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The Prayer of Holy Willie: A canting, hypocritical, Kirk Elder

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THE PRAYER OF HOLY WILLIE

by

ROBERT BURNS



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***The Prayer of Holy Willie,
A canting, hypocritical, Kirk Elder***
With Quotations from the Presbyterian Eloquence

by

Robert Burns

The Kilmarnock chapbook of 1789
edited by
Patrick Scott

Scottish Poetry Reprints
University of South Carolina Libraries
2015

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INTRODUCTION

Robert Burns's "Holy Willie's Prayer" has long been recognized as the greatest of his "Kirk satires." It was written in 1785, but Burns did not include it in his first book, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786), nor in any of the later editions published in his lifetime. Indeed, it was long thought that its first publication was not till 1799, in an unauthorized Glasgow chapbook printed for Thomas Stewart. In fact, it had been printed ten years earlier, in 1789, in Burns's native Ayrshire, while Burns was still very much alive.

This reprint makes the 1789 version readily accessible for the first time in over two hundred years. The existence of that first printed version, a modest chapbook or small pamphlet of just eight pages, was first recorded by the Burns collector W. Craibe Angus in 1899, and a description was included in J.W. Egerer's Burns bibliography in 1964.¹ However, Craibe Angus's copy, now in the Burns Birthplace Museum, is still the only copy known. It has never been utilized by editors of Burns, and the circumstances in which the poem first reached print do not seem to have been explored by Burns's interpreters and biographers.

Burns himself provided the best-known short account of how he came to write "Holy Willie's Prayer." When he was copying out the poem for his patron Robert Riddell, he prefaced it with this "Argument":

¹ W. Craibe Angus, *The Printed Works of Robert Burns: A Bibliography in Outline* (n.p.: privately printed, 1899), 113; J. W. Egerer, *A Bibliography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964; Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1965), 32 (Egerer 16). Cf. also my fuller treatment of the bibliographical history in "The First Publication of 'Holy Willie's Prayer,'" *Scottish Literary Review*, 7:1 (Spring-Summer, 2015): 1-18.

Holy Willie was a rather oldish batchelor Elder in the parish of Mauchline, and much and justly famed for that polemical chattering which ends in tippling Orthodoxy, and for that Spiritualized Bawdry which refines to Liquorish Devotion.—In a Sessional process with a gentleman in Mauchline, a Mr. Gavin Hamilton, Holy Willie, and his priest, father Auld, after full hearing in the Presbytery of Ayr, came off second best; owing partly to the oratorical powers of Mr. Robt Aiken, Mr. Hamilton's Counsel; but chiefly to Mr. Hamilton's being one of the most irreproachable and truly respectable characters in the country.—²

Burns provided similar explanations on manuscript copies he made for several other correspondents (Kinsley I:74-75).

Circulating both in manuscript and by word of mouth, the poem was an immediate local success with Burns's friends, and even with some of the more progressive Ayrshire presbyterian ministers. Allan Cunningham gives this anecdote from Burns's friend John Richmond, then a clerk in Gavin Hamilton's law office, about Gavin Hamilton's reaction:

Burns came in one morning and said, "I have just been making a poem, and if you will write it, John, I'll repeat [i.e. dictate] it." He accordingly, to Richmond's surprise, repeated "Holy Willie's Prayer." Hamilton, came in, read it, and ran laughing with it to Robert Aiken—and Aiken was delighted.³

Others were less pleased, and the poem sharpened hostility to Burns among the local kirk elders and the Auld Licht clergy. It is, perhaps, difficult after more than two hundred years to understand how offensive the poem seemed in 1785 to the unco' guid of Ayrshire.⁴ Burns wrote in his autobiographical letter to Dr. John Moore that it had "alarmed the kirk-Session so much that they held three several meetings to look over their holy artillery, if any of it was pointed against profane Rhymers," and, as Burns acknowledged, he had left himself vulnerable to their

² James Kinsley, ed., *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), I: 74. For background on the Gavin Hamilton case, see Kinsley, III: 1047-1048; Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical* (West Linton: Tuckwell, 2002); J. Walter McGinty, *Burns and Religion* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2003); the entry by Carol McQuirk on Hamilton in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004); and David Purdie, et al., eds., *Maurice Lindsay's Burns Encyclopaedia*, 4th ed. revised (London: Robert Hale, 2013), 158-159.

³ Allan Cunningham, ed., *The Works of Robert Burns, with his Life*, 8 vols. (London: James Cochran, 1834), II: 98.

⁴ Extracts from 18th and 19th century comment are given as an appendix to this reprint (pp. 27-30).

censure for other faults, “point blank within the reach of their heaviest metal.”⁵ When a local moderate minister, the Rev. John M‘Math, requested a copy, Burns sent him one, but with a poem indicating just how much he had underestimated those he had antagonized:

I own, ‘twas rash, an’ rather hardy,
That I, a simple countra bardie,
Shou’d meddle wi’ a pack sae sturdy,
Wha, if they ken me,
Can easy, wi’ a single wordie,
Louse h-ll upon me (Kinsley, I: 124).

The Hamilton case was soon over; while Burns made copies of “Holy Willie” for friends and patrons, he did not have the poem printed, and he did not include it in his 1786 volume.

Two years later, some of the same Auld Licht clergy picked a new fight, this time against a softer target, a moderate minister, the shy, scholarly Rev. Dr. William M‘Gill (1732-1807), who held the second charge in Ayr at the parish kirk as junior colleague to Willliam Dalrymple. In the aftermath of his wife’s death, M‘Gill had published in Edinburgh a 500-page book about Christ’s sharing of human suffering, under the title *A Practical Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ* (1786). M‘Gill’s book was denounced as heterodox by two leading Auld Licht ministers in locally-published sermons, first by John Russel, minister in Kilmarnock, in his *Reasons of Our Lord’s Agony in the Garden* (Kilmarnock: Wilson, 1787), and then by William Peebles, minister of Newton upon Ayr and clerk to the Ayr Presbytery, in his *The Great Things which the Lord Hath Done for This Nation* (Kilmarnock: Wilson, 1788).⁶ When M‘Gill at last rose to the bait and answered Peebles, in yet another locally-published sermon, *The Benefits of the Revolution* (Kilmarnock: Wilson, 1789), the Auld Lichts bypassed the local presbytery and persuaded the next level up, the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, to order the presbytery to investigate M‘Gill for heresy. Robert Aiken again took up the moderate cause, and in May 1789, the General Assembly meeting in Edinburgh quashed the M‘Gill investigation, though adjuring the Presbytery of Ayr to “maintain purity of doctrine.”

⁵ G. Ross Roy, ed., *Letters of Robert Burns*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), I: 144.

⁶ For summaries of the M‘Gill case, see Kinsley, III: 1306-1307; McIlvanney; McGinty; the entry by John R. McIntosh on M‘Gill in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; and Purdie, *et al.*, p. 225.

M'Gill had no stomach for prolonged controversy, and in April 1790 he ended the affair by apologizing to his fellow-ministers.

As the references above make clear, even though the M'Gill case was centred in Ayr, both sides used John Wilson's Kilmarnock shop to print their formal contributions to the controversy. Alongside the sermons of the major participants, however, M'Gill's defenders also used Wilson's printing-shop in an attempt to influence general opinion in Ayrshire. M'Gill's attackers had used selective quotation from his *Practical Essay* to make their case. To illustrate his piety and good sense, M'Gill's defenders countered with an equally selective 24-page chapbook, to sell at 1 ½ d. "for the benefit of the Poor of Ayr," entitled *Meditations and Prayers extracted from Dr. William M'Gill's Practical Essay ... Now Published without the Author's Knowledge ... by Way of Answer, in Part, to the Inquisition Recommended by the Synod* (Kilmarnock: Wilson, 1789).⁷

But Robert Aiken, in particular, hoped that Burns would contribute a new kirk satire to help swing local opinion behind M'Gill. When the new controversy began, Burns was away in Edinburgh, and when it reached its height, in 1788-1789, he was down in Dumfriesshire, at Ellisland. All his sympathies lay with M'Gill, but equally unsurprisingly, he felt his direct participation might be counter-productive, telling John Logan:

If I could be of service to Dr M'Gill, I would do it though it should be at a much greater expence than irritating a few Bigoted priests; but as I am afraid, serving him in his present embarrass is a task too hard for me, I have enemies enow, God knows, tho' I do not wantonly add to the number (*Letters*, I: 434).

When Aiken approached him for help, Burns again demurred on the same grounds:

Whether in the way of my trade, I can be of any service to the Rev. Doctor, is I fear very doubtful.... the worthy Doctor's foes are as securely armed as Ajax was.... to such a shield, humor is the peck of a sparrow, and satire the pop-gun of a school-boy (*Letters*, I: 432).

Burns had, in fact, already been provoked by the M'Gill case to write a series of satiric portraits, "The Kirk's Alarm," commending M'Gill for joining "Faith and Sense," while mocking Russel and Peebles, but he

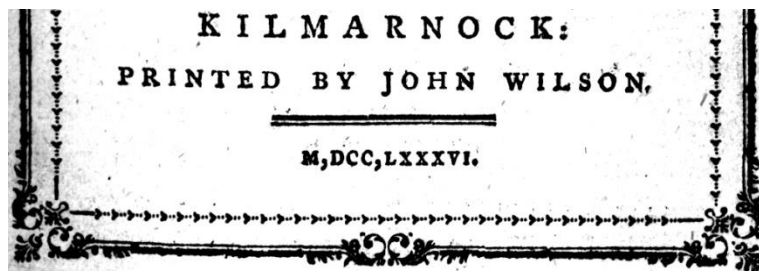
⁷ No complete copy survives, but the two incomplete copies, in the Burns Monument Centre, Kilmarnock, and Glasgow University Library, allow the whole chapbook to be reconstructed; see Patrick Scott, "William M'Gill's *Meditations and Prayers* (Kilmarnock: Wilson, 1789)," *The Book Collector* (forthcoming).

repeatedly warned his correspondents that the new verses must not leak out to the public or be linked with his name (see e.g. *Letters*, I: 422, 433). He decided only to “throw off two or three dozen copies” as a broadside or single sheet, to be published anonymously in Dumfries in 1789, for arms-length distribution via the mails from Edinburgh (*Letters*, I: 422).⁸

What seems to have happened instead was a decision among M‘Gill’s friends to print and distribute a chapbook version of Burns’s earlier and already notorious satire against the Auld Licht, “Holy Willie’s Prayer.” This was published in 1789 as *The Prayer of Holy Willie, A canting, hypocritical, Kirk Elder*, but without any indication of the printer or of where it was printed. In fact, it was printed in John Wilson’s shop in Kilmarnock.⁹ The evidence is on p. 2 of the chapbook, where a paragraph headed “To the Reader” is highlighted top and bottom by a distinctive decorative type-ornament:



Burnsians will immediately recognize that this ornament is made up of shorter sections that had also been used on the title-page of Burns’s *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*:



The same type-ornament was used in a number of other products of the Wilson printing shop during the years 1786-1789. As Ross Roy pointed

⁸ On this broadside, *The Ayrshire Garland*, see Egerer, p. 31 (Egerer 15).

⁹ Wilson was suggested as printer in *Scottish Exhibition of National History Art and Industry ... Palace of History* (Glasgow: Dalross, 1911), I: 190, and by W.T. Johnson, *Kilmarnock Printing in the 18th Century* (Edinburgh: Sgann Microforms, 1982), 50, but neither offered evidence for the identification. The chapbook is not listed as Wilson’s in the imprint bibliographies by Thomson and Gardner.

out, the title-page frame used on the Burns Kilmarnock edition appears also on John Russel's *Reasons of Our Lord's Agony* (Kilmarnock: Printed by John Wilson, 1787), John Lapraik's *Poems on Several Occasions* (Kilmarnock: Printed by John Wilson, 1788), and David Sillar's *Poems* (Kilmarnock: Printed by John Wilson, 1789).¹⁰ The separate segments of type-ornament also appear, notably in the 1788 Wilson reprint of Allan Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany*, in the text (volume II, pp. 343 and 400), and in William Peebles's sermon *The Great Things which the Lord Hath Done* (Kilmarnock: Printed by J. Wilson, 1789), on the half-title. For Ayrshire readers in 1789, the ornaments on p. 2 of *The Prayer of Holy Willie* would have been instantly recognisable, equally by Burns's friends and by the Auld Licht followers of Black Jock Russel. The chapbook was published anonymously, without a stated publisher or printer, but the ornament was a giveaway, perhaps even a deliberate giveaway. It was certainly slightly cheeky to use an ornament that was shared, not just with Burns's most famous book, but also with the two fiercest sermons that had attacked M'Gill.

Confirmation that Wilson was the printer comes from the non-Burnsian annotations that the chapbook added to Burns's poem. By itself, "Holy Willie's Prayer" was not long enough to fill even an eight-page chapbook. The better-known chapbook version published in Glasgow by Stewart & Meikle ten years later was filled up by adding other Burns poems, and it put Burns's name on the title-page.¹¹ In the 1789 Kilmarnock chapbook, the purpose was less on the authorship of the poem than on mocking the Auld Licht. Burns's poem was bulked out with footnotes extracted from a much older satire, Gilbert Crockatt's *The Scotch Presbyterian Eloquence Display'd*, first published in 1693 but frequently reprinted through into Burns's own time, which consisted of ridiculous extracts from presbyterian sermons. One of these reprints, just before *The Prayer of Holy Willie*, carries the imprint "London: for the Booksellers, 1786." Such generic imprints often conceal a book that had actually been printed elsewhere. The 1786 "London" *Scotch Presbyterian Eloquence* seems, like the chapbook itself, to have been printed in Kilmarnock in the Wilson shop. Again the evidence is from the same type-ornament, specifically as it was used on page 9 of the book,

¹⁰ G. Ross Roy, "A Prototype for Robert Burns's Kilmarnock Edition?," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 32 (2001): 213-216.

¹¹ Robert Burns, *Holy Willie's Prayer, Letter to John Goudie, and Six Favourite Songs ...* (Glasgow: Printed and Sold by Stewart & Meikle, [1799]); Egerer 41.

where a "Postscript to the Reader" has almost identical text to p. 2 of the chapbook ("To the Reader"), topped and tailed with an identical arrangement of the ornament. The function of the two paragraphs is the same (to disclaim any intention of mocking true religious belief, only of satirizing hypocrisy), but the creators of the chapbook have slightly softened the original text, changing "the danger of *false prophets*, and *blind guides*" to read "the danger of hypocrites," and deleting the reference to "sackcloth."



P O S T S C R I P T

T O T H E

R E A D E R.

THE reader must be here given to understand, that in exposing this *gallimaufry* of *enthusiastic zeal*, *farce*, and *nonsense*, the publisher had no design upon the lashing either of persons or opinions, any farther than to shew the world the folly, the misery, and the danger of *false prophets* and *blind guides*: In which case, there needs no other argument, than the very history of the age we live in. The reader should do well to have a care too, not to make a sport and merriment of so tragical a judgement, as ought rather to move men to the solemnity of a repentance in tears and sackcloth; for the foolishness of this liberty is no excuse for the wickedness of it. Under these precautions the Reader will be so wise as not to laugh where he should cry.



From *Scotch Presbyterian Eloquence Display'd* (London [Kilmarnock]: for the Booksellers [John Wilson], 1786), p. 9; cf. *The Prayer of Holy Willie* ([Kilmarnock: John Wilson], 1789), p. 2 (p. 18 of this reprint).

The chapbook seems to have been put together quite quickly, because the annotations are drawn from only a few pages of the book and do not always match up closely to the text they purport to illustrate.¹²

Finally, the actual text of the poem in *The Prayer of Holy Willie* is itself significant. Whoever was responsible for setting type used one of the early, locally-circulated manuscripts as printer's copy, so that the text of the poem in the chapbook differs in several important respects from the version used in most modern editions, which is based on the later Glenriddell manuscript. For instance, in the first stanza, the chapbook has "wha" not "that," "thysel'" not "thyself," "afore" not "before." In line 17, the chapbook reads "Five thousand years 'fore my creation," not "Sax thousand years ere my creation." as in Kinsley's text. Two lines later, in line 19, the chapbook has "Whan frae my mither's womb," not "When from my mother's womb." In lines 89-90, the chapbook reads:

While he wi' hinging lips and snakin'
Held up his head.

rather than the reading in Kinsley (and Glenriddell):

While Auld wi' hingin lip gaed sneaking
And hid his head!

These variants will be familiar to some Burnsians, because they also occur in the pirated versions of the poem printed for Thomas Stewart in Glasgow in chapbook form in 1799, and thence in the poem's first book publication, also published by Stewart, *Poems Ascribed to Robert Burns*.¹³ From 1799 through to the 1860s, the major Burns editions all took their text of "Holy Willie's Prayer," directly or indirectly, from Stewart's reprints.¹⁴ Stewart's various editions were known to have been unauthorised, and Stewart himself known to be unscrupulous over the publishing rights of Burns's assignees and estate, but he was believed to have based his text on manuscript sources that had since gone missing.

¹² The annotations in the *Prayer* come from these pages in the 1786 *Scotch Presbyterian Eloquence*: excerpts on p. 3, from pp. 109, 125; excerpts on p. 4, from pp. 109, 122, 125; the long excerpt on pp. 5-6, from pp. 133-134; excerpts on p. 7, from pp. 125, 122, 125; the excerpt on p. 8, from p. 121.

¹³ Egerer 41, and Egerer 57.

¹⁴ Textual variations occur during these years in whether or not to include the Meg/Lizzie stanzas or the extra drinking stanza Stewart introduced from an unknown source in 1802, in the bowdlerisation of line 88, and in incremental changes away from Stewart's original text in punctuation and spelling.

Up to Hately Waddell in 1867, none of the Burns editors seem to have questioned the basis for Stewart's text. From the 1870s on, however, until quite recently, all the major Burns editors, beginning with Scott Douglas through to James Kinsley's Clarendon Burns in 1968, based their text primarily on a single late manuscript source, the Glenriddell Manuscript, with only modest variant readings cherry-picked from elsewhere.

Since Kinsley, editorial theories have changed, from a reliance on manuscript sources to an historical emphasis on early printed sources, to show a poem as its first readers would have seen it. At least two recent editors have opted for one or another of the Stewart texts instead of Glenriddell, but they had to make that choice without any hard information about where Stewart's text came from.¹⁵ The identification of the 1789 *Prayer of Holy Willie* as being printed in Kilmarnock, together with the similarities between the text as printed in 1789 and in the 1799 Stewart & Meikle chapbook, provides for the first time a convincing origin for the Stewart texts and the more vernacular version of "Holy Willie's Prayer" that they preserve. Now, instead of there being simply an old-fashioned and suspect text of the poem based on piracy (the Stewart texts) and a newer, more scholarly tradition based on study of Burns's fair-copy manuscripts (the Kinsley-Glenriddell text), there are two equally authentic textual traditions for readers and editors to negotiate. Both in the words it prints and even in its paratextual wrapping from *the Scotch Presbyterian Eloquence*, the 1789 chapbook can be seen as transmitting from Burns's Ayrshire to the Glasgow printers an authentic, vernacular, local version of the poem that Burns arguably modified too much in the copies he made for patrons living elsewhere.

This reprint originated in a wider research project on John Wilson, Robert Burns, and Printing in Eighteenth-Century Ayrshire, which has been supported in part by a grant in 2014 from the National Endowment for the Humanities (FT-62054-14). In connection with that project, I have twice been able to examine the unique copy of the original 1789 chapbook, in

¹⁵ Carol McGuirk, ed., *Robert Burns: Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 20-22, 200; Robert P. Irvine, ed., *Robert Burns: Selected Poems and Songs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 230-233, 378-381.

the Burns Birthplace Museum, Alloway, and I am grateful also to David Hopes for providing me with photographs of it. Because of conservation concerns, this reprint is taken from the almost equally scarce photographic facsimile made ca. 1900, in the G. Ross Roy Collection, University of South Carolina. The bibliographical background to both the 1789 original and the facsimile is treated in much greater depth in my article "The First Publication of 'Holy Willie's Prayer,'" *Scottish Literary Review*, 7:1 (Spring-Summer, 2015): 1-18; I am grateful to the editor, Prof. Gerard Carruthers, for allowing me to draw from that article in this introduction. Robert Betteridge at the National Library of Scotland drew my attention to the 1799 reprint of this chapbook and more recently confirmed my inference about the Kilmarnock printing of the the 1786 *Scotch Presbyterian Eloquence*. At the University of South Carolina, I wish to thank Rachel Mann and Joseph DuRant for assistance in proofreading, and Kelsey Crump for making the chapbook scans.

Scottish Poetry Reprints, an occasional series initiated in 1970 by the late G. Ross Roy, is now published in connection with the journal *Studies in Scottish Literature*. Most of the research for this project was done in the University of South Carolina's G. Ross Roy Collection. In its new format, both print and digital, the series will focus primarily on texts and research from that collection.

Patrick Scott

University of South Carolina

THE PRAYER OF HOLY WILLIE
A canting, hypocritical, Kirk Elder
(1789)



THE
P R A Y E R
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H O L Y W I L L I E,

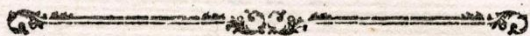
A canting, hypocritical, Kirk Elder.

With Quotations from the *Presbyterian Eloquence*.

An *Ignis Fatuus* that bewitches,
And leads men into pools and ditches :
This light inspires, and plays upon
The nose of saint, like bagpipe drone,
As if hypocrisy and nonsense
Had got th' advowson of his conscience ;
As if religion were intended
For nothing else but to be mended :
Still so perverse and opposite,
As if he worshipping'd God for spite.

HUDIBRAS.

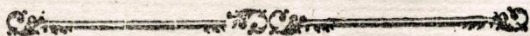
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T O T H E

R E A D E R.

THE reader must be here given to understand, that in exposing enthusiastic zeal, farce and nonsense, the publisher had no design upon the lashing either of persons or opinions, any farther than to shew the world the folly, the misery and the danger of hypocrites: In which case there needs no other argument, than the very history of the age we live in. The reader should do well to have a care too, not to make a sport and merriment of so tragical a judgment, as ought rather to move men to the solemnity of a repentance in tears; for the foolishness of this liberty is no excuse for the wickedness of it. Under these precautions the reader will be so wise as not to laugh where he should cry.



()

*Make your een reel, and circumspect your mouth,
Make th' upper lip point north, the under south.*

T H E P R A Y E R.

O THOU wha in the heav'ns does dwell,
Wha, as it pleases best thyself,
Sends ane to heaven and ten to hell,
A' for thy glory,
And no for any gude or ill
They've done afore thee*.

I blefs and praise thy matchless might,
Whan thousands thou has left in night,
That I am here afore thy sight,
For gifts and grace,
A burning and a shining light,
To a' this place†.

What was I, or my generation,
That I should get such exaltation;
I, wha deserve sic just damnation,
For broken laws,

* How shocking an idea this of the Supreme Being, whose tender mercies are over all his works.

One Mr Steidman, in Carriden, told once, "That the people of God had many doubts about their election; for proof of this, see, says he, the 2 Cant. v. 16. *My beloved is mine, and I am his.*

† Mr Dickson praying for grace, said, "Lord dibble thou the kaill seed of thy grace in our hearts, and if we grow not up to good kaill, Lord make us good sprouts at least."

(4)

Five thousand years 'fore my creation,
Thro' Adam's cause †.

Whan frae my mither's womb I fell,
Thou mightst have plunged me in hell,
To gnash my gums, to weep and wail,
In burning lake,
Whar damned devils roar and yell,
Chain'd to a stake §.

Yet I am here a chosen sample,
To shew thy grace is great and ample;
I'm here a pillar to thy temple,
Strong as a rock;
A guide, a buckler and example,
To a' thy flock *.

But yet, O Lord, confess I must,
At times I'm fash'd wi' fleshly lust,
And sometimes too wi' worldly trust;
Wily self gets in;
But thou remembers we are dust,
Defil'd wi' sin.

† Another time Mr Steidman said, "That the best of God's saints have a little tincture of Atheism; for a plain proof of this, you may see, Psal. xiv. 1. *The fool hath said in his heart there is no God.*"

§ One Borlands in Gallowshields, a blasphemous ignorant blockhead, said in his prayers, "Lord, when thou wast electing to eternity, grant that we have not got a wrong cast of thy hand to our souls."

* Mr Areskine, praying in the Tron-church last year, said, "Lord have mercy on all fools and idiots; and particularly on the magistrates of Edinburgh."

(5)

O Lord, yestreen thou kens wi' Meg,
 Thy pardon I sincerely beg;
 O may't ne'er be a living plague
 To my dishonour,
 And I'll ne'er lift a lawless leg
 Again upon her.

Besides, I farther maun avow,
 Wi' Lizzie's lafs, three times I trow;
 But, Lord, that Friday I was fou,
 When I came near her,
 Or else, thou kens, thy servant true,
 Wad ne'er ha'e steer'd her.

May be thou lets this fleshly thorn
 Beset thy servant e'en and morn',
 Lest he o'er high and proud shou'd turn,
 'Cause he's sae gifted;
 If sae, thy hand maun e'en be born,
 Until thou lift it†.

† Some notes of a lecture of Mr Wyllie's, beginning the viith chap. of the Proverbs, ver. 10. *And behold there met him a woman with the attire of a harlot, and subtil of heart.* Ye see from the preceeding part of the chapter, and we told you in our lecture last Lord's day, the character of the young man that met this whore; that he was a senseless, simple, silly fool, and, may be, Sirs, had nae parents or friends to look after him, and got gear before he got wit to guide it. Now, in this, and some of the following verses, ye see her character, and a bonny ane it is. Ye see she was in a harlot's attire, and she was subtil and cunning like all whores. ver 13. *She caught him, and kissed him, and with an impudent face said unto him.* Impudent whore that she was, ver. 14. *I have*

(6)

Lord blefs thy chofen in this place;
 For here thou has a chofen race;
 But God confound their stubborn face,
 And blast their name,
 Wha bring thy elders to difgrace,
 And public shame.

peace offerings with me; this day have I paid my vows. I fe warrant she thought she might begin a clean fcore, juft like a hankle folks, they think they're right enough, if they go to the kirk on Sunday, although they go to the devil all the week through. Ver. 15. *Therefore came I forth to meet thee; diligently to feek thy face, and I have found thee.* Impudent lying jade, she would have taken the firft man she met with for all that. Ye fee, Sirs, what arguments she ufed to incite that young daft lad to luft. This harlot was juft like a queen in this town, I've forgot her name, Sirs; they call her Rofs, Helen Rofs, she was not content with the men of this parifh, but she bid to feek ane in the next. She got the miller's fon of Alloa, they call him Charlie Allan, o'er by at a place they call Wightman's glen, and there he got her wi' bairn. and that was e'en the fame thing as if it had been done in the bed. Ver. 19. *For the goodman is not at home, he has gone a long journey.* Ver. 20. *He hath taken a bag of money with him, and will come home at the day appointed.* Now this was alfo an incitement, that her husband was gone abroad, that no body was to difturb them; but whether her husband was gone about his lawful bufinefs, or if he was gone a whoring as she did, I fhall not determine. Ver. 21. *With fuch fair fpeech she caufed him to yield.* Now you fee, firs, what pains women are at to entice men to ly with them. But I'll tell ye, the men exceed the women very far; for their vile luft comes to fuch a height, that they're e'en fometimes forced to take cold water to quench it. But does ony of you ken what luft is like, it is juft like oil, it flips into the belly."

(7)

Lord mind G---n H---t---n's deserts,
Wha drinks and swears, and plays at cards,
Yet has, fæ mony takin' arts
Wi' grit and sma';
Frae God's ain priests the people's hearts
He steals awa'.

And whan we chastis'd him therefore,
Thou kens how he bred sic a splore,
And set the warld a' in a roar
O' laughing at us;
Curse thou his basket and his store,
Kaill and potatoes*.

Lord hear my earnest cry and pray'r,
Against that presbyt'ry of Ayr;
Thy strong right-hand, Lord, mak it bare
Upo' their heads;
Lord, weight it down, and dinna spare,
For their misdeeds†.

* Mr Linning, cursing the king of France in his prayers, said, " Lord curse him, confound him and damn him; dress him, and guide him as thou didst Pharaoh, Senacherib, and our late king James and his father."

† Mr Borland in Gallowfields, praying at Jedburgh, said, " Lord confound the tyrant of France; God's vengeance light on him; the vengeance of God light on him; God's vengeance light on him: but if he be of the election of grace, Lord, save him."

Another imprecating, said, " Lord give thy enemies the papists and prelates a full cup of thy fury to drink; and if they refuse to drink it off, Good Lord gi'e them. Kelty."

Appendix: Some Early Comments on “Holy Willie’s Prayer”

“Holy Willie’s Prayer” ... a piece of satire more exquisitely severe than any which Burns afterwards wrote—but unfortunately cast in a form too daringly profane to be received into Dr Currie’s collection.

Sir Walter Scott, in *Quarterly Review* (1810)

His libertinism in the heckling period, the company of the sailor of manly virtues, mason clubs, and jades and hizzies, made him daesed, in his own phrase, and easily explain his dislike and contempt of religion.... it is believed, and maintained by many, that the reputation of his infidelity was more than a feather in his cap, and added greatly to his celebrity and popularity among the profligate and irreligious. An officer of high rank told me, that he had seen a dreadful proof of the impiety of Burns, in a prayer which was handed about at that time in manuscript: it was too shocking, he said, to be shewn: he was horrified that he had read it. I had, and have, no desire to see it. It appears that his biographers have seen it. I am told that, to the disgrace of the press and the booksellers, this and other blasphemous and irreligious things of like nature are not only handed about, like Wilkes’s *Essay on Women*, but are openly printed, and sold, and bought up eagerly, and devoured, in this Christian country!

Anon. [Rev. William Peebles], *Burnomania* (1811)

This was not only the prayer of Holy Willie, but it is merely the metrical version of every prayer that is offered up by those who call themselves the pure reformed church of Scotland. In the course of his reading and polemical warfare, Burns ... could not reconcile his mind to that picture of the Being, whose very essence is love, which is drawn by the high Calvinists or the representatives of the Covenanters.... such are the identical doctrines of the Cameronians of the present day, and such was

Holy Willie's style of prayer. The hypocrisy and dishonesty of the man, who was at the time a reputed saint, were perceived by the discerning penetration of Burns, and to expose them he considered his duty. The terrible view of the Deity exhibited in that able production is precisely the same view which is given of Him, in different words, by many devout preachers at present. They inculcate, that the greatest sinner is the greatest favourite of heaven—that the lost sheep alone will be saved, and that the ninety-and-nine out of the hundred will be left in the wilderness, to perish without mercy—that the Saviour of the world loves the elect, not from any lovely qualities which they possess, for they are hateful in his sight, but "he loves them because he loves them." Such are the sentiments which are breathed by those who are denominated high Calvinists, and from which the soul of a poet who loves mankind, and who has not studied the system in all its bearings, recoils with horror.

Rev. Hamilton Paul, *Poems & Songs of Robert Burns* (1819)

The Reverend Hamilton Paul may be considered as expressing ... the sentiments with which even the most audacious of Burns's anti-Calvinistic satires were received among the Ayrshire divines of the New Light. That performances so blasphemous should have been, not only pardoned, but applauded by ministers of religion, is a singular circumstance, which may go far to make the reader comprehend the exaggerated state of party feeling in Burns's native county, at the period when he first appealed to the public ear; nor is it fair to pronounce sentence upon the young and reckless satirist, without taking into consideration the undeniable fact—that in his worst offences of this kind, he was encouraged and abetted by those, who, to say nothing more of their professional character and authority, were almost the only persons of liberal education whose society he had any opportunity of approaching at the period in question.

J. G. Lockhart, *Life of Robert Burns* (1828)

In after-life the poet seemed little inclined to remember the verses he composed on this ridiculous controversy; and I have learned that he was unwilling to talk about the subject. Perhaps he felt that [in the *Kirk Satires*] he had launched the burning darts of verse against men of blameless lives, and honesty, and learning; that his muse had wasted some of her time on a barren and profitless topic, and had sung less from her own heart than for the gratification of others.

Allan Cunningham, *Works of Robert Burns* (1834)

Has Burns here dared beyond Milton, Goethe, and Byron? He puts a Prayer to the Almighty into the mouth of one whom he believes to be one of the lowest of blasphemers. In that Prayer are impious supplications, couched in shocking terms, characteristic of the hypocrite who stands on a familiar footing with his Maker. Milton's blasphemer is a fallen angel, Goethe's a devil, Byron's the first murderer, and Burns' an elder of the kirk. All four poets are alike guilty, or not guilty.... why blame Burns! You cannot justly do so ...

John Wilson, in *The Land of Burns* (1840)

His first verses were drawn forth by local squabbles. They displayed that satirical power which was more terrible because it was absolutely unscrupulous. Holy Willie's Prayer, for example, cannot be justified by any misdeeds of the elder. Even if it was a correct representation of that person's mental state, it is lamentable that prayer should have been trifled with.... Burns adopted the side of Hamilton in this parochial storm, and produced an attack on one of his humble neighbours, that has been correctly styled the most cutting and exquisite satire in existence. The statement is perfectly correct, when the poem is considered only as an example of intellectual scalping; but there is a "fearlessness" in the choice of the topic which could not be recommended for imitation.

Tait's Edinburgh Magazine (1859)

["Holy Willie's Prayer" is] one of the boldest and most effective satires on hypocrisy and unconscious blasphemy ever written. It is a purely dramatic performance, and implies no irreverence whatever on the writer's part; but on the contrary, manifests his own profoundest detestation of, and contempt for, every variety of imposture in the name of religion. The language employed would indeed be blasphemous enough in any other view of it; but as it stands in the mouth of such a worshipper, it is the most characteristic embodiment ever imagined of the unspoken thoughts and "desires of the flesh and of the mind" in one who was "by nature a child of wrath, even as others." "Woe unto you, scribes and pharisees, hypocrites, for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers, therefore, ye shall receive the greater damnation." The unhappy subject of this satire, it is said, was ultimately detected in some malversation of the poor's funds; and, if we are correctly informed, was found dead in a ditch by the wayside as the result of intoxication.

Rev. P. Hately Waddell, *Life and Works of Robert Burns* (1867)

His good mother and his brother were pained by these performances, and remonstrated against them. But Burns, though he generally gave ear to their counsel, in this instance turned a deaf ear to it.... The love of exercising his strong powers of satire, and the applause of his boon-companions, lay and clerical, prevailed over the whispers of his own better nature and the advice of his truest friends. Whatever may be urged in defence of employing satire to lash hypocrisy, I cannot but think that those who have loved most what is best in Burns's poetry must have regretted that these poems were ever written. Some have commended them on the ground that they have exposed religious pretence and Pharasaism. The good they may have done in this way is perhaps doubtful. But the harm they have done in Scotland is not doubtful, in that they have connected in the minds of the people so many coarse and even profane thoughts with objects which they had regarded till then with reverence.... Strange that the same mind, almost at the same moment, should have conceived two poems so different as *The Cotter's Saturday Night* and *The Holy Fair*!

John Campbell Shairp, *Robert Burns* (1879)

We can only be sorry and surprised that Principal Shairp should have chosen a theme so uncongenial. When we find a man writing on Burns, who likes neither *Holy Willie*, nor the *Beggars*, nor the *Ordination*, nothing is adequate to the situation but the old cry of G ronte: "Que diable allait-il faire dans cette gal re?"

Robert Louis Stevenson, in *Cornhill Magazine* (1879)

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