
Robert Burns, “Tam o’ Shanter”

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“Tam o’ Shanter” is an unusual poem in that it lies at the core of both academic assessment and popular celebration of Robert Burns. The recitation of this complex and tricky narrative poem, which makes frequent satiric sallies by way of the many sub-genres it invokes or inflects, lies at the core of the cultural practices of Burns Suppers around the world. In this, it has to some extent been adopted by the tradition it satirizes, that of the reduction of orality’s elusive and hidden nature to the dimensions of cultural codification and collection.

The poem tells the story of a relatively well-to-do Scottish peasant farmer, Tam, who habitually gets drunk whenever he visits Ayr on market day. One evening, his prolonged stay in the pub not only gets him drunk but arouses lecherous passions, which are alluded to in a line on Tam’s intimacy with the innkeeper’s wife. Eventually, either he cannot risk any further absence from his own wife or it is closing time, and Tam has to ride home in a storm. Passing the ruined kirk of Alloway, he is attracted by lights and the noise of revelry, such as he has just left. Drawing closer, he sees that witches are dancing to music provided by the Devil. One witch, who has only a short shirt on, attracts his attention: it is hinted that Tam can glimpse her buttocks. Aroused and excited by her dancing, Tam forgets that betrayal of a stranger’s presence on such occasions is followed by dire consequences, and shouts out “Weel done, Cutty-sark!” (l. 189), thus breaching folk taboo in the sheer physicality of his appreciation of the metaphysical, his ready and instinctive nature bursting in on the supernatural. The taboo, however, prevails over Tam’s voyeuristic cheer: the lights go out, and the hellish crew in rage pursues him. The fact that Cutty Sark is the foremost among them uneasily unites the folk-tale elements of the story with male sexual fantasy. The witches eventually almost catch him, but he escapes at the Brig o Doon, as the servants of the Devil cannot cross running water. Just as one taboo endangers Tam, so another saves him. However, Cutty Sark is close enough to grab hold of the “tail” – not of Tam, but of Meg, his mare. The narrator concludes the poem by a brief moral:

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.

(ll. 221–4)

There is clearly something wrong with this moral closure, as Tam has not suffered from buying “joys o'er dear”: rather, it is his horse that has suffered (“left poor Maggie scarce a stump,” l. 218), and that suffering has nothing to do with transgression.

The status of the narrator and his relation to what he narrates is thus one of the key questions of the poem, because it is the narrator's relationship to Tam that underpins the implications of a story which is a mixture of folk and comic tale. For much of the critical history of the poem, its uneven tone has been a puzzle to commentators: more recently, beginning with Tom Crawford's majestic *Burns* (1994; 1st edn. 1960), there has been an increasing understanding of the dialogic quality of the poem's narrative, and its significance.

“Tam o' Shanter” was written for Captain Francis Grose (1731–91), an antiquary who was, like many of his contemporaries, collecting British traditions across the four nations. He had already published the *Antiquities of England and Wales* (1773–87) and was preparing an *Antiquities of Scotland* (1789–91) before commencing work on an Irish book (Crawford 1992: 108); he died before he could finish this last collection. Burns was friendly toward Grose, but some of his comments, particularly the most famous (“A chield's among you, taking notes / And, faith, he'll prent it,” Burns 1992: 392), suggest a degree of reservation about the activities of this “profound Antiquarian.” Although he found Grose kind and funny, Burns also characterized him as “Dr Slop,” and generally spoke about him with an air of humor or ironic distancing. In June 1790 he sent Grose the original of the story of “Tam o' Shanter” in a letter: this tale is much less sexualized (the witches remain “hags”) but it shares the poem's ending, and Burns's slyly solemn moral: “the unsightly, tailless condition of the vigorous steed was to the last hour of the noble creature's life, an awful warning to the Carrick farmers, not to stay too late in Ayr markets.” The letter also gives Burns's own warning about the stories he is recounting, for at the end of the third tale (“Tam” is the second), the poet notes that the story requires to be interpreted by “Somebody that understood Scotch” (Burns 1985: vol. 1, 423; vol. 2, 29, 31, 47, 52).

Generally, the stronger Burns's Scots is, the more directly he is addressing a community with which he identifies, and the less ambivalent is his narrative stance. A story that can be understood only by someone who understands Scots is a story by its nature inaccessible to the non-Scots collector. Is “Tam o' Shanter” also in part an example of this? When Burns sent Grose the poem of “Tam o' Shanter” on December 1, 1790, he portrayed himself as the “rustic bard,” a suitable subject for the antiquary's collection (Burns 1985: vol. 2, 62, 72), and a self-image which reveals Burns at his most slippery, as the Preface and text of the 1786 Kilmarnock edition of his poems makes clear (Pittock 2003). Grose duly collected “Tam o' Shanter” for the second

volume of his *Antiquities of Scotland*, where the poem appeared in 1791. But what did it mean? Was it, too, a story to be interpreted by "Somebody who understood Scotch"? Burns's own bardic stance was elusive and deceptive, and he carries this over into the tension between the voice of the narrator in "Tam o' Shanter," with its insistence on moral closure, and the uproariously open oral tale which resists it, all of which is told, by the narrator, for Grose.

Telling tall tales to antiquaries was not unknown. One interesting example is perhaps that of Patrick Graham, minister of Aberfoyle, who in 1806 produced *Sketches Descriptive of Picturesque Scenery*, a book which included much local anecdote about the supernatural, but nothing about what is now the most famous supernatural occurrence to have taken place at Aberfoyle: the disappearance of an earlier minister, Robert Kirk, at the hands of the fairies in 1692. However, when Graham published his expanded *Sketches of Perthshire* in 1812, Kirk made an appearance, together with a stanza from Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake* introduced to comment on his fate. Graham's supply of Trossachs folklore for Scott had intervened and, one way or another, had produced the Trossachs' most exciting fairy story (Cowan and Henderson 2002).

Burns similarly supplies Grose with a supernatural tale, on this occasion a tale of witches. For his hero, he chooses a member of his own community – and indeed his own class – a surrogate for Burns himself. Tam belongs to a wealthier peasant class which was vanishing under the pressures of rising rents (even for unproductive farms) and the growing efficiency of larger farming enterprises. Over time, many in Tam's class descended into poverty and the agricultural working class. Burns's own family came from this background and shared this fate.

And the narrator? He is male, as his participation in Tam's excitement over the dancing witches shows; and he stands both without and within the world he describes, his voice sometimes that of the antiquary, in love with the sententious, fey, and picturesque, and sometimes that of the Scottish peasantry whose story he reports. The moral coda to the tale depends on the loss of the "tail" with an "I," and these two tales/tails can be taken as symbolizing the external antiquarian stance of the collector, who imposes the moral of the "tale," and the interior, secret self of the "tail" with an "I," whose love for a bawdy story is in fact the hidden warning coda to the antiquarians' practice of depoliticizing and bowdlerizing the peasant world.

Tam's story begins with the departure of the "chapman billies," purveyors of the printed ballads already being collected by the antiquaries to whose representative the poem is dedicated. As they leave, they make room for the narrator, who first of all represents himself as one of the community ("getting fou and unco happy," l. 6), and then shifts from Scots to standard English in the course of the first verse paragraph, as he anticipates the scolding wives will give their errant husbands on their return: "Gathering her brows like gathering storm / Nursing her wrath to keep it warm" (ll. 11–12). Standard English is the language of distance, judgment, and reportage; Scots the intimate tongue of participation, expressing the communal "we." The narrator uses both, but does not consider the Scots inferior: tellingly perhaps, the quotation that heads the poem is from Gavin Douglas, canonical writer in Scots and the author of the

first translation of the *Aeneid* into the vernacular in the British Isles. This Bishop of Dunkeld, a scion of the greatest family of medieval Scotland, cannot have rank pulled on him by an English antiquary in the manner that an Ayrshire peasant can. "Tam o' Shanter" is the peasant subject, but also perhaps on one level the peasant author, as Kenneth White has suggested: for his name, with its undertones of "chanter," "chantre," or "shanty" may imply a hidden identity with Burns (White 1990: 5).

The shift between English and Scottish voices in the narrative provides very tempting material for a Bakhtinian analysis. English and Anglophone antiquarianism demanded a record of heteroglossic traditions in a unitary voice. As indicated both by his stress on the need for someone to "interpret" Scots in his letter to Grose, and his extensive use of a Scots voice in the poem, Burns is resisting this demand with what is surely an exercise in hybridity, "an encounter . . . between two linguistic utterances" (Craig 1999: 89) as the languages of Scots and English jostle each other for ascendancy through the poem. The narrator by turns appears to conspire with his subject as an equal and to satirize him as a fool, turning from the laughter of belonging to being "above the object of his mockery" in Bakhtinian terms – although, as indicated above, the opening quotation undermines standard English's right to pull rank. Meanwhile, the setting of the poem fulfills Bakhtin's category of the ritual spectacle. The market day is a time of carnival and riot ("Ae market-day thou was nae sober," l. 22), which is based on drink ("They had been fou for weeks thegither," l. 44), oral tales and laughter ("The night drave on wi sangs and clatter . . . The Souter tauld his queerest stories," ll. 45, 49). The light Scots of these lines indicates the narrator's identification with such community celebrations, and his local knowledge of the reason for them: ("Auld Ayr, wham ne'er a town surpasses, / For honest men and bonny lasses," ll. 15–16), a remark set in parenthesis from the narrator to his audience, who by token of this aside are identified as not a local but a national audience, the audience to whom such an excuse must be made because it is waiting to hear an antiquarian tale, not an account of a communal spree. On line 33, some part of his audience is identified: "gentle dames" with "sage advices." Sage advice will be offered by this poem as well as by its audience: but another spirit keeps breaking through. In the same way, the mainly tetrameter couplets hint at neoclassical closure, but also at the ballads: moreover, the rhyme requires Scots pronunciation to retain its regularity, while some of the rhymes, such as "understand/hand" (ll. 77–8) are regular in either Scots or English pronunciation. The poem is perfectly balanced, permanently in the act of sitting in remote judgment on itself and resisting that judgment in its localities. Linguistically, it represents an extremely sophisticated mediation between registers and between Scots and English.

The first part of the tale of Tam deals with his enjoyment of the pub (and the landlord's wife) on market night. This passage, from line 36 to line 57, is told in the conspiratorial light Scots of the narrator as participant, though the last four lines begin a shift to standard English ("Kings may be blest, but *Tam* was glorious, / O'er a' the ills o' life victorious!," ll. 57–8), which anticipates the standard English of the first coda, which closes the first third of the poem:

But pleasures are like poppies spread,
 You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;
 Or like the snow falls in the river,
 A moment white – then melts for ever . . .
 Or like the rainbow's lovely form
 Evanishing amid the storm.

(ll. 59–62, 65–6)

This meditation on the transitoriness of human enjoyment ends Tam's visit to the pub, from which he now "maun ride" (l. 68). The narrator's high style of English passes "judgement on Tam's drunken abandon" (Bittenbender 1994: 33), as it evicts its subject from the secret world of oral and introspective pleasure to the governing realm of normality and rule, farms and marriages – and British antiquaries. But Tam's romantic journey never reaches this neoclassical goal within the confines of the poem's couplets. Instead, the narrator's socio-linguistic divorce from the scene of Tam's pleasures leads us into the fantastic world of the second part of the poem, where folk carnival is no longer found in the lineaments of local Ayrshire pleasures reported to a wider public, but instead in the threateningly anti-hierarchical and overtly orgiastic cavortings of the witches. Here we encounter the dark underside of peasant celebration, the occult (in both senses) world of local culture, where the witches dance "hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels" (l. 117), the native dances of Scotland, for their antiquarian audience, to whom they are revealed not as an old story but as a living threat.

Tam's journey to the witches initially appears to be controlled by the narrator within the familiar lineaments of the picturesque. The narrator knows local anecdotes and reports them in print (ll. 89–96), much as Scott was to do in the next generation; unlike Scott, perhaps, he realizes the death of orality these written renderings represent, for the first anecdote is that of the smothered chapman ("By this time he was cross the ford, / Whare, in the snaw, the chapman smoor'd" [ll. 89–90], the very Scots word for the manner of his death itself serving as an elegiac note on the death of Scots). At the beginning of the poem these ballad-sellers depart to leave the narrator in command; now in the middle of the poem the chapman's death is celebrated as an anecdote for antiquarian consumption. At the same time, the narrator bears witness to the reader of his knowingness as a collector as well as a local, for on Tam's journey to Alloway Kirk, the darkness, gloom, and decay of the scene (Alloway Kirk had been falling into ruin since 1690) develop to the point where the reader is plunged into a world of genre construction – the collector's art, not the peasant's experience: "That night, a child might understand, / The Deil had business on his hand" (ll. 77–8). Indeed, the function of the picturesque as "a frame of mind, an aesthetic attitude involving man in a direct and active relationship with the natural scenery through which he travels" (Barbier 1963: 99), enables the reader to take a parallel journey to Tam's, one rationally conducted and yet spiced with that *frisson* of controlled fear which characterizes the transitions from light to dark in the picturesque landscape,

when “The speedy gleams the darkness swallow’d” (l. 75). As Tam draws near “*Kirk-Alloway*” (l. 102), this rather stagy scene design reaches its self-consciously gothic climax, once again delivered in the best narratorial English of the collector’s external gaze:

Before him *Doom* pours all his floods;
The doubling storm roars thro’ the woods;
The lightnings flash from pole to pole;
Near and more near the thunders roll . . .
(ll. 97–100)

Yet as soon as the “bleeze” of “*Kirk-Alloway*” is sighted, a real Scottish place in the picturesque landscape, the narrator’s language slips back into the colloquial Scots of shared community:

Wi’ usquabae, we’ll face the devil! –
The swats sae ream’d in *Tammie*’s noddle,
Fair play, he car’d na deils a boddle.
(ll. 108–10)

Not only the narrator’s Scots, but his use of the diminutive “*Tammie*” indicates an affectionate intimacy with his hero; while “boddle,” an old copper coin worth two Scots pence (two-thirds of a sterling farthing), obsolescent since 1707, serves as a term of cultural and linguistic exclusion for the English reader.

Inspired by Scotland’s national drink, Tam and his mare Maggie venture forwards, and see the “unco sight” (l. 114) of warlocks and witches dancing. They dance the dances of Scotland rather than any “cotillion brent new frae *France*” (l. 116). The devil, in the shape of “A towzie tyke” (l. 121), plays “the pipes and gart them skirl” (l. 123). What is unmistakable here is the element of the native: Scottish music and dancing suppressed by neither domestic or Presbyterian disapproval (wickedly, indeed, taking place in a Presbyterian kirk), existing in its place of action oppositional to and independent of both. Just as the “Deil” exists as a character elsewhere in Burns who can send oppressive aristocrats to hell or steal away intrusive excisemen, so here he is a force of native and folkloric identity, akin in his music-making (as in “Address to the Deil” [Burns 1992: 135]) to the (Scots) Bard himself. A whole hinterland of commentary, indeed, could be made which relates Burns to Blake in their use of the Devil to redefine morality. In “Tam o’ Shanter,” what looks like extraneous gothic detailing (“Five tomahawks, wi’ blude red-rusted; / Five scymitars, wi’ murder crusted” [ll. 135–6]) is provided in a light Scots which possibly gestures toward presentation of the scene for external consumption, and in doing so moves us briefly away from the local and intimate implications of the bardic demon.

However, we swiftly move in to a much more intimate connection with this appalling scene, one not of fear or outrage, but rather of sexual excitement, a feeling in which the narrator (returning to Scots) frankly shares with Tam: “Thir breeks o’ mine, my

only pair . . . I wad hae gi'en them off my hurdies, / For ae blink o' the bonie burdies!" (ll. 155, 157–8). Although these lines technically refer to girls other than the witches, when Tam spots the prettiest of all, Cutty Sark, the narrator admits, "But here my Muse her wing maun cour" (l. 179): the narrative cannot preserve its distance in the excitement of the "lap and flang" of the "souple jade" (ll. 181–2). Like the narrator, Tam is excited, and so is the Devil, who flushes and twitches with sexual arousal and discomfort: "Even Satan glowr'd, and fig'd fu' fain" (l. 185).

Narrative distance has gone: three greedy male gazes voyeuristically consume the "hurdies" (the sight of the buttocks may be implied by the "hurdies/burdies" rhyme as well as "Cutty-sark") of the dancing witch: Tam "thought his very een enrich'd" (l. 184). The narrator has disclaimed responsibility for the description as being "far beyond" his Muse's "pow'r," so Tam supplies the deficiency: "And roars out, 'Weel done, Cutty-sark!'" (l. 189). These are his only words in the whole poem, and they disrupt the narrative, with all its controlled and controlling use of register. By publicly bawling out his direct appreciation of the erotic dance he is witnessing, Tam voices to the world the power of the sexualized witch carnival directly and powerfully, with far greater authority than could ever be located in the mediated reportage of the antiquary. For one moment, he wrests the narrative from its narrator, returning it to oral immediacy: he is Tam the Chanter (the pipe part of the bagpipes), calling out his appreciation to the dance played before the piping (and likewise excited) Deil. Just as the unfettered imagination of Blake's Milton and Shelley's poetic conceptions are more powerful than what appears in print, so the residue of writing's record of orality is inflamed, if only for a moment, by the intervention of Tam's delighted and abandoned words in the immediacy of their contact with the peasantry's hidden culture. His subsequent flight and escape demonstrate that, far from getting his "fairin" (l. 201), Tam gets off scot free. The narrator's excited Scots suggests a sympathetic account, which modulates toward standard English only as the poem closes with its ludicrously inaccurate moral, for Tam's encounters with sex, alcoholism, and diabolism have left him completely unscathed. In the prose tale Burns sent to Grose, "Maggy," not "Cutty Sark", was the witch; in the poem, Maggy is the horse that Tam rides, and the witch succeeds only in damaging her alter ego: "The carlin claught her by the rump, / And left poor Maggie scarce a stump" (ll. 217–18). A faint implication of jealousy arises from this exchange of names. Tam drinks, he is unfaithful, women fight over him: by so much "Weel done, Cutty-sark!" outdistances as a truth claim the laborious distancing and moralizing of the standard English voice, to which the antiquarian aspires.

In "Tam o' Shanter," then, a poem that begins as a written report of an oral tale develops through a sequence of events that increasingly flummox its narrator as collector, while offering through its narrator as participant a conspiratorial glimpse into the liberating quality of the secret life of the locality. The moral's restored orderliness of closure is itself testament to the victory of orality over its condescension, for the moral is itself a world turned upside down, mocked by a folk world free of its control. Yet it is the assertion of that control with which the poem ends, because that is what

poems do: they close out the stories which run on in and through one another, and draw a line under and put a period to what they relate. “Remember” is the instruction of the poem’s last line: a memorialization which emphasizes closure, just as Burns himself, like other collectors, created single canonical versions of altering and varied songs for Johnson’s *Musical Museum*. But although “Nae man can tether time or tide” (l. 67), Tam’s ride is from one riot to another, one zone of “unpublicized speech, nonexistent from the point of view of literary language” to another. The printed page presents what Bakhtin calls “only a small and polished portion of these unpublicized spheres of speech” (Bakhtin 1984: 421), and does so in a hybrid style that publicizes the very instability of register it officially seeks to erase. So much of the effect of this great poem, truly if only partly written in what Wordsworth, in debt to the linguistic politics of Burns’s own bardic prefaces (Johnston 1998: 86–7; Pittock 2003) would term the ordinary language of men in a state of vivid sensation. In that sense the whole poem is compressed into half a line: “Weel done, Cutty-sark!” “And in an instant all was dark” (ll. 189–90): dark, that is, to the orderly arrangements of antiquarianism’s version of a folklore eviscerated of its native speech. “Tam o’ Shanter” remains free of its poet’s control – designedly so, for the subject is the poet: occult in the sense of “hidden,” not just the gothic version delighted in for public consumption. Tam the Chanter conceals Rab the Ranter in a poem written by Robert Burns for Francis Grose. Burns is thus no peasant poet, but he deploys the voice of the peasantry to challenge the tale he appears to tell.

See also ch. 41, “POETRY BEYOND THE ENGLISH BORDERS.”

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