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Footnoted Folklore: Robert Burns's "Hallowe'en"

Corey E. Andrews

Robert Burns's interest in folklore and the supernatural started at an early age and found its way into nearly everything he wrote. In his famous autobiographical letter to Dr. John Moore in 1787, Burns testified that his wide knowledge of Scottish folk beliefs concerning the supernatural "owed much to an old Maid of my Mother's, remarkable for her ignorance, credulity, and superstition" (Roy I: 135). He continues that

She had, I suppose, the largest collection in the county of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions ... and other trumpery.

Despite his apparently dismissive attitude about these beliefs, Burns admits to Moore that the maid's collection had "cultivated the latent seeds of Poesy" in him.

Other letters suggest that such folk beliefs and customs may have influenced his own thinking in ways that he could not fully admit. In a letter to Captain Richard Brown from 1788, Burns mused that "Life is a fairy scene; almost all that deserves the name of enjoyment, or pleasure, is only charming delusion; and in comes ripening Age, in all the gravity of hoary wisdom, and wickedly chases away the dear, bewitching Phantoms" (Roy I: 245). In this rumination, the supernatural is a source of delusion and desire, offering only a "fairy scene" and "bewitching Phantoms" that tantalize but offer no fulfillment. With characteristically wry irony, Burns concludes by asking his friend, "How do you like my Philosophy?" Joking aside, Burns expresses key ideas about

the supernatural in this passage that shaped his writing on folk beliefs and customs.

The most prominent of such works, "Halloween" (1785), has been traditionally regarded as the definitive treatment of Scottish folk customs surrounding the holiday. At 252 lines (among the longest poems in the Burns canon), "Halloween" offers a wealth of folkloric practice that is skillfully interwoven within an episodic narrative. A chapbook edition of the poem from 1802, in the G. Ross Roy Collection at the University of South Carolina, gives a fairly thorough summary of the folk customs found in the poem. In full, the title reads:

*The Merry Diversions of Halloween, Giving an Account of The Pulling of the Kail Stocks—Burning Nuts—Catching Sweethearts in the Stack Yard—Pulling the Corn—Winding the Blue Clue—Winnowing the Corn—Sowing the Hemp Seed—And the Cutting of the Apple, with the Conclusion of these Merry Meetings, by telling Wonderful Stories about Witches and Fairies.*¹

The poem teems with rich, often confusing detail about these folk practices. As if to account for their ambiguity, Burns meticulously explains the customs by using footnotes throughout "Halloween." Burns's talents as both a cultural observer and scenarist are thus fully employed in a poem which has actually become more highly regarded as an anthropological account than as a literary work.

In his recent "cultural history" of Halloween, David J. Skal describes Burns's poem as a "paean to the holiday and a valuable historical document," one which "recorded and memorialized Halloween customs involving fortune-telling with apples and nuts practiced in Scotland."² Similarly, Nicholas Rogers discusses the poem as a "burlesque account of Halloween's games and divinations," focusing particularly on "early modern courtship customs and...social, principally

¹ *The Merry Diversions of Halloween* (Stirling: Randall, 1802). Another item in the Roy Collection pertaining to Burns's poem is *The Mignonette: A Christmas and New Year's Gift Book* (New York: Appleton, 1856), in which "Halloween" is accompanied by engraved illustrations.

² David J. Skal, *Death Makes a Holiday: A Cultural History of Halloween* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002), 25, 26.

masculine, license.”³ Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, the poem served as a touchstone in numerous histories of Scottish folklore, often representing a kind of historical testimony rather than artistic work. William Motherwell remarked that the poem “exhibits a highly humorous and masterly description of some of the most remarkable superstitions of the Scottish peasantry.”⁴ As can be readily surmised, the poem’s title and content are of primary interest in such historical accounts, which seek to situate Burns’s micro-history of Halloween in the context of other cultural practices.

Early reviewers and readers commented on the poem’s blending of description and folklore, noting both such literary predecessors as Robert Fergusson’s “Hallow-Fair” and John Mayne’s “Halloween,” and allusions to such earlier poets as Virgil and Theocritus. James Anderson, in his review of the Kilmarnock edition in the *Monthly Review*, stated that the poem was “a valuable relic, which ... will preserve the memory of these simple incantations long after they would otherwise have been lost.”⁵ Interestingly, he added that the poem was “properly accompanied with notes, explaining the circumstances to which the poem alludes.” In the *English Review*, John Logan criticized the poem’s tonal imbalance; while “Halloween” gave “a just and literal account of the principal spells and charms that are practised on that anniversary among the peasants of Scotland,” the poem was “not happily executed. A mixture of the solemn and burlesque can never be agreeable” (Low 77). James Currie praised the poem’s descriptive passages, noting after the twenty-fifth stanza that “those who understand the Scottish dialect will allow this to be one of the finest instances of description, which the records of poetry can afford” (Low 139). In reviewing Lockhart’s *Life of Burns*, Thomas Carlyle asserted that “our ‘Halloween’ has passed

³ Nicholas Rogers, *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 44, 84.

⁴ *The Works of Robert Burns*, edited by the Ettrick Shepherd and William Motherwell (Glasgow: Fullarton, 1834-1836), 1: 99.

⁵ Donald A. Low, ed., *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1974), 73; hereafter cited in the text as “Low.”

and repassed, in rude awe and laughter, since the era of the Druids; but no Theocritus, till Burns, discerned in it the materials of a Scottish Idyl" (Low 360). Lastly, in his edition of the *Works*, Allan Cunningham stated that "the whole poem hovers between the serious and ludicrous: in delineating the superstitious beliefs and mysterious acts of the evening, Burns keeps his own opinion to himself" (Low 405).

This last has proved difficult for many contemporary critics of the poem. Unlike Burns's other long narratives such as "Tam o' Shanter," "Love and Liberty," and "The Cotter's Saturday Night," "Halloween" has never enjoyed widespread popularity and has attracted few critical admirers.⁶ The dearth of critical comment is hard to believe, given the poem's abundance of Scots vocabulary; it is among the very densest of Burns's Scots poems, rivaling the single Scots letter Burns wrote in terms of sheer volume of Scots words. David Daiches' assessment in his standard book *Robert Burns* remains the characteristic response:

We need say little of "Halloween".... It is an able enough piece ... but the poem remains of more interest to the expert in folklore than to the general reader; its accumulation of descriptions of Halloween folk customs ... becomes tedious.⁷

Elsewhere Daiches describes the poem as having "an almost antiquarian or anthropological insistence on detail."⁸ In his seminal study, Thomas Crawford highlights this contradictory quality: "'Halloween' should be among the very best things Burns ever did. Its language is pure vernacular Scots, its subject a series of rustic genre pictures ... full of a pulsating, joyous movement.... And yet, considered as a whole, the poem fails to please."⁹ One of chief reasons for this failure, according to Crawford, is the poem's "elements

⁶ The most recent article devoted solely to "Halloween" is Butler Waugh's "Robert Burns's Satires and the Folk Tradition: 'Halloween,'" *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 32:4 (1967): 10-13.

⁷ David Daiches, *Robert Burns* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 138.

⁸ Daiches, *Robert Burns and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 50.

⁹ Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), 123.

of superciliousness, of conscious superiority, and even of thinly disguised cruelty.”

Many contemporary critics share the opinions of Daiches and Crawford about the poetic merit of “Halloween.” In his article “Burns and Superstition,” Edward Cowan calls it “an extraordinary poem in the sense that it is extraordinarily disappointing”¹⁰ He continues that although “commentators have suggested that it is invaluable as a source for folklore ... in fact it is not,” concluding that “the poem is a monument to wasted opportunity.” The Canongate Burns offers only a short comment, noting that “the prose explanations of Burns reveal another example of his extraordinary talent for turning prose into poetry within the body of ‘Halloween.’”¹¹ In a brief but intriguing analysis of “Halloween,” Marilyn Butler states that the poem “resembles a report by an antiquarian on the religious practices of an unfamiliar community, complete with headnotes and footnotes.”¹²

Along with such considerations, another key complaint with the poem involves its formal properties. “Halloween” does not offer a sustained narrative focused on a few chief incidents, and its ensemble cast of twenty characters often confounds the reader. When one adds these formal challenges to the poem’s arcane folk content and high Scots usage, it is little wonder that “Halloween” has not attracted more appreciative readers. However, as if to circumvent this eventuality from the start, Burns appended footnotes to the poem in order to invite a broader audience likely unfamiliar with the Scottish folk content. Butler notes that “Burns emerges here as a pioneer of the common Romantic practice ... of accompanying a poem about ‘simple’ beliefs with a learned paratext, as though inviting readers to proceed to serious study.” Indeed, the use of paratextual commentary was a technique uncharacteristic of Burns’s work in general.

¹⁰ Edward J. Cowan, “Burns and Superstition,” in *Love and Liberty: Robert Burns - A Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. Kenneth Simpson (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1997), 235.

¹¹ Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg, eds., *The Canongate Burns* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001), 83.

¹² Marilyn Butler, “Burns and Politics,” in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, ed. Robert Crawford (Iowa City, 1997), 106.

In his entire body of work, numbering over six hundred poems and songs, only fourteen employ Burns's own footnotes.¹³ Of the fourteen footnoted works, "Halloween" outnumbers all others with sixteen notes of considerable length. The poem also includes a prose preface, another infrequent device used by Burns in only three other poems.¹⁴ The preface directly explains the need for explanatory footnotes: "The following poem will, by many readers, be well enough understood; but for the sake of those who are unacquainted with the manners and traditions of the country where the scene is cast, notes are added to give some account of the principal charms and spells of that night" (Kinsley I: 152).

While they clarify matters of content, Burns's footnotes also underscore and indeed, embody the distance between the poem's folk content and the poet's conception of its readers. Again, the preface is tellingly direct:

The passion of prying into futurity makes a striking part of the history of human nature in its rude state, in all ages and nations; and it may be some entertainment to a philosophic mind, if any such honour the author with a perusal, to see the remains of it among the more unenlightened in our own (Kinsley I: 152).

These comments have understandably alienated many readers. Although he had insider contact with a presumably "unenlightened" folk culture that would later fuel his nationalist song-collecting project, Burns appears to regard the folk content of "Halloween" with an outsider's eye, perhaps the curiosity of a Collins or disdain of a Johnson. However, it would be unwise to take the preface too much at its literal word. As a writer of prose, Burns was a canny rhetorician. The prefaces to his 1786 and 1787 editions are

¹³ Footnotes appear in twelve poems—"Halloween," "The Cotter's Saturday Night," "Epistle to Davie," "To William Simson, Ochiltree," "Epistle to John Ranken," "Death and Doctor Hornbook," "The Brigs of Ayr," "The Ordination," "Tam Samson's Elegy," "John Barleycorn," "Again Rejoicing Nature Sees," and "On the Late Captain Grose's Peregrinations"—and two songs—"Tam Glen" and "The Dumfries Volunteers."

¹⁴ Poems with prefaces are "A Dream," "Halloween," "Prayer: O Thou Dread Power," and "Tam o' Shanter."

small masterpieces of rhetorical persuasion.¹⁵ Likewise, the poet's letters reveal a writer acutely aware of his self-image, particularly how that self-image can be shaped to meet the needs of differing audiences. As a matter of routine, Burns sized up potential readers and adapted his personae to meet both the writing occasion and the reader(s).

In the case of "Halloween," the speaker begins by actively distancing himself from the poetic content to follow, offering the folk core of "Halloween" as a remnant from the past designed for the perusal and entertainment of educated, "philosophic" readers. Kenneth Simpson remarks that "the voice of the preface is that, not of participant, but of cultural tour-guide."¹⁶ Burns immediately follows the preface, however, with an epigraph from "The Deserted Village" that begins, "Yes! let the rich deride, the proud disdain, / The simple pleasure of the lowly train" (Kinsley I: 152). This epigraph perhaps indicates a familiar class defensiveness on the part of a famously touchy poet. This tonal shift continues as the poem proceeds and the footnotes proliferate. The class divide enunciated in the preface in fact begins to erode, and the footnotes shift from descriptive explanation to imperative instruction. Elaborating, expanding, and affirming, the poem's paratext creates a supplementary set of referents that aligns the reader with the folk content.

As Gerard Genette has argued, the footnote can open up entirely different rhetorical horizons in a text:

In denying himself the note, the author thereby denies himself the possibility of a second level of discourse, one that contributes to textual depth. The chief advantage of the note is actually that it brings about local effects of nuance ... or as they also say in music, of register, effects that help reduce the famous and sometimes regrettable linearity of discourse.¹⁷

¹⁵ On Burns's 1787 preface, cf. Corey E. Andrews, *Literary Nationalism in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Club Poetry* (Lewiston: Mellen, 2004), 298-301.

¹⁶ Kenneth Simpson, "Introduction," in *Love and Liberty*, ed. Simpson (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1997), 7.

¹⁷ Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 328.

Such a strategy is at work in “Halloween”; the poem’s paratext—its preface, epigraph, and footnotes—at first distances both poet and reader from the folk content. Peering into the world of the poem as a curious outsider, Burns’s speaker adopts a pose that for many readers belies his folk authenticity in rather damning fashion. However, a “second level of discourse” emerges in the poem, one that encourages understanding and appreciation of the folk customs.

Such strategies are endemic to relations between paratexts and body texts. As noted by Derrida in his own exemplary paratextual essay “Living On,” “there is no paradigmatic text. Only relationships of cryptic haunting from mark to mark.”¹⁸ In Derrida’s essay, paratext follows, supplements, and diverts the body text for the entire length of the essay. Likewise, as Anthony Grafton has argued, the footnote is not merely a functional notation. It has its own specific set of generic requirements and standards. Grafton nicely invokes the example of Gibbon, writing that “in the eighteenth century, the historical footnote was a high form of literary art.... And nothing in [Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*] did more than its footnotes to amuse his friends and enrage his enemies.”¹⁹ Grafton concludes that Gibbon’s footnotes “not only subverted, but supported, the magnificent arch of his history” (p. 3). Evelyn Tribble has suggested the shift from marginal note to footnote may indicate a new conception of critical authority vested upon the author, stating that “footnotes are yet another manifestation of the marked shift in canons of taste.”²⁰

If one interprets Burns’s preface to “Halloween” in this light, as a strategic paratextual ploy to capture readers’ attention, its class abnegation becomes more explicable.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Living On: Border Lines,” in Harold Bloom *et al.*, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 137.

¹⁹ Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 1.

²⁰ Evelyn Tribble, *Margins and Marginality: The Printed Page in Early Modern England* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1993), 233.

Actively anticipating and blocking automatic class prejudice is a constant feature of Burns's poetics. In this example, Burns anticipates and prepares for predictable snobbery by highlighting the poetic subjects' "rude" origins. The novelty of Scottish primitivism was still current at the time of the poem's composition, with such notable precedents as Ossian.²¹ Beyond appealing to a current fad in popular taste, Burns also represents the "rude" folk culture of rural Scotland as a source of community that offers a type of social pleasure not to be found in Scottish cities, let alone London. Much more strongly than Goldsmith may have intended, the epigraph further underscores the tension between observation and participation in "Halloween." Burns had personally witnessed the delicate balance between interest and derision that privileged observers visited upon peasant culture. His ambivalence about the popularity of "rude" cultures should lead one to suspect the preface acts as a kind of rhetorical Trojan horse, bringing outsiders into an unfamiliar folk culture where they are expected not only to observe but participate in the rites of the holiday.

An invitational shift from outsider observation to insider participation occurs quite literally in the footnotes to "Halloween." The first eight notes employ third-person plural to describe the customs being enacted in the body of the poem. For instance, note six appears after the lines, "The lassies staw frae 'mang them a', / To pou their stalks o' corn" (46-47). The note explains the action thus: "They go to the barnyard, and pull each, at three different times, a stalk of oats. If the third stalk wants the 'top-pickle,' that is, the grain at the top of the stalk, the party in question will come to the marriage-bed anything but a maid" (Kinsley I: 154). The footnote extends and elaborates upon the apparently innocuous act of the lasses, providing a helpful clue to the outcome of Rab and Nelly's dalliance in the sixth stanza: "her tap-pickle maist was lost, / When kiutlin in the fause-house / Wi' him that night" (52-54). While the distancing third-

²¹ Cf. Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: A Study of James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1988).

person voice of the note seems to provoke the smug, knowing wink of an “enlightened,” entertained reader, at the same time it also represents such a reader’s distance from the tightly-knit community at the heart of the poem.

This effect is reinforced by such paratextual commentary as that found in the first footnote, where Burns states that Halloween “is thought to be a night when witches, devils, and other mischief-making beings are abroad on their baneful midnight errands; particularly those aerial people, the fairies, are said on that night to hold a grand anniversary” (Kinsley I: 152). To the Scot, such reductive explanation may seem wholly unnecessary, particularly given the primary place of fairy lore in Scottish folk culture.²² Likewise, folk beliefs about witches abound in Scotland and pertained directly to Halloween customs. Marian McNeil notes that “witches were believed to have the power to aid or blight fertility ... and also trafficked in the affections, and by means of a love potion could induce a goodly youth come of honest folk to marry ‘ane ugly harlot queyne.’”²³ Beyond informing readers who lack folk knowledge of fairies, witches, and the like, the footnote further demonstrates the gulf in perception and experience that separates an “enlightened” audience from Scottish folk communities. Indeed, as “Halloween” continues, the “enlightened” reader may feel like Tam o’ Shanter enviously spying on the outskirts of the witches’ dance and wishing to join in.

The purpose for this rhetorical strategy becomes clearer by the poem’s second stanza and fourth footnote where the nationalist imagery one expects from Burns is strongly drawn. Martial nostalgia for the time when “Bruce ance rul’d the martial ranks” (12) is abundant, and Bruce himself is

²² On Scottish folk beliefs about fairies, see for instance Alan Bruford, *The Green Man of Knowledge and Other Scots Traditional Tales* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Univ. Press, 1982).

²³ Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough: A Four-Volume Study of the National and Local Festivals in Scotland* (Glasgow: MacLellan, 1957-68), I: 147. On Scottish folk beliefs about witches, see also the recent collection, *The Scottish Witch-hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2002).

glossed in the footnote as “the great deliverer of his country” (Kinsley I: 153). The Scottishness of the poem takes center stage, with none too subtle admonitory expressions of national solidarity. Though the “merry, friendly, countra-folks” (14) of rural Scotland no longer shake their “Carrick spears” (13), their customs, practices, and rites—in Raymond Williams’s phrase, their “whole way of life”—involve an entirely different set of beliefs and values.²⁴ In the text of the poem proper, the beliefs and values that orient and guide Scottish folk culture are incomprehensible to the outsider. While the footnote delivers a basic understanding of what the folk rites signify, it also opens up a new horizon of meaning, a second level of discourse. That is to say, Burns’s use of paratext points to gaps in access to experiences that differentiated folk culture from that of enlightened readers. In this sense, the footnote bridges whole “ways of life” that were being increasingly confounded in eighteenth-century Scotland and Britain as a whole.

Throughout the poem Burns acts as a participant-observer in the classic anthropological sense. He clearly is, and is not, a part of the folk culture that is the poem’s subject. As in many of his other works, Burns adopts a persona (here “Rab M’Graen”) who finds his way into “Halloween.” He is described as a “clever, sturdy fellow” (136) who defies social conventions and the Kirk (we learn his son has “gat Eppie Sim wi’ wean” [138]). Rab is doubtful of the value of the Halloween celebration but not so skeptical that he doesn’t get “sairly frightened / That vera night” (143-44). Rab’s ambivalence toward Halloween customs matches the author’s; both reveal a similar resistance toward the conformity implied by custom as well as an abiding affection for such occasions that provoke social gatherings and a sense of community. Burns’s other alter-ego in “Love and Liberty,” the Bard “of no regard,” states this quite plainly:

What is title? What is treasure?
 What is reputation’s care?
 If we lead a life of pleasure,

²⁴ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York: 1983), viii.

'Tis no matter how or where! (Kinsley I: 208)

In the "how and where" of "Halloween," Burns reveals himself to be an intrepid anthropologist who does not hesitate to enter the various cultures surrounding him, looking for points of connection and difference.

Those points of contact in "Halloween," however, are not found in the world of fairies and witches. Unlike "Tam o' Shanter" where witches represent another universe of experience and fun, the alternate world of "Halloween" is peopled less with witches and devils than with "merry, friendly, countra-folks." As in Burns's other poems of social custom like "The Holy Fair," the ostensible purpose of the holiday in "Halloween" is offset and often subverted by the actual practices of folk participants. Mischief-making becomes the province not of witches and fairies but rather the characters themselves, who dramatize and enact folk customs out of a desire for fun. For instance, the character Merran, "her thoughts on Andrew Bell" (92), follows the instructions of the "spell" described in the ninth footnote with unexpected results; the note advises one to "steal out, all alone, to the kiln, and darkling, throw into the 'pot' a clue of blue yarn; wind it in a new clue off the old one; and, toward the latter end, something will hold the thread: demand ... who holds? and answer will be returned from the kiln-pot, by naming the Christian and surname of your future spouse" (Kinsley I: 156). The twelfth stanza recounts Merran's shock when something or someone holds the thread:

Something held with the pat,
 Good L__d! but she was quaukin!
 But whether 'twas the deil himself,
 Or whether 'twas a bauk-en',
 Or whether it was Andrew Bell,
 She did na wait on talkin
 To spier that night (102-109).

The poem is overrun with such characters and incidents, highlighting the ever present ironic humor that is one of the most recognizable traits of Burns's writing. Such irony

conveys Burns's insider status in the world of poem proper, where official holidays, pagan or Christian, are celebrated with a carnivalesque humor that foregrounds sensual pleasure. Burns's participant-observer status serves a dual purpose in "Halloween," particularly in how the footnotes shift in rhetorical design and purpose. As noted above in the case of Merran, the actual "spell" is related to readers in instructional format. Of the final eight notes, seven are written in second-person imperative with anywhere from three to six specific actions to be taken. All of these notes offer folk strategies for discerning the identity of future spouses. The fifteenth note is a typical example:

Take three dishes, put clean water in one, foul water in another, and leave the third empty; blindfold a person and lead him to the hearth where the dishes are ranged; he (or she) dips in the left hand; if by chance in the clean water, the future (husband or) wife will come to the bar of matrimony a maid; if in the foul, a widow; if in the empty dish, it foretells, with equal certainty, no marriage at all. It is repeated three times, and every time the arrangement of the dishes is altered (Kinsley I: 162).

The twenty-seventh stanza relates the wrath of poor "auld uncle John" in conducting this experiment, "[Who] because he gat the toom dish thrice, / He heaved them on the fire" (241-42).

A poem of social pleasure and community, "Halloween" deserves to be more widely read and known. Despite formal difficulties, "Halloween" offers readers a tableau of characters whose enjoyment seems genuine enough. Their participation in folk customs also involves just enough irony to suggest that they are not as "rude" and "unenlightened" as we are led to believe in the preface. Likewise, the poem's sophisticated paratext implicates the knowing reader in the wistful enterprise of such casual anthropology. To the degree that the poem condescends to its subject and actors, the knowing reader's comfortably superior distance from their strange practices is affirmed. By the same token, such affirmation also blocks the reader's participation in just such practices as are encouraged (nay, dictated) by the footnotes. It is explained to us as easy enough—"take an opportunity of going unnoticed to a 'bear stack,'" or "take a candle and go

alone to a looking glass,” and so forth—and yet such commands are impossible for readers with “philosophic” minds to perform. The last laugh of “Halloween” is actually on them too, for Burns reminds us in the final stanza just what fun the holiday offers to those who know how to really enjoy it:

Wi’ merry sangs, an’ friendly cracks,
I wat they did na weary;
And unco tales, an’ funnie jokes—
Their sports were cheap an’ cheery:
Till butter’d sowens, with fragrant lunt,
Set a’ their gabs a-steerin;
Syne, wi’ a social glass o’ strunt,
They parted aff careerin
Fu’ blithe that night (244-52).