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## “Tam o’ Shanter”

G. Ross Roy

*University of South Carolina - Columbia*

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## “TAM O’ SHANTER, A TALE”

(1979)

“Tam o’ Shanter” stands by itself in the canon of Robert Burns’s work—a glorious tale of drinking and diablerie in which the poet has perfectly matched the supernatural and the humorous elements. The poem would probably not have been written had Burns not met the antiquarian Francis Grose in 1789 when the latter was in Scotland making drawings for his two-volume *Antiquities of Scotland* (1789-91). The two became good friends and Burns told Grose about the lore of Ayrshire, particularly requesting the antiquarian to draw Alloway Kirk which lay a few hundred yards from the cottage in which the poet was born. Perhaps Burns told Grose stories of the ruined kirk, for Grose agreed to publish an engraving of the kirk if the poet would supply him with a suitable poem to go with it. By November 1790 Burns was at work on the poem, by 6 December it was completed, and by January 6, 1791, Grose had sent Burns proof sheets of it. Perhaps the poet himself sent one of these to the *Edinburgh Review*, for, on 18 March 1791, that paper first published the poem; later that month it was reprinted in the *Edinburgh Magazine*. Its third appearance was in the publication for which it was written, and it subsequently appeared in the two-volume collection of Burns’s poems in 1793.<sup>1</sup> Since then it has appeared countless times in editions of the poet’s works, in chapbooks, in collections of humorous poems, of poems of the supernatural, of collections designed for recitation—even the “gude blue bonnet” Tam is wearing in the poem is frequently called a Tam o’ Shanter. And one of the great clipper ships was called the *Cutty-Sark*.

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<sup>1</sup> [This account follows the chronology that was accepted at the time Prof. Roy was writing, but now see Bill Dawson, “The First Publication of ‘Tam o’ Shanter’,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 40 (2014): 105-115. Eds.]

Tam would have chuckled to find that name today on the label of a bottle of whisky.

In the poem the author adopts several voices. The scene opens with the poet imaginatively taking part in market-day revelry (as Burns often had) involving himself and the reader in the events with the repeated use of "we"—even the wife waiting at home "nursing her wrath to keep it warm" is made to appear universal, for she is "*our* sulky, sullen dame." The next section finds the poet lecturing Tam about his follies and repeating his wife Kate's prediction of a bad end, perhaps at "Alloway's auld haunted kirk."<sup>2</sup>

The poet then turns to the reader and in a four-line passage laments the unwillingness of husbands to heed their wives. Coming as it does immediately after Kate's diatribe, the passage has an ironic tone. Following these digressions, which are essential to the poem, Burns brings the reader up short with "But to our Tale," and he then proceeds to reintroduce us to the gathering at the inn, although this time the poet stands aside, acting as narrator rather than as participant. The pace of the story quickens till Care itself

... mad to see a man sae happy,  
E'en drown'd himsel among the nappy.—  
and Tam's drunken elation is described thus:  
Kings may be blest, but Tam was glorious;  
O'er a' the ills o' life victorious!

Abruptly the poem shifts from Scots to English in an eight-line meditation on the transience of pleasure. This is the only passage in the entire poem in standard English, and it serves as a dividing point—before it Tam was comfortably seated inside, after it he is outside. We come back to Tam, and the vernacular, with a pithy eight-line passage summed up in one line of Scots, "Nae man can tether Time or Tide," and he mounts and rides off. There is something elemental about Tam, a son of the soil as was his creator, when he rides away from the comfort of the inn into the dark; Burns reinforces this when he describes Tam as "Despising wind and rain, & fire"—do what they might these three elements could not harm one who identified with the fourth element, the soil.

Tam is not, however, without some prudence; approaching Alloway Kirk he looks about "lest bogies catch him unawares," although it is his

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<sup>2</sup> [James Kinsley, ed. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* 3 vols., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), vol. II: 557-64.]

mare Maggie who has to be goaded forward when the kirk comes into sight and it appears that there are ghostly goings-on. Here again Burns turns to his audience to warn, with tongue-in-cheek, against the effects of drink and the false courage it inspires—“Wi’ usquabae we’ll face the devil.” In this short passage the poet identifies with Tam no doubt, as we see by the fact that he reverts to the collective pronouns “us” and “we.”

After a splendid description of the scene in the church-yard the author once more admonishes Tam for his interest in these “wither’d beldams” and “hags” while readily admitting that

... had thae been queans

A’ plump & strappin in their teens,

he too would gladly have given “Thir breeks o’ mine, my only pair,” for a look at these “bonie burdies.” Not only does the poet suggest the exchange of something valuable for such a sight, he may well be making an oblique reference to the fact that in real life he had more than once removed his breeks for a lass. As the poem continues, however, we find that Tam, like Burns, can recognise an attractive girl when he sees one; after painting a vivid picture of the “winsome wench” Tam has his eyes on, the poet masterfully ends the descriptive passage by suggesting that much more could be said on the subject:

But here my Muse her wing maun cour,

Sic flights are far beyond her power,

Earlier in the poem he terminated the description of what Tam first saw at the kirk with:

With mair o’ horrible & awefu’,

Which even to name wad be unlawfu’.

After Tam gives himself away by roaring out “Weel done, Cutty-sark!,” the poet addresses himself to him for the last time:

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

In hell they’ll roast thee like a herrin!

but the mock seriousness of Burns’s warning is completely undercut by the hilarious incongruity of Tam likened to a roasted herring.

The final passage in the poem is addressed to the readers of the tale. Outwardly, whenever they are inclined to drink or think about cutty-sarks, they, like Burns, run the same risk as did Tam; a final admonition ends the poem:

Think, ye may buy the joys o’er dear;

REMEMBER TAM O’ SHANTER’S MEARE!

When we consider it, though, we become aware that Burns is here indulging in a splendid irony. For what has been the price to Tam for his

evening at the inn, and the sight of Cutty-sark and the dance of witches? The loss of his mare’s tail! Isn’t Burns subtly suggesting that the prophets of doom are wrong? We may be threatened by them, as Kate threatened Tam, but finally those who live life to its fullest are the richer in experience, although they may pay a trifling price for it. Read this way, “Tam o’ Shanter” forms a companion piece with Burns’s celebration of low life in *The Jolly Beggars*.

It is not necessary to be aware of these subtle interplays at work in the poem to enjoy it. Since its first appearance it has enchanted young and old, rich and poor, and it will continue to do so. Like all great works of art it is deathless.