

NARRATIVE IRONY IN ROBERT BURNS'S
TAM O' SHANTER

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The critical problems presented by Robert Burns's *Tam o' Shanter* generally arise from the narrator's digressions and the variations of style apparent in the tale. The complexity of the poem is simplified when we turn our attention from the story to the storyteller, from the movement of the action to the technique of narration. The narrator, with his tendency to digress and interrupt the action, is a character part, one of Burns's poetic masks.¹ The poet is imitating a simple and voluble man who tells his story in an unusual and idiosyncratic way.

From the tension between the basic story and the narrative style of the storyteller, we find a definite ironic effect which pervades the whole poem. This tension can best be studied from two points of view: first, the narrator's understanding of the moral significance of the tale; and, secondly, the narrator's skill in rhetoric.

It cannot be doubted that the narrator of *Tam o' Shanter* thinks of the tale as having moral significance. But the exact nature of this significance neither he nor the reader quite grasps. The narrator gives a variety of suggestions about what may be learned from the tale. It is a story about drunkenness and about the dire effects of lascivious thoughts:

Ilk man, and mother's son, take heed:
Whene'er to Drink you are inclin'd,
Or Cutty-sarks rin in your mind. . .²

It is a demonstration against heedlessness of distance and weather, the thoughtlessness of the irresponsible man:

We think na on the lang Scots miles,
The mosses, waters, slaps and stiles,
That lie between us and our hame.
The storm without might rair and rustle,
Tam did na mind the storm a whistle.

It is a sermon against neglecting the advice of one's wife:

O Tam! had'st thou but been sae wise,
As taen thy ain wife Kate's advice!

But the narrator does not develop these moral points. When the

¹ In Thomas Crawford's *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (London, 1960), which appeared after the completion of the present paper, the concept of a "crony narrator" in *Tam o' Shanter* is ably developed. Crawford's thesis, however, differs from that here presented.

² The text of *Tam o' Shanter* is taken from Robert Burns, *Poems and Songs*, intro. James Kinsley, Everyman's Library (London, 1958)

witches swoop on Tam, he is told, "thou'll get thy fairin!" The reader, however, is not sure what his deserts are, or if he is guilty of any vice except muddleheadedness. The basic story shows no more than the imprudence of going out at night and of losing one's head at a witches' party; and yet the narrator is constantly feeding the reader with suggestions of didactic implications. Meanwhile, the pervasive irony is at work.

The story is morally neutral, but the imagined narrator is concerned to give it moral significance. He does this by casting round for causes—and those he finds are present, certainly, but not central. The comment against the forgetfulness of time is well applied to the drunken roistering at the inn, and the note on conjugal duty is perhaps stimulated by the attentions Tam pays to the landlady:

The Landlady and Tam grew gracious,
Wi' favours secret, sweet and precious. . . .

But the basic story has little to do with these elements. Critics who accept too literally the narrator's moral suggestions may be misled.

A distinguished Continental student of Burns, accepting the moral asides as vital, naturally sees the poem as incomplete:

A la vérité, l'histoire ressemble à la jument de Tam. Elle a aussi perdu sa queue . . . involontairement, on accompagne Tam jusqu'à sa ferme; on s'attend à le voir paraître devant sa femme Kate. . . . La morale aurait été mieux à cet endroit, car la punition aurait été plus complète. . . . Le moment pénible était l'explication à Kate. C'est cela vraiment qui peut garder les gredins comme Tam de boire, et leur purger la cervelle de chemises courtes pour le reste de leur jours.³

Most readers will not feel this dissatisfaction with the tale. A more convincing suggestion about the significance of the drunken scene and the moral asides is made by David Daiches in his account of the poem: "This interruption ["Inspiring bold John Barleycorn!" etc.] effectively keeps the reader in suspense and gives him an excuse to dismiss, if he so wishes, all that Tam saw as the product of the man's drunken imagination."⁴

What Tam sees, the narrator may imply, is the sort of hallucination conjured up by alcohol and lecherous thoughts. If that is so, there remains then "a living evidence of the truth of the story": Maggie's lack of a tail. That this possibility is indeed inherent in the narrative is suggested by the analogous story of a Carrick farmer whose horse's tail was stolen, hair by hair, for fishing lines, while he spent a night in a public house. "When he comprehended the amount of the disaster, [he] was, it seems, so much bewildered as to its cause, that he could only attribute it to the agency of witches."⁵

³ Auguste Angellier, *Robert Burns* (Paris, 1893), II, 136-37.

⁴ David Daiches, *Robert Burns* (London, 1952), p. 288.

⁵ The story is told in *Complete Works of Robert Burns*, Gebbie self-interpreting edition (New York, 1909), IV, 11.

This reading of the poem sees a basic ambiguity—if the story, as Tam imagined it, is true, then the moral comment is irrelevant; if the story is a hallucination, the moral is clear and well-chosen. But what did happen to Maggie's tail? In stage tradition, the retranslated Bottom (awakened, as he thinks, from a strange dream) finds hay in his knapsack.

These problems which confront the reader of *Tam o' Shanter* are present only if attention is focused on the narrative element. With such focus, critics have sometimes found it necessary to apologize, in some ingenious way or other, for the very presence of the narrator's asides. A clearer total picture of the poem is obtained if we realize that the narrative is not the sole interest, but that the character of the storyteller is vigorously presented and is essential for the overall effect of the poem. His garrulous illogicality and his inability to tell a straightforward tale in a direct and simple manner may be clearly perceived. The result of this lively portrayal is that *Tam o' Shanter* is not a straightforward tale: the qualities of simple and direct narrative must not be sought for in it. This is a simple story as told by a man who is constantly led astray into pious exclamations or learned diversions (as, for example, when he tells the affecting but irrelevant history of Nannie's sark). He will even interrupt the story at a vital point to draw our attention to the state of his breeches:

Thir breeks o' mine, my only pair,
That aince were plush, o' guid blue hair,
I wad hae gien them off my hurdies. .

Such concentration of interest is not unique in Burns's poetry. To suggest that *Tam o' Shanter* is a dramatic monologue like *Holy Willie's Prayer* would certainly imply attention directed too particularly toward the speaker; but a close parallel is provided by *Death and Doctor Hornbook*. In this piece the vigorous portrayal of the personality of the speaker (who has in him more than a little of Tam) is essential to the success of the poem.

The general atmosphere of *Tam o' Shanter* is that of the tale told round the inn fire, and the narrator instantly cuts both himself and the reader off from the rest of society. The dichotomy—

And folk begin to tak the gate,
While we sit bousing at the nappy

—though quickly shown, is vital and not to be ignored. This is not society's story of Tam, but his tale told by a fellow reveler. The speaker, with didactic gleam in his eye, punctuates the recounted action with static generalizations, not always of obvious relevance. In an early digression the narrator establishes his skill at missing the point:

Ah, gentle dames! it gars me greet,
To think how many counsels sweet,
How many lengthen'd, sage advices,
The husband frae the wife despises'

The irony is obvious—perhaps even too obvious, although we must allow that at the beginning of the tale the reader may safely be given a strong hint of what is to come. The “advices” given by Kate are shown as no more than powerful abuse:

She tauld thee weel thou was a skellum,
A blethering, blustering, drunken blellum. . . .

Only someone with the character of our narrator would be able to imagine constructive suggestion in such a tirade, and consequently the reader is not surprised to find that he can see moral lessons in Tam’s meaningless adventure.

Early in the poem the narrator’s understanding comes under question. We next begin to doubt his rhetorical skill. The digression on the rapid fading of pleasures puts this doubt into our minds:

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 nor Tide,
The hour approaches Tam maun ride. . . .

The passage is in English, and in its careful balance and lack of forward motion is unique in the poem. But more striking than these elements is the fact that its rhetoric is top-heavy. The great illustrates the small; the mutability of the world demonstrates that it is time to go home. The images, beautiful in themselves, are piled up in a way foreign to the idiom of the poem and are used to adorn a concept mundane and insignificant. Propriety, so vital for a successful use of rhetoric, is missing, and a dichotomy appears between the golden chain of images and the murky night in the homely inn. The irony in *Tam o’ Shanter* is not provided only by the incongruous moral, but by a stylistic incongruity that is also apparent.

The stylistic differences between the moral passages and the narrative parts of the poem have frequently been noted. The images of the moral asides are formal and traditional, whereas those of the narrative are freshly observed and vigorous. No clearer example could be found than in the contrast between two lines with a similar subject: “As bees flee hame wi’ lades o’ treasure” and “As bees bizz out wi’ angry fyke.” The distinction is natural enough—morality may well become overloaded with conventionalities—but the aesthetic effect is in *Tam o’ Shanter* more particular.

A close parallel may be found in another Burns poem similarly abounding in irony, *The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie*. Here the expiring sheep leaves instructions for the upbringing of her children and successors. Vague, general, moral guidance is expressed in familiarly vague pastoral bleatings:

But ca' them out to park or hill,
 An' let them wander at their will:
 So may his flock increase, an' grow
 To scores o' lambs, an' pack^s o' woo'!

or:

My poor toop-lamb, my son an' heir,
 O, bid him breed him up wi' care!
 An' if he live to be a beast,
 To pit some havins in his breast!

The more particular (and more earthy) instructions are precise, vigorous, and idiomatic:

O, bid him save their harmless lives,
 Frae dogs, an' tods, an' butchers' knives!
 But gie them guid cow-milk their fill,
 Till they be fit to fend themsel',
 An' tent them duly, e'en an' morn,
 Wi' taets o' hay an' rippis o' corn.

In *Tam o' Shanter* we have lively descriptions of the storm and the adventures placed in a framework of old-fashioned and drab cliché. The narrator speaks sometimes with startling clarity of visualization and sometimes in the outworn terms of a post-Augustan poet. He is most persuasive when the style is clear.

When the narrator speaks as the moralist, we have generalities in such phrases as:

(Auld Ayr, wham ne'er a town surpasses,
 For honest men and bonie lasses.)

In vain thy Kate awaits thy comin!
 Kate soon will be a woefu' woman!

There, at them thou thy tail may toss,
 A running stream they dare na cross.

Now, wha this tale o' truth shall read,
 Ilk man, and mother's son, take heed.

Also falling into this category are some of the comments on the significance of the tale already quoted. The narrator as moralist also tends to use images which are far from precise in visual effect:

Gathering her brows like gathering storm,
 Nursing her wrath to keep it warm.

Care, mad to see a man sae happy,
 E'en drown'd himsel among the nappy.

Inspiring bold John Barleycorn!
 What dangers thou canst make us scorn!

In contrast, the parts of the poem actually telling the story and advancing the action are filled with vividly realized pictures:

The night drave on wi' sangs an' clatter ;
And aye the ale was growing better.

Whiles holding fast his gude blue bonnet,
Whiles crooning o'er some auld Scots sonnet,
Whiles glow'rin round wi' prudent cares,
Lest bogles catch him unawares. . . .

And (by some devilish cantraip sleight)
Each in its cauld hand held a light.

A thief, new-cuttet frae a rape,
Wi' his last gasp his gab did gape.

The grey hairs yet stack to the heft. . . .

And there are many more. Such passages make us intimate witnesses of the adventure. The driving force and speed of the action of the poem is brought home by the vivid use of verbs of violent motion: "Tam skelpit on thro' dub and mire." (The Scots reader would be aware of the ambiguity here: "Dub-skelper" means "one who travels rapidly regardless of the state of the road; used contemptuously for a rambling fellow."⁶)

He screw'd the pipes and gart them skirl,
Till roof and rafters a' did dirl.—

The dancers quick and quicker flew,
They reel'd, they set, they cross'd, they cleekit,
Till ilka carlin swat and reekit.

Even Satan glowr'd, and fidg'd fu' fain,
And hotch'd and blew wi' might and main.

For Nannie, far before the rest,
Hard upon noble Maggie prest,
And flew at Tam wi' furious ettle. . . .

From about line 73 of the poem, from the time when Tam rides off alone and becomes, consequently, the sole authority for his adventure, we can see an ever-widening breach between narrative and moral aside. The effect is of having Tam's story given to us decked with editorial comments. The culmination of this tendency is found in the passages where the narrator addresses Tam directly, pretending ignorance of the ending to the story:

Now Tam, O Tam! had they been queans. . . .

Ah, Tam! Ah, Tam! thou'll get thy fairin!

The distinction between Tam and the narrator here is made clearer by the obvious stylistic differences between the two passages of Gothic horror: the first describing the environs of Kirk-Alloway; the second describing the grisly remains on the altar. If the first tends toward

⁶ See *Scottish National Dictionary*, ed. W. Grant and D. D. Murison (Edinburgh: S.N.D., 1931 *et seq.*), article on *dub-skelper*.

the farcical,⁷ the second manifests an even greater tendency toward the ridiculous, and in its lively exaggeration, leads up to a broadsword, if rather off-hand, bit of satire.

Three lawyers' tongues, turned inside out,
Wi' lies seamed like a beggar's clout;
Three Priests' hearts, rotten, black as muck,
Lay stinking, vile, in every neuk.⁸

It is a fine example of the exuberance of the poem. The first description is comic; the second is riotously overzealous, as the use of feminine endings (a sure sign of Burns's lighthearted mood) and the introduction of the very un-Scottish tomahawks and scimitars suggest

Five tomahawks, wi' blude red-rusted;
Five scimitars, wi' murder crusted .
Wi' mair of horrible and awfu',
Which even to name wad be unlawfu'.

It is not surprising, then, that the first and comparatively quiet description should be part of the general knowledge of the surroundings and hence within the province of the narrator:

Where in the snaw the chapman smoor'd . . .
Where drunken Charlie brak's neck-bane .
Where hunters fand the murder'd bairn. . . .
Where Mungo's mither hang'd hersel' . . .

while the second passage, in its vigorous and vivid burlesque, should be a special part of this particular tale—the responsibility of Tam rather than the narrator.

The narrator certainly tends toward the formal and moral—for a more elevated and less direct speech—but he is shown as being unable to preserve this elevation in diction. The periodic collapse of the narrator's rhetoric—from the sublime to the commonplace—is a notable feature of the style of the poem. We have already noted something similar in the passage concerning the short-lived pleasures of man, but the sudden reduction in grandeur of style may be seen in other parts of the poem:

The storm without might rair and rustle,
Tam did na mind the storm a whistle.

Here the movement from formality to colloquialism lets the reader down with a bump, and the effect is closely paralleled in

⁷ John Speirs, in *The Scots Literary Tradition* (London, 1940), p. 135, describes the passage as "comic melodrama at the point of farce."

⁸ These lines were canceled and do not appear in the standard reprints. They are quoted here from *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Barke (London, 1955), p. 206. The present comment is not intended to suggest that the lines should be restored to the text, but merely to show that the canceled lines confirm the general tendency of the passage.

The swats sae ream'd in Tammie's noddle,
Fair play, he car'd na deils a boddle,

and in

But ere the key-stane she could make,
The fient a tail she had to shake!

The narrator chooses his moral comments off the peg, whether they fit the case or not: here we see him throwing in everyday idioms regardless of the general style of the poem. Similarly, the comment following the excellent description of the storm marks a sudden change in style:

The wind blew as 'twad blawn its last;
The rattling showers rose on the blast;
The speedy gleams the darkness swallow'd;
Loud, deep, and lang the thunder bellow'd:
That night, a child might understand,
The deil had business on his hand.

Bearing these passages in mind, the reader might well feel that the claim made by the narrator when the tale demands a description of Nannie's excellence in dancing—

But here my Muse her wing maun cour,
Sic flights are far beyond her power

—may not be entirely the result of modesty.

The descent from the magnificent to the mundane may perhaps also be cited at the end of the tale. The narrator's imitation of a moralist—the apparent desire to end his story, as if a sermon, with a pious exhortation to good behavior—is shattered by the final production of the tailless horse, an object for laughter rather than a symbol for the weak to treasure:

Think ye may buy the joys o'er dear;
Remember Tam o' Shanter's mare.

We do not remember Tam's sins or his adventures, but rather the undignified accident which has befallen his innocent horse.

It must not be understood, of course, that the elevated passages in *Tam o' Shanter* always collapse in this way. The incompetence of the narrator must not be allowed to overcome the competence of the poet. During the description of the dance of witches, the climax of the tale, there is no example of deflation of style. The idiosyncratic character of the narrator is cut off from the story and allowed few interruptions. Through the rest of the poem, however, the imitation of the incompetent narrator is vigorously carried out, and the ironic effect thereby gained is essential to the humorous success of the poem.

The reader must be constantly aware of the distinction in *Tam o' Shanter* between the parts of the poem devoted to the story and the parts principally devoted to an ironic portrayal of the speaker's personality. The fact that one element in the poem is framed within the

other is vital: the story itself is humorous and meaningless, an idle tale around the fireside rather than a Scottish *Ancient Mariner*. The placing of a comic narrator between the events and the reader succeeds effectively in distancing and diminishing the narrative.

The fact that *Tam o' Shanter* has not undergone much interpretation by critics is a sign of Burns's success here. Such critical interpretation as there is frequently appears solemn and ill-matching with the tone of the poem: "So Nannie, the young witch in *Tam o' Shanter*, is all the young women that Burns himself has seduced. Burns' own desire is reflected in Tam, and projected into the Devil himself."⁹ This may be true, but it is surprising. To arrive at this conclusion we have to forget so much of the narrative frame. By ignoring the character and scene—the image of the alehouse fire and the inexperienced, amateur storyteller—we ignore the major element of the poem.

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⁹ William Montgomery, "Tam o' Shanter," in *New Judgments Robert Burns*, ed. William Montgomery (Glasgow, 1947), p. 80.

