

1978

Robert Burns, "Tam O'Shanter," and the Authorship of "Duncan Macleerie"

Douglas D. Short

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Short, Douglas D. (1978) "Robert Burns, "Tam O'Shanter," and the Authorship of "Duncan Macleerie"," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol13/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

Douglas D. Short

Robert Burns, "Tam O' Shanter," and the Authorship of "Duncan Macleerie"



The commonly acknowledged source for many of the narrative details of Robert Burns's "Tam o' Shanter" is a witch story that Burns himself recounted in his well-known letter to Francis Grose.¹ There is, however, another analogue for the climactic cutty sark passage that has never been noted. This analogue is to be found in *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* in a humorously erotic song entitled "Duncan Macleerie."² Although several of the individual lyrics in this collection of ribald songs are known to have been written by Burns, "Duncan Macleerie" has never been numbered among them, but has instead been dismissed as a traditional piece of ribaldry.³ It is the purpose of this discussion to examine the parallels between "Tam o' Shanter," Burns's letter to Grose, and the *Merry Muses* song, to investigate the relationship between "Duncan Macleerie" and a folksong tradition from which it was adapted, and finally to explore the possibility that Burns himself wrote "Duncan Macleerie."

The climax of "Tam o' Shanter," it will be recalled, occurs when the inebriated Tam is overcome by the dancing of Nannie, the "ae winsome wench and wawlie" in the company of otherwise "wither'd beldams."⁴ Each of the dancers has "coost her duddies to the wark, / And linket at it in her sark!" After a few stimulating moments spent watching the "souple" Nannie dancing in "Her cutty sark o' Paisley harn" with a vigor far

beyond the power of the narrator's Muse to describe, Tam loses all self-control and shouts out, "Weel done, Cutty-sark!"

The analogue for these narrative details in Burns's letter to Grose concerns a farmer who observes some dancing witches who "were all in their smocks; and one of them happening unluckily to have a smock which was considerably too short to answer all the purpose of that piece of dress, our farmer was so tickled that he involuntarily burst out, with a loud laugh, 'Weel luppen, Maggie wi' the short sark!'" The analogous passage in "Duncan Macleerie" is to be found in the final quatrain of the four-stanza song:

Duncan Macleerie played on the harp,
An' Janet Macleerie danc'd in her sark;
Her sark it was short, her c--t it was hairy,
Very weel danc'd, Janet quo' Duncan Macleerie.⁵

In all three writings--the poem, the letter, and the song--there is a striking similarity in the parallel use of the short sark, the erotic dance, and the responsive exclamation. Since Burns wrote "Tam o' Shanter" and the letter to Grose which contains the ostensible sources for "Tam o' Shanter," these parallels suggest the possibility that Burns wrote "Duncan Macleerie" as well, especially since he is known to have written many of the other songs that ultimately found their way into the *Merry Muses* collection.⁶

To inquire into the possibility of a Burns ascription we must first examine a folksong tradition which underlies "Duncan Macleerie." In his edition of *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, Gershon Legman has pointed out that the song is "a parody or continuation of the sixteenth-century song, 'Tom o' Lin,' first recorded in William Wager's interlude, *The longer thou livest, the more foole thou art*, c. 1566."⁷ A thorough study of the Tom-a-lin folksong (not to be confused with "Tam Lin," no. 39 in Francis Child's collection)⁸ requires collecting as many of the surviving variants as is possible. Based on an analysis of over seventy variants of the Tom-a-lin folksong compiled from oral and written sources spanning four centuries,⁹ two salient features can be identified relevant to the present discussion. First, unlike many widely circulated folksongs, the Tom-a-lin variants never deviate from a set stanza form--in this case a quatrain with an *aabb* rhyme scheme. Second, the *b*-rhyme is constant throughout the tradition, being fixed by the last syllable of the character's name, for example:

Thomas o' Linn was a Scotsman born;

His head was clipped, his beard was shorn;
 His breiks were borrowed, his coatie was thin;
 And an antique fallow was Thomas o' Linn.¹⁰

Although the character's name changes somewhat in different versions (Tom-a-lin, Tom Bolin, Brian O'Lynn, John Barney Flynn, Old Tumble Lynn, etc.), the rhyme does not. Of all the Tom-a-lin variants and adaptations thereof, "Duncan Macleerie" is the only one to exhibit a different *b*-rhyme, an alteration obviously concomitant with the choice of the name "Macleerie."

At this point it is helpful to have the full text of the song before us:

Duncan Macleerie and Janet his wife,
 They gaed to Kilmarnock to buy a new knife;
 But instead of a knife, they coft but a bleerie;
 We're very weel saird, quo' Duncan Macleerie.

Duncan Macleerie has got a new fiddle,
 It's a' strung wi' hair, and a hole in the middle;
 An' ay when he plays on't, his wife looks sae cheary,
 Very well done, Duncan, quo' Janet Macleerie.

Duncan he play'd 'till his bow it grew greasy;
 Janet gre fretfu', and unco uneasy.
 Hoot, quo' she, Duncan, ye're unco soon weary;
 Play us a pibroch, quo' Janet Macleerie.

Duncan Macleerie play'd on the harp,
 An' Janet Macleerie danc'd in her sark;
 Her sark it was short, her c--t it was hairy,
 Very weel danc'd, Janet, quo' Duncan Macleerie.

Beyond the first stanza, the metaphoric ploys and vigorous eroticism are very uncharacteristic of the Tom-a-lin tradition, particularly as it was known in Scotland and Northern Britain during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, if we compare a few typical stanzas from Scottish variants of the period, we discover that the first stanza of "Duncan Macleerie" runs much to type, except of course for the *b*-rhyme:

Tam o' the Linn's gaen doon to the moss,
 Seeking a stable to stable his horse,
 The night being mirk, the mare fell in,
 'Ye're stall'd for the night,' quo Tam o' the Linn.¹¹

Thomas o' Linn gaed down the gate,

Wi' twenty puddings on a plate:

Ilka pudding had a pin--

"There's walth o' wud here," quo' Thomas o' Linn.¹²

Furthermore, if we delete the untraditional name "Duncan Macleerie" and replace it with a traditional name that preserves the original *b*-rhyme, and if we also replace "bleerie" with the obvious rhyme the context demands (namely, "pin"), the first stanza of the song takes on an even greater resemblance to an authentic Tom-a-lin folk variant. The hypothetical restoration reads as follows:

Thomas o' Linn and Janet his wife,
They gaed to Kilmarnock to buy a new knife;
But instead of a knife, they coft but a pin;
We're very weel saird, quo' Thomas o' Linn.

In fact, with these two modifications the stanza follows closely the most commonly repeated thematic pattern in the surviving Tom-a-lin songs. Typically Tom-a-lin lacks something he needs--wearing apparel, riding gear, a scabbard for his sword, a pocket watch, etc. He then corrects his deficiency with an inferior substitute or make-shift replica. Finally he quips on the efficacy of his substitute. Of all the many variants of the Tom-a-lin folksong thus far recovered, there are several dozen stanzas which fit this general pattern.

But beyond the first stanza, the only features that "Duncan Macleerie" shares with the Tom-a-lin variants are the stanza form and fourth-line fillip, for the remainder of the song exhibits some significant features not in the underlying folk tradition. The second stanza introduces the real subject of the song with the conventional sexual metaphor of playing on a fiddle, the first appearance of a shifting musical-instrument metaphor that unifies the song. The effect is both humorously erotic and playfully euphemistic. In the third stanza the humor is intensified with a clever joke within the metaphoric context on Duncan's inadequacy. The joke was partially explained by James Barke in the 1959 edition of *The Merry Muses* with a note that "The time for an average four-part march is two minutes; a pibroch 12 minutes (p. 142). Actually the joke is somewhat more complex: a pibroch is a piece of music for the bagpipe, not the fiddle. Thus Janet's request for such a tune not only suggests her desire for a more sustained performance, but it also effects an appropriate shift in the musical-instrument metaphor to the phallic, for the bagpipe has traditionally been emblematic of the male genitalia. In the last stanza the musical-instrument metaphor

shifts once again, this time to a harp, and it is in this form that the metaphor is incorporated into a bluntly sexual finale. In line 3 of the stanza the metaphor is briefly dropped in favor of a well-timed climax with a sharply dysphemistic description. But the metaphor returns in the fourth line to furnish the understated (by comparison to line three) exclamation--at once anticlimactic and immensely funny.

By this analysis it becomes evident how the *Merry Muses* song was written. The author knew the Tom-a-lin folksong and saw in it the potential for a ribald adaptation that would make effective use of the laconic quip at the end of each stanza. He accordingly modified one of the stanzas by changing the name of the comic personage from "Tam o' the Linn" or "Thomas o' Linn" to "Duncan Macleerie" and by adjusting the third line to accommodate the new *b*-rhyme. The change was obviously introduced to yield the subsequent rhymes on "cheary," "weary," and of course the climactic rhyme on "hairy." Thus, except for the opening stanza, the song is an entirely original composition. And in view of its status as a unique text and its overall distance from the Tom-a-lin tradition, including the clever musical joke, and the sophisticated use of metaphorical euphemism highlighted by the pithy dysphemism, there can be little question that the song is of literary rather than folk origin.

In exploring the possibility that Burns was the author of "Duncan Macleerie" it would certainly be helpful if evidence could be adduced to show that he was indeed familiar with the Tom-a-lin prototype. Evidently the folksong was widely circulated in Scotland and Northern England during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. An English version appears in *The Distracted Sailor's Garland*, a chapbook printed in Newcastle in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁴ Ritson reprinted it in *North Country Chorister* in 1802, although it had undoubtedly been collected some time earlier.¹⁵ In that same year, Sir Walter Scott noted in his *Border Minstrelsy* that "a burlesque ballad, beginning 'Tom o' the Linn was a Scotsman born' is still well known."¹⁶ Later Scott was to recall some stanzas, which are printed in David Laing's edition of Sharpe's *Ballad Book*.¹⁷ In addition unpublished variants dating from the early nineteenth century are to be found in the Campbell Manuscripts under the title *Tom o' Lin* and in the Kinloch Manuscripts under the title *Thomas o' Linn*.¹⁸

Burns's lifelong interest in folksong and especially his work on the *Scots Musical Museum* very likely brought him into contact with the Tom-a-lin piece. But actual proof that Burns knew the folksong does exist, and it suggests more about his attitude toward the piece than a holograph variant. Burns sent his poem "Elegy on the Year 1788" to the *Edinburgh Evening*

Courant, where it was published under a pseudonym in the January 10, 1789 issue. Burns used the pseudonym "Thomas A. Linn." Later that year he sent the text of his poem "On Captain Grose's Peregrinations" to the *Evening Courant*, where it was published in the August 27 issue--again under the signature "Thomas A. Linn."¹⁹ Burns's choice of this name cannot be dismissed as mere chance; rather, it confirms that he knew the Tom-a-lin folksong and probably anticipated that his intimates among the readership would recognize the poem to be his on the basis of his known fondness for the piece. It seems a just inference from Burns's two uses of the signature eight months apart that during this period the folksong had indeed captured his imagination.

The one assumption we must make in attributing "Duncan Macleerie" to Burns is that he was taken enough by the Tom-a-lin folksong to attempt an extension of it in a bawdy vein. Certainly Burns's common practice in such matters is sufficiently acknowledged to obviate a lengthy discussion of the plausibility of his having done so; however, it does seem appropriate to recall DeLancey Ferguson's memorable dictum in his 1951 assessment of Burns's contribution to *The Merry Muses*:

It is reasonable to infer that [Burns's] practice with bawdy songs was precisely the same as his practice with more decorous ones: when he had only traditional fragments to work with, he added lines and stanzas of his own which were consonant with the fragments.²⁰

Although Ferguson limits his observation to "every bawdy lyric which survives in the poet's handwriting, or which contemporary opinion attributed to him," nevertheless the observation fits admirably the facts surrounding "Duncan Macleerie," which neither survives in holograph nor was attributed to Burns during his lifetime or since.

But these facts we have seen above do not alone prove that Burns wrote the *Merry Muses* song; rather, they prove only that he *could* have written it. One might well suggest as an alternative explanation that subsequent to the publication of "Tam o' Shanter" some unknown versifier, perhaps one of the Crochallan group borrowed the cutty sark motif from Burns's poem and incorporated it in a bawdy extension of the evidently well-known Tom-a-lin folksong.

However, this alternative is disproved by a final piece of evidence that specifically links Burns to "Duncan Macleerie" in 1789, a year prior to his composition of "Tam o' Shanter." Midway between his two uses of the Thomas A. Linn signature to poems he sent to the *Edinburgh Courant*, Burns wrote a letter

to the London *Star* dated 25 April 1789.²¹ The letter contained a brief preface followed by the text of his irreverently satiric poem "A New Psalm for the Chapel of Kilmarnock." The poem and preface were published three weeks later on 14 May--under the signature "Duncan M'Leerie." Once again, Burns's choice of the name cannot be dismissed as mere chance; on the contrary, it proves that the *Merry Muses* song was written no later than April of 1789 and that Burns knew the song, interestingly enough, before he wrote "Tam o' Shanter." On the question of authorship, while this piece of evidence may not constitute proof positive that Burns composed "Duncan Macleerie," considered in light of the other evidence it comes about as close to conclusive proof as is possible, short of a specific acknowledgment of authorship by Burns or a contemporary attribution by a reliable source. The Duncan M'Leerie signature has the distinction of being the *only* reference to the *Merry Muses* song outside the 1799 edition and later reprints and references traceable to that edition. Moreover, coming when it does, the signature associates Burns with the song during the very period that the other evidence would seem to indicate as the most probable time of composition, namely, within a few months proximate to his use of the Thomas A. Linn signatures.²²

In anticipation of the alternative explanations that Burns took the Duncan M'Leerie pseudonym from a song that he knew to be by someone else or that he thought to be traditional, it can be said from the outset that both seem rather improbable in light of the total body of evidence. Nevertheless, against them it can be argued that whereas Burns used as a pseudonym "Thomas A. Linn," the name of a traditional folksong personage, it is unlikely that he would sign one of his poems, particularly a pungent satire such as "A New Psalm," with the name of a character from a poem by someone else, for that would involve a potentially malicious deception in the implication of authorship. Nor is it credible that Burns, whose knowledge of Scottish folksongs was outstanding, would have mistaken "Duncan Macleerie" as a traditional folksong, one that would furnish a convenient pseudonym free of misleading implications of authorship. If nothing else, Burns's familiarity with the authentic Tom-a-lin tradition would have precluded such a mistake. In short, the only reasonable explanation for Burns's choice of the Duncan M'Leerie pseudonym is that he took it from a song of his own composition based on a folksong he liked, a composition that employed some of the same features he was later to include in his most famous poem, "Tam o' Shanter."

A Burns ascription for "Duncan Macleerie" thus adds another ribald song to the Burns canon. Furthermore, it is an ascription that provides an interesting gloss on the eroticism of

the cutty sark passage in "Tam o' Shanter." Its value as a gloss becomes obvious when we consider the widely different tastes of the respective audiences of the two poems. *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (and by its inclusion "Duncan Macleerie") was intended for the Crochallan Fencibles, an Edinburgh drinking club, and as would be expected of such a collection, the exclusively erotic contents are not generally characterized by subtlety. In contrast, "Tam o' Shanter" was written for a much wider audience, including a "genteel" readership that would have been offended by an overtly sexual description. Hence, the eroticism of the witches' dance, especially of Nannie's performance, is evident, but in a less explicit fashion. It is interesting to note that in his letter to Grose, Burns was deliberately circumlocutory in the description of the short sark: it was "a smock which was considerably too short to answer all the purposes of that piece of dress." In the poem itself the briefness of the sark worn by Nannie is even less directly described:

Her cutty sar, o' Paisley harn,
That while a lassie she had worn,
In longitude tho' sorely scanty,
It was her best, and she was vauntie.--
Ah! little kend thy reverend grannie,
That sark she coft for her wee Nannie,
Wi' twa pund Scots, ('twas a' her riches),
Wad ever grac'd a dance of witches! [171-178]

At the very outset of this passage Burns (or rather his narrator) tells us that Nannie's sark is short with the phrase "cutty sark." But the *degree* of shortness, which has considerable bearing on the erotic impact of the poem, is inferential. Her sark was purchased for her when she was only a wee bairn, but she is wearing it years later, after she has grown into a "winsome wench and wawlie." It must have been incredibly short! We are teased into imagining the overall effect of the briefness of Nannie's sark combined with the vigor of her dancing, which the narrator modestly declines to describe:

But here my muse her wing maun cour;
Sic flights are far beyond her pow'r;
To sing how Nannie lap and flang,
(A souple jade she was, and strang). [179-182]

There can be little doubt that the image Burns wished to convey in a "polite" fashion in "Tam o' Shanter" was identical to the rather graphic image of Janet's dance in lines 14-15 of "Duncan Macleerie." Unquestionably the ribald eroticism of

the last stanza of "Duncan Macleerie" clarifies, even to those who prefer to ignore such matters, the intensity of the eroticism of Nannie's far less bluntly described dance in "Tam o' Shanter."

Thus, the foregoing discussion has attempted to ascribe one more of the erotic poems of *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* to Burns, one that has never before been attributed to him. It is an ascription which provides some useful insights into various aspects of the method Burns employed in adapting and extending authentic folksongs, since several variants of the Tom-a-lin folksong are available for comparison. Furthermore, it is an ascription which sharpens our perception of the erotic impact of "Tam o' Shanter." And finally, whatever else this examination of the cutty sark may achieve, it certainly suggests a special appropriateness for the commonplace reference to Burns's "high-kilted" poetry.

North Carolina State University

NOTES

1. Letter 401 in *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson (Oxford, 1931), II, 22-24. Actually the letter contains three witch tales, but most of the narrative details are from the second.

2. All references to *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* are to Gershon Legman's type-facsimile of the original 1799 edition (New Hyde Park, N. Y., 1965); "Duncan Macleerie" appears on pp. 57-58.

3. For a thorough analysis of Burns's hand in the *Merry Muses* see James Kinsley, "Burns and the *Merry Muses*," *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, 9 (1965), 5-21; see also the introduction to Legman's edition. In the 1959 edition of the *Merry Muses* edited by James Barke and Sydney Goodsir Smith (Edinburgh, 1959), "Duncan Macleerie" appears without explanation under the rubric "Collected by Burns," evidently on the assumption that it was transcribed from oral tradition.

4. All quotations of "Tam o' Shanter" are taken from the standard edition by James Kinsley, *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* (Oxford, 1968), II, 557-64.

5. All quotations of "Duncan Macleerie" are from Legman's

type-facsimile edition, in which the letter expurgations of the 1799 edition are retained.

6. The most convincing theory of how this collection was compiled and published is that of Legman, *The Horn Book* (New Hyde Park, N. Y., 1964), pp. 164 ff. Kinsley ("Burns and the *Merry Muses*," pp. 20-21) endorses Legman's account, which is also presented in the introduction to his edition of *The Merry Muses*, pp. xlvi ff.

7. Legman, *Merry Muses*, p. 182. The Wager interlude available in R. Mark Benbow's edition [Lincoln, 1967]; see *ll.* 88-91) has only a single stanza of the song:

Tom-a-lin and his wife and his wife's mother,
They went over a bridge all three together;
The bridge was broken and they fell in.
The devil go with all, quoth Tom-a-lin.

8. Child made reference to the Tom-a-lin folksong in an effort to dispel the notion that it was somehow related to "Tam Lin;" see *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston, 1882-98), I, 340.

9. The variants referred to have been compiled by this writer for a modified historic-geographic study of the folksong which is now in progress.

10. From George R. Kinloch's collection "Burlesque and Jocular Songs" (MS dated Edinburgh, 1827-29), pp. 45-47. The original MS is in the Houghton Library, Harvard, MS 25242.12, vol. 3.

11. From a recitation by "the late Mr. Drummond of Strageth," recollected by Sir Walter Scott in a letter to Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe and reprinted in Sharpe's *Ballad Book*, ed. David Laing (London, 1880), pp. 137-38.

12. From the Kinloch variant.

13. For a convenient checklist of poems employing the stringed-instrument metaphor, see Kinsley's notes to Burns's version of "Greensleeves," which also employs a fiddle metaphor (*Poems and Songs*, III, 1325).

14. Copies are to be found in the Harvard College Library (25276.44) and the British Museum (11621.c.3 [50]). The chapbook carries no date or place of publication, but the

British Museum *Catalogue* vol. 211, col. 124) places it at Newcastle c. 1765 and reprinted c. 1775.

15. *North Country Chorister* was originally published in Durham, 1802, but was reprinted in *Northern Garlande* (London, 1810). A modern reprint is available (Darby, Pa., 1973).

16. *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (Kelso, 1802), II, 224.

17. See footnote 11 above.

18. For the Kinloch MSS, see footnote 10 above. The present location of the Campbell MSS has not been traced, but Child had them copied in the late nineteenth century, and the copies, following the original pagination, are in the Harvard College Library, MSS 25241.16. "Tom o' Lin" appears in II, 107. Dr. E. B. Lyle of the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, has supplied the present writer with other Scottish fragments of the folksong from MSS (c. 1825-28) in the handwriting of William Motherwell and Andrew Crawford. These fragments exhibit degenerative features characteristic of folksongs that have long survived in oral tradition.

19. See J. W. Egerer, *A Bibliography of Robert Burns* (Carbondale, 1965), pp. 334, 339.

20. *MLN*, 66 (1951), 473.

21. See Burns's letter to Mrs. Dunlop of May 4 (Letter 335 in Ferguson's edition), into which he copied his letter to the *Star*. Kinsley (*Poems and Songs*, III, 1304) describes the signature as "the title of a traditional bawdy song," even though the only known text is that of the 1799 edition of *The Merry Muses* and subsequent reprints. It would be interesting to investigate the number of anonymous songs from unique texts that are conveniently disposed of as "traditional," a term that properly should include only folksongs or anonymous songs *proven* to have been widely circulated in broadsides, chapbooks, songsters, etc. Erotic and scatologic songs seem to be particularly susceptible to this type of pigeonholing.

22. It is perhaps worth noting that in *The Merry Muses*, "Duncan Macleerie" carries the notation: "Tune--Jocky Macgill." Burns used this tune only once as an accompaniment to a song he is known to have written, and that is "Tibbie Dunbar," which he probably also composed in 1789, since the volume of the *Scots Musical Museum* in which it appears (III) carried a preface dated 2 February 1790.