile form.

In the instance just discussed we have seen Burns making masterly and clearly deliberate use of parody as a technique in *Tam O'Shanter*. In this passage the humor comes from his exaggerated imitation of a style which is normally associated with dignified, serious poetry; and this same method is one which Burns uses less obviously throughout the poem in several other passages to which we now turn.

For example, toward the end of the tavern scene in the early part of the poem, when Tam is becoming gloriously drunk with his cronies, totally unmindful of the lateness of the hour and the storm raging outside ("Tam did na mind the storm a whistle"), there is a significant stylistic change in the short climactic verse paragraph which closes this boisterous section of the poem:

Care, mad to see a man sae happy,
E'en drown'd himsel amang the nappy.
As bees flee hame wi' lades o' treasure,
The minutes wing'd their way wi' pleasure:
Kings may be blest but Tam was glorious,
O'er a' the ills o' life victorious!

There is a distinctly literary tone in these expansive lines which contrasts with the colloquial idiom of the preceding passage. For one thing, Burns's use of the personified abstraction "Care" (a favorite device of serious neo-classical poetry) in this context is wholly ridiculous and delightful, and is enhanced by the offhand and highly indecorous way in which this usually dignified personage is disposed of—he drowns himself in Tam's liquor. The simile in the second couplet also smacks of conventional poetizing, and the final comparison of Tam with victorious "kings" further reinforces the mock-heroic tone of the whole paragraph. The reader has only to contrast these alcoholic generalities with the homey, intimate quality of the preceding passage

(as, for example, in the description of Souter Johnny: "Tam lo'ed him like a very brither; / They had been fou for weeks thegither") to become aware of the subtle shift in style which has taken place. Here again, in this paragraph culminating his tavern scene, Burns has strengthened the richly humorous effect by the skillful parody of devices normally associated with the kind of serious didactic poetry his age was addicted to.

Additionally, this parody of conventional elements in neo-classical English verse in the lines discussed above helps to prepare the reader for the succeeding transitional passage in which, after a long pause, Burns shifts completely into standard English:

But pleasures are like poppies spread;
 You seize the flow'r, its bloom is shed;
 Or like the snow falls in the river,
 A moment white—then melts for ever;
 Or like the borealis race,
 That flit ere you can point their place;
 Or like the rainbow's lovely form
 Evanishing amid the storm.
 Nae man can tether time or tide;
 The hour approaches Tam maun ride.

These lines have been praised by some as being beautiful, and attacked by others as a blemish on the poem, an unhappy sliding into English poetic diction. But Daiches is surely right when he points out that here "Burns is seeking a form of expression which will set the sternness of objective fact against the warm, cosy, and self-deluding view of the half-intoxicated Tam, and he wants to do this with just a touch of irony" (page 286). Hence the deliberate shift into English poetic diction. And the touch of irony emerges, I submit, from the parodic element which Burns once again introduces. Those who see in this passage only a series of beautiful similes are surely missing part of Burns's intention and part of the wonderful artistry of *Tam O'Shanter*. It is true, of course, that each of these comparisons is poetically effective in itself; but more significant is the *accumulation* of similes. Burns is not satisfied with one or two; he piles them on, one after another, until we have four. Moreover, he encloses these similes within an extremely formal, even heavy-handed, rhetorical framework—"But pleasures are like . . . Or like . . . Or like . . . Or like . . ." Thus, not only does Burns switch into English poetic diction in this passage, but he calls attention to it by adopting a stiff and artificial structure which

parodies grandiose poetics or "fine writing." The exaggeration is not in the content of the comparisons, but in the accumulation of them and in the rhetorical structure; and this is precisely the same method which Burns used in emphasizing the mock-epic similes, with their "as—as—as—so" formula, in the later passage which we have already analyzed.

We may now consider the total effect of these lines in a new perspective, as performing a multiple function in the poem. Not only is the passage pleasing in itself as a poetic rendering of a commonplace truth; not only is it effective as a transition, intentionally formal and detached in tone to bring us down to earth after Tam's "glorious" tavern elation, as Daiches has shown; but it is also brilliantly comic when seen in the light of the actual situation in the poem. The high-flown diction, the intentionally exaggerated formality of structure—reminiscent of grandiose eighteenth-century poems on serious philosophical subjects—are here used to describe the predicament of an obscure Scots tenant farmer, who has gotten drunk in a tavern and now has to get himself home! That the humorous incongruity of the passage was a conscious and important part of Burns's purpose here is made clear by his suddenly reverting to "plain braid Scots" after the four similes:

Nae man can tether time or tide;
The hour approaches Tam maun ride.

This abrupt shift in style deliberately emphasizes the parodic quality of the grand poetic similes in a deft and humorous way.

In the three passages examined above we have seen Burns parodying dignified poetic styles for comic effects. There are, in addition, at least two or three other passages of *Tam O'Shanter* in which he employs a similar parodic method, but with the language and attitudes of the common people. The first of these occurs early in the poem:

O Tam! hadst thou but been sae wise,
As taen thy ain wife Kate's advice!
She tauld thee weel thou was a skellum,
A blethering, blustering, drunken blellum;
That frae November till October,
Ae market-day thou was nae sober;
That ilka melder wi' the miller,
Thou sat as lang as thou had siller;
That ev'ry naig was ca'd a shoe on,
The smith and thee gat roaring fou on;
That at the Lord's house, even on Sunday,
Thou drank wi' Kirkton Jean till Monday.

This is a fine re-creation of the age-old folk theme of the scolding wife. The remarkable effectiveness of these lines comes from the fact that Burns, while ostensibly only reporting these accusations, slides into the *actual style* of the scolding wife, so that the reader's imagination is stirred to visualize Kate furiously shaking her finger in Tam's face as she delivers her scathing criticism. This effect, incidentally, has been skillfully prepared for in the previous glimpse we have had of Kate sitting at home "Nursing her wrath to keep it warm." Each market night, the moment Tam opens the door the torrent of abuse begins. And the humorous exaggeration here comes largely from the cumulative effect of the accusations, which are hurled at Tam one after another in a long series of parallel clauses, with scarcely time to draw breath between them, and which rise to a climax of shocked indignation at the end with the perfect phrase "*even on Sunday.*" Here, though Burns is not quoting Kate, he manages to incorporate in his style the angry tones of Kate's voice, and gives us in rich folk idiom a vivid parody of the perennial scolding wife.

Later in the poem, in two passages which may be considered together, Burns gives us a comic picture of folk superstition, using essentially the same technique. On Tam's wild ride home through the storm, he is "glow'ring round wi' prudent cares, / Lest bogles catch him unawares," becoming more and more apprehensive as he approaches the haunted Kirk-Alloway:

By this time he was cross the ford,
Whare in the snaw the chapman smoor'd;
And past the birks and meikle stane,
Whare drunken Charlie brak's neck-bane;
And thro' the whins, and by the cairn,
Whare hunters fand the murder'd bairn;
And near the thorn, aboon the well,
Whare Mungo's mither hang'd hersel.⁴

And in the next verse paragraph, describing the ghastly scene within the Kirk itself, Burns lays on the horrors with an even heavier hand:

A murderer's banes, in gibbet-airns;
Twa span-lang, wee, unchristen'd bairns;

⁴For some of the details in this passage Burns was indebted to the long, superstitious speech of "Bauldy" in Allan Ramsay's pastoral play *The Gentle Shepherd* (Edinburgh, 1725), II. iii. 31-50. See *The Works of Allan Ramsay*, edd. Burns Martin and John W. Oliver, Scottish Text Soc., 3rd Ser. 20 (Edinburgh, 1953), II, 231.

A thief new-cutted frac a rape—
 Wi' his last gasp his gab did gape;
 Five tomahawks wi' bluid red-rusted;
 Five scymitars wi' murder crusted;
 A garter which a babe had strangled;
 A knife a father's throat had mangled—
 Whom his ain son o' life bereft—
 The grey-hairs yet stack to the heft;
 Wi' mair of horrible and awefu',
 Which even to name wad be unlawfu'.

In these two passages Burns is surely poking fun at Tam's superstitious fears, and also at the obsession of human kind in general with the sensational, grotesque, and unnatural; and he does so by describing these scenes in very much the same exaggerated way in which one might imagine Tam himself would later recount his frightful experience to Souter Johnny and the landlord over "reaming swats" of ale on the next market day. Here are all the earmarks of a tall tale told by a superstitious countryman who really had gotten a bad scare, and felt compelled to justify his fears. Hence the enlarged catalogue of horrors, the inclusion of minute details such as the grey hairs on the heft of the patricidal knife (a perfect touch to lend conviction), and the final intimation that Tam saw even more grisly sights which he does not dare to describe. All of this is precisely in character. No doubt Burns himself had heard scores of such tales at village gatherings, and he here parodies the style with great skill and turns it to good humorous account. Through this slightly exaggerated imitation of the way Tam himself would tell the story, Burns succeeds in conveying to the reader a shuddering sense of Tam's real superstitions terror, yet, at the same time, a feeling that the whole business is absurd, the figment of a befuddled imagination, not to be taken seriously. And this ingenious method enables Burns to put these horror passages over vividly to the reader without destroying the richly comic mood which pervades and unifies the entire poem.

Finally, in one or two other places in *Tam O'Shanter* Burns makes good-natured fun of the earnest didacticism which was characteristic of a good deal of eighteenth-century poetry, and which was especially congenial to Calvinist Scotland. The tendency to sprinkle poems with heavy-handed moral sermons was familiar indeed to Burns (witness his own *Cotter's Saturday Night*, for example); and he seized the opportunity to include a couple of tongue-in-cheek parodies of this moralizing style in *Tam O'Shanter*, his comic "tale o' truth." The first in-

stance of this device comes early in the poem in the short parenthetical passage beginning "Ah! gentle dames, it gars me greet," which has been aptly described by Daiches as "a somewhat beery generalization" (page 284). But a more obvious hit at the style of the moral poem appears at the very end of *Tam O'Shanter* when, the action having ended with Tam's hairbreadth escape from the fury of the witches, Burns introduces, with mock solemnity, his own "moral":

Now, wha this tale o' truth shall read,
 Ilk man, and mother's son, take heed:
 Whene'er to drink you are inclin'd,
 Or cutty sarks run in your mind,
 Think! ye may buy the joys o'er dear:
 Remember Tam O'Shanter's mare.

This absurd "moral" makes a perfect ending for *Tam O'Shanter*. Not only is it funny in itself as a parody of the sententious style in poetry ("take heed" . . . "Think!" . . . "Remember"), but it is even more amusing in the light of the poem as a whole. Burns is here, in fact, pretending that the entire uproarious story of Tam and Souter Johnny in the tavern, of the wild ride through the storm, of the macabre dance of the witches, of the "Cutty-sark," and of the final mad gallop to the Brig o' Doon was solely created to serve as a dire warning against drinking and chasing after girls—that the poem, in short, exists for the sake of the "delightful instruction" contained in the moral. The ridiculousness of Burns's mock-serious "moral" seen in this perspective is obvious enough. This final passage represents, perhaps, Burns's most daringly imaginative use of parody in *Tam O'Shanter*, and rounds off the poem beautifully with an anti-climactic laugh.

The eight passages examined here surely reveal parody as an important stylistic method in *Tam O'Shanter*, one which has generally been overlooked in critiques of the poem. In each of these passages a large part of the comic effect derives from the fact that the reader is reminded, perhaps only vaguely or even subconsciously, of the literary or colloquial style which Burns is imitating. Yet so smoothly does Burns slide out of one style and into another throughout the poem that the reader is seldom aware of the carefully calculated artistry which underlies these changes. Burns's use of parody in *Tam O'Shanter* is, indeed, a master stroke of concealed art. It accounts for many of the passages which readers find irresistibly amusing for no very obvious reason; and it contributes significantly to that richness of texture, that profoundly human and humorous quality which marks *Tam O'Shanter* as a truly great comic poem.