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“Tongues Turn’d Inside Out”: The Reception of “Tam o’ Shanter”¹

Gerard Carruthers

... *Tam* was able
To note upon the haly table,
A murderer’s banes in gibbet airns;
Twa span-lang, wee, unchristen’d bairns;
A thief, new-cutted frae a rape,
Wi’ his last gasp his gab did gape;
Five tomahawks, wi’ blude red-rusted;
Five scymitars, wi’ murder crusted;
A garter, which a babe had strangled;
A knife, a father’s throat had mangled,
Whom his ain son o’ life bereft,
The grey hairs yet stack to the heft;
Wi’ mair o’ horrible and awefu’,
Which even to name wad be unlawfu’.
Three Lawyers’ tongues, turn’d inside out,
Wi’ lies seam’d like a beggar’s clout;
Three Priests’ hearts, rotten, black as muck,
Lay stinking, vile, in every neuk.—²

“Tam o’ Shanter” has always been among the most popular of Burns’s poems. Critical emphases and interpretations have varied greatly over the two centuries since its first

¹ Acknowledgement is due to the British Academy for travel support to present the original version of this paper at the Eighteenth-Century Scottish Studies Society conference, in Charleston, S.C., and to the Editor of *Studies in Scottish Literature* (where it first appeared: *SSL*, 35-36, 455-463) for permission to offer it here, in slightly modified form.

² Kinsley II: 554. Hereafter quotations from the poem are referenced in the text by line number only.

publication, from the couthy and sentimental through the dramatic and folkloristic to the psychological or even anthropological. Yet the passage quoted above, a crucial turning point both in the narrative and in the poem's psychological and dramatic development, has seldom been given its due attention. As so often in criticism, to focus on a gap or maybe repression in the dominant critical readings is to reread the text, and perhaps throw a fresh light on its complexity.

Similarly, the re-examination of a neglected textual crux or editorial difficulty often brings to the surface significant conflicts in a work, and (if one allows the biographical leap) its author. Revealingly, the passage quoted above was one with which Burns himself became uncertain, the only point in the text at which he made a major change after publication, and a point over which a modern editor of the poem might still pause over the motivation, validity, and effect, of the changes. At the urging of Alexander Fraser Tytler, and before Burns first included "Tam o' Shanter" in an edition of his own poems, he removed the last four lines from the quoted passage. Tytler purported to believe that the lines were "good in themselves" but opined that, since "they derive all their merit from the satire they contain, [they] are here rather misplaced among the circumstances of pure horror."³ James Currie, parroting Tytler, and ever fastidious in his presentation of Burns in the first collected edition of the works in 1800, remarks that "independent of other objections, [the expunged lines] interrupt and destroy the emotions of terror which the preceding description had excited."⁴

Tytler, later Lord Woodhouselee, who was fast becoming a pillar of the prestigious Scottish legal system when Burns began to know him, bridled at the four lines not out of professional shock (as Currie hovers on the edge of implying), but because of what he took to be an interruption to the poem's decorum. The lines, as Tytler acknowledges,

³ Donald Low, ed., *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1974), 96. Hereafter cited in the text as "Low."

⁴ James Currie, ed., *Works of Robert Burns*, 4 vols. (Liverpool, 1800), III: Appendix, p.21.

are skilful and, indeed, contain one of the most strikingly strange images ever to issue from Burns's pen. The lawyers' tongues are inverted so as somehow to show a dark stitching of lies in a metaphor of hypocrisy that is obvious enough. What this looks like physically, however, is a little difficult to imagine. The tongues are prepared, it seems, as a demonic offering, or delicacy even, alongside the priests' hearts. After being ripped out and ritually inverted, the tongues are reconstituted by being sewn up, though quite how this can be done "wi' lies" is unclear.

Burns, then, has presented us with a moment more surreal than he produces anywhere else in his writing. To help us out with this difficult visualisation he offers the analogy of the clumsily repaired clothing of the beggar. This concrete comparison notwithstanding, the fabric of the supposedly straightforward narrative tale has been punctured for an instant by the over-exuberance of the narrator. And this moment parallels other moments of rupture in the poem, most obviously Tam's ejaculation, "Weel done, Cutty-Sark" (l.189), where the scene of orgy at Alloway Kirk is interrupted by an excess of human emotion and imagination which is the ultimate subject of the poem.

It is true enough, as Tytler realises, that Burns signals in show-stopping manner his satiric intent in the four excised lines with a garrulous narrator immediately telling us of things he has just said he cannot name (and where he even names something he cannot literally see). These excised lines, then, might be said actually to reinforce the essential unity of the poem in that the narrator can be seen to have become infectiously inebriated as he recounts Tam's tale. Tytler and Currie, though, wish the poem to be seen as a cogent "tale of terror" and therefore disarm themselves from reading the full psychological panoply of "Tam o' Shanter." Tytler shows this deficiency again when he comments of the poem in a letter of March 1791 to Burns:

The only fault it possesses, is, that the winding up, or conclusion of the story, is not commensurate to the interest which is excited by the descriptive and characteristic painting of the preceding parts.—The preparation is fine, but the result is not adequate. But for this perhaps you have a good apology —you stick to the popular tale (Low, p. 96).

The notion of “Tam o’ Shanter” as based upon a “popular tale” has dogged the text. Apart from the ubiquitous “wild ride” aspect in the context of folktale, it is far from clear what particular source, if any, Burns had in mind for his poem. Burns in a letter to Francis Grose during the summer of 1790 provided several stories of diabolic doings surrounding Alloway Kirk that loosely inform “Tam o’ Shanter” and which, in their diffuse collective, speak of no particularly cogent local folk tradition prior to Burns’s composition of his poem (Roy II:29-31). No doubt the ruins of Alloway Kirk did excite local superstition, but Burns was, in a sense, playing to the gallery. The poem appears in its first published form in the *Edinburgh Magazine* for March 1791, and, more importantly, one month later in volume two of Captain Grose’s *Antiquities of Scotland*. In the second of these contexts, it is part of a rather odd item. Amidst a survey of the much more venerable ruins of abbeys and castles in the book, Alloway Kirk is very small beer. Its insertion as a location of historical curiosity is really an excuse for Grose’s drinking crony, Burns, to parade his fine poem. Grose provides a very short and vague description of the ruin at Alloway, the most salient point of which is to say that “it is one of the eldest parishes in Scotland”, which is to say nothing at all.⁵ In a limp footnote to his discourse, Grose says of the kirk, “the church is also famous for being wherein the witches and warlocks used to hold their meetings.”⁶ The text of “Tam o’ Shanter”, itself a (very large) footnote to Grose’s description, is *in toto* a kind of staged over-excited response to the real, physical scene which Grose’s book ostensibly surveys. And this textual relationship too has something about it of the “tongue turn’d inside out” as Burns and Grose collaborate in an imaginative and picturesque rather than merely factual version of “local history”.

Neither Grose nor Burns offer anything in the way of any local legend that is richly or even firmly delineated. In “Tam o’ Shanter,” what we actually see Burns performing is his latest act of cultural substitution within the Presbyterian

⁵ Francis Grose, *The Antiquities of Scotland*, II (Edinburgh, 1791), 32.

⁶ Grose, *Antiquities of Scotland*, II: 31.

culture from which he emerges, as certain highly generalised parts of the folk past of Scotland rather than the folk present of Ayrshire are inserted into his native locale. A very similar earlier example of Burns behaving in this way can be found in his poem "Halloween" (1785), as the bard takes his poetic model from Robert Fergusson's essentially North East centred "Hallowfair" (1772) and transplants this to his native Ayrshire, where such November festivity would have been largely seen as "Papist" or "Pagan" by the most douce Calvinist Presbyterians. Arguably, there is an ironic circular effect going on in "real life" with this process, revealed, perhaps, by William Aiton's comments in his Agricultural report for 1811 on the magical practices of Halloween in Ayrshire: "The manner in which these spells are conducted, and their absurdity, are properly exposed in the poem of Hallowe'en by the celebrated Robert Burns."⁷

I suspect that Burns actually brings such customs to the fore in a way that their weight of actual practice in late eighteenth-century Ayrshire probably does not justify. Aiton's scant source for his comments on the superstitions of Halloween is Burns's poem itself. Does Burns's poem, then, reflect or, instead, rather create the notion of such pagan festivities going on in Calvinist Ayrshire? We should be wary of the "realism" of "Halloween" precisely because Burns circumscribes it with a dissonantly anthropological persona. In his prefatory remarks to the poem he very coolly comments that the customs he describes, "may be some entertainment to a philosophic mind" (Kinsley I:152).

The persona here is that of enlightened historian and in the contrasting narrative of the poem itself, obviously enough, that of folk raconteur enjoying the festivities he describes. Burns's colliding of such personae, though, need not lead to the tired old diagnosis of "crisis of identity." Burns is often a "poet of the gaps," conjugating different registers that will not simply cohere as part of the reality of the complex human psychological terrain in which he is ultimately interested. His performances in both "Halloween" and "Tam o' Shanter" cut across the mentalities of Ayrshire

⁷ Quoted by John Strawhorn, *Ayrshire at the Time of Burns* (Kilmarnock, 1959), p.79.

Calvinism, Scottish folk-belief and contemporary antiquarianism, as well as the “age of sentiment”, in a fashion that refuses absolute authority to any of these.

“Tam o’ Shanter” is perhaps Burns’s poem that has most suffered under the “scholarly” pursuit of “authority” and “authenticity.” We see a good example of this in John Gibson Lockhart’s promotion of the “Galloway” version of the legend in his biography of Burns, primed by the ever-unreliable “Honest” Allan Cunningham. In the “Galloway” story, the day following the events of Tam’s adventure a young woman is found to be in possession of hairs from the tale of Tam’s mare, and so exposed and executed as a witch. This version is not, as Cunningham claims (and as Lockhart implies), a superior rendition of the story. Cunningham and Lockhart wishfully construct, in a way that Tytler might have desired, a more rounded out and less fizzled out narrative. However, it is ultimately a reduction of Burns’s materials to the level of misogynistic fear, a precise turning “inside out” of the design of the text of “Tam o’ Shanter” which actually ridicules the swaggering though fearful male psyche.⁸ One might well wonder whether Cunningham, in fact, is consciously responding to Tytler’s remarks on the poem: fabricating a more seemingly resonant piece of folk legend than that “popular tale” which Tytler assumes to be directing Burns’s version to such disappointing conclusion.

We find a variation on the problem of “Tam o’ Shanter’s” consistency in the attitude of Mrs Dunlop. Her early enthusiasm for “Tam o’ Shanter” in extracts that Burns had sent her was dissipated by her receipt of the entire work and, in disgust, she wrote to the poet, “Had I seen the whole of that performance, all its beauties could not have extorted one word of mine in its praise, notwithstanding you were the

⁸ See also Gerard Carruthers, “Remaking Romantic Scotland: Lockhart’s Biographies of Burns and Scott” in Arthur Bradley & Alan Rawes, eds., *Romantic Biography* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp.100-101; on the subversive treatment of gender in the poem, see Sarah M. Dunnigan & Gerard Carruthers, “Two Tales of ‘Tam o’ Shanter’” in *Southfields* 6:2 (2000), pp.36-43.

author."⁹ Burns replied to her that the poem represented a "finishing polish" he was unlikely ever to better in his work; and Dunlop retorted that this "finishing polish" "was a little tarnished by the sweat and smoke of one line which I felt rather a little too strong for me" (Roy, II: 83-84). Whatever this line was, and it may well have been one of those among the four expunged, as James Kinsley speculates, the charge is that Burns has himself become over-excited in the telling of his tale (Kinsley, III: 1349). Again, this is somewhat ironic since the expunged lines represent, in fact, a quite conscious exploding of the narrative voice, or a signalling of over-excitement and, at the same time, a very nice layer of satire that elaborates upon the purpose of the poem to encompass the topsy-turvy nature of human institutions. Underneath our various institutions of society, whether the church, the law, or Tam's marriage (and it is significant that the expunged lines show horrible sins against family ties), there are dark forces straining against our sociability. If Mrs Dunlop refers to another line in the poem, perhaps one that is sexually voyeuristic, this is also a misapprehension where she fails to read the psychological fervour that the poem essays and which it punctures even as it is revelatory.

The comments of Dunlop, Currie and Tytler all fail to appreciate the full "jouissance" of the poem, in a sense akin to the usage of Roland Barthes when he suggests that the best playfulness by a writer shatters the conventional "pleasure" of the text where such limited pleasure is to be found in work that connects to "a homogenizing movement of the ego".¹⁰ "Tam o' Shanter" is a striking text in this sense, as it explores the hidden angst of the rationalising ego, since Tam is actually experiencing a fantasy of sexual irresponsibility. It also implodes, in its deliberately limp, exhausted conclusion, a narrative that might have appeared previously to be much more credulous of Tam's experience.

⁹ William Wallace, ed., *Robert Burns and Mrs. Dunlop: Correspondence Now Published in Full for the First Time* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898), p. 296.

¹⁰ See Stephen Heath's 'Translator's Note' in his edition of Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (London, 1977), p.9, and Barthes' essay "From Work to Text" (*ibid.*, pp.155-164).

Burns's refers by "finishing polish", presumably, to the very smooth narrative control that he produces in his poem, but this narrative control includes by way of ironic counterpoint to its "wild ride" fabric, instances where the excitement—either of Tam himself, or the narrator—is deliberately toppled over. The unwary reader might not immediately register this internal ridicule, even in the four excised lines mentioned above, but must be brought up short by the mock moralitas of the final lines drawing attention to the less than harmful consequences of the whole episode for Tam:

When'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.221-224).

The rather dubious stories of Burns's composition of the first version of "Tam o' Shanter" in febrile manner as he walked along the River Nith are the result of the reception of the poem as a work that is thought ought to be well-integrated as a folktale and to be somewhat unconscious in, and more respectful of, its catalogue of chilling delights. This attitude to the poem, however, flies in the face of Burns actually questioning the "sweat and the smoke" of the situation he essays as part of the poem's interrogation of "the unconscious." The final lines confront the reader with the question: what are the consequences of bottled up and released frustration for the human psyche?

Of Burns's contemporaries Samuel Taylor Coleridge, writing in 1809, produces the most canny insight into "Tam o' Shanter" as he comments on the lines "To snow that falls upon a river/A moment white – then gone forever!":

In poems, equally as in philosophic disquisitions, genius produces the strongest impressions of novelty while it rescues the most admitted truths from the impotence caused by the very circumstance of their universal admission. Truths of all others the most awful and mysterious, yet being at the same time of universal interest, are too often considered as so true, that they lose all the life and efficiency of truth and lie bed-ridden in the dormitory of the soul side by side with the most despised and exploded errors (Low, p. 110).

Coleridge points us towards a quality of "Tam o' Shanter" that is apparent not only in the lines that provide his cue, but

in the poem as a whole. The fragility of the moment or the basic unit of truth is precisely what is at issue throughout Burns's poem. Somewhat ironically, we might say that Burns reactivates in his supernatural story "the most despised and exploded errors" so as to illuminate a psychological terrain that has lain hidden "in the dormitory of the soul" and which underpins his supernatural tale. Tytler, Dunlop and Currie, however, desire Burns's poem to be a polite antiquarian composition rather than the dissonant interface that it undoubtedly is between inner and outer human worlds.

Puritanical Scotland has been somewhat uncomfortable with "Tam o' Shanter", precisely because it has seemed to be Robert Burns's most personally representative poem. We see this in Walter Scott, also writing in 1809, as highly perceptive comments on the poem's manic excellence give way to dismay as its author's biography is brought to mind:

No poet, with the exception of Shakespeare, ever possessed the power of exciting the most varied and discordant emotions with such rapid transitions. His humorous description of the appearance of Death (in the poem on Dr Hornbook) borders on the terrific, and the witches' dance, in the 'Kirk of Alloway' is at once ludicrous and horrible. Deeply must we then regret those avocations which diverted a fancy so varied and so vigorous, joined with language and expression suited to all its changes, from leaving a more substantial monument of his own fame and to the honour of his country (Low, p. 207).

It is not clear what the "avocations" to which Scott refers are, but, presumably, he has believed stories of the poet's real-life excess as an interference with his powers of concentration and creativity. It is peculiar that Scott should choose to make such an inference immediately after observing Burns's ability in the conjugation of emotion. The response to Scott is not so much that this poetic propensity might actually be seen as consonant with the fragile Burns he believes in (though one might pursue such a line). Rather, it is that the poetic fluidity he admires in Burns, in the case of "Tam o' Shanter" the poem's simultaneity in the "ludicrous and horrible", should be enough in itself. Scott contradicts himself in appreciating poetic fluidity, but then desiring a "substantial monument" in a manner that establishes a dominant note in the Scottish

response to Burns, generally, and to “Tam o’ Shanter” particularly.

The Scottish misappreciation of “Tam o’ Shanter” is, in itself, monumentally, consistently solid. John Wilson sees “the description of the horrors of the scene [as] overcharged, and caricatured so as to become shocking rather than terrible” (Low, p. 315). Thomas Campbell laments what he takes to be the relegation of the supernatural to “comic effect,” the implication being that Burns’s personal sense of levity militates against the sustaining of a suitably serious note (Low, p. 323). John Gibson Lockhart opines that “Tam o’ Shanter” shows “what Burns might have done,” and again Burns’s supposed inconsistency is highlighted in this remark (Low, p. 349). Thomas Carlyle pets his lip and terms the poem “a mere drunken phantasmagoria painted on ale vapours” (Low, p. 368). A century later Edwin Muir leans heavily upon Carlyle’s conception. For Muir, “Tam o’ Shanter” speaks of the historic dysfunctional Scottish cultural system where dissociated reason and fantasy cannot organically cohere as they would within a more well-integrated national, literary sensibility.¹¹ It is extraordinary how all of these responses miss the point as they lament the absence of a better balanced or a more consistently centred poem than the one Burns provides. A crucial point made by “Tam o’ Shanter” is that human cogency is not easily available, precisely because of our conflicting and confused urges toward sociability and pleasure. The very fabric of the poem imitates this human uncertainty.

The four lines that Burns removed from the poem for the 1793 “Edinburgh” edition represented a small surrender. They lived on beyond this edition for several years both in further printings of Grose’s *Antiquities of Scotland* and in the highly popular anthologies of Scottish poetry produced by Brash and Reid, but Currie’s edition largely put paid to them in collected editions of Burns for nearly two centuries.

It was Professor Roy himself, at the meeting in Charleston, South Carolina, where I first presented this argument, who drew attention to an intriguing exception.

¹¹ Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* [1936] (Edinburgh, 1982), pp.62-66.

There was one subsequent collected edition of Burns, of far narrower circulation than Currie's, that took these four lines seriously, and retained them in the text, placing them differently in a way worth consideration. This was the Bewick (or Alnwick) edition of 1808, which reordered the lines as:

(Three Lawyers' tongues, turn'd inside out,
 Wi' lies seam'd like a beggar's clout;
 Three Priests' hearts, rotten, black as muck,
 Lay stinking, vile, in every neuk.)
 Wi' mair o' horrible and awefu',
 Which ev'n to name wad be unlawfu'.¹²

This rearrangement, presumably not a typesetting error since it is retained in succeeding Bewick editions including a special selection of 1828, has much to commend it. It has the merit of taking to an even greater pitch the idea of horror that cannot be depicted, following on from lines that, as we have seen, are encompassing an idea (stitching with lies) which is already too exuberantly abstract to be any kind of easy pictorial image. Did the Bewick edition somehow have an intimation of Burns's original intention for these lines? At the very least it presents a superior solution to the arrangement of the material than the Tytler-Currie approved excision of long canonical tradition.

The limited reappearance of the excised lines as a footnote on the same page in Kinsley's edition in 1968 was a welcome phenomenon, but also a typographical demonstration of how Burns's tongue had been turned inside out. In accepting Tytler's advice, Burns had bowed for an unfortunate moment to a polite sensibility that was precisely the reverse of his identification in "Tam o' Shanter" of the raggedness of the human psyche and of human society. Future editors of the poem might well turn serious attention to re-inserting the missing lines (discussing also the precise place to locate them). Their re-inclusion would be in keeping entirely with Burns's psychological critique in, and his artistic design for, "Tam o' Shanter."

¹² *The Poetical Works of Robert Burns; with his Life. Ornamented with engravings on wood by Mr. Bewick* (Alnwick: Davison, 1808), II: 14.