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*Allan H. MacLaine*

Radicalism and  
Conservatism in Burns's  
*The Jolly Beggars*



A fig for those by law protected!  
*LIBERTY'S* a glorious feast!  
Courts for Cowards were erected,  
Churches built to please the *PRIEST*.<sup>1</sup>

These lines from the final song of the Bard are the most often quoted in *The Jolly Beggars*, and that fact in itself points up the problem with which I intend to deal.

It often happens in the history of literature that an early stereotype becomes affixed to a poem or play or novel, and persists without critical challenge for generations. In many cases the stereotype begins with superficial or facile judgments by influential people which color all subsequent reactions to the work. Succeeding critics never really look at the work directly for what it is, but always tend to see it through the distorting glass of the time-honored view. Such has certainly been the fate of Burns's *The Jolly Beggars*. From the beginning this magnificent cantata was labeled with adjectives like "revolutionary," "radical," "anarchic," and so forth, recalling Lady Bracknell's dictum (in a very different context) in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*-- "It reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution."

In our own time, recent Burns critics have followed the

same line in a somewhat more sophisticated fashion. David Daiches, writing in 1952, clearly views *The Jolly Beggars* as a revolutionary work and says that it makes its appeal to "humanity's unofficial self" (George Orwell's phrase).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Thomas Crawford in the latest critical book on Burns calls it "a root-and-branch criticism of organized community life and morality from a point of view as extreme in its own way as those sometimes found in Byron and Shelley." He says, further, that "the cantata effectively demolishes the presuppositions of eighteenth-century society."<sup>3</sup> I propose to dispute this traditional view of *The Jolly Beggars*, to show that it is at least a badly lopsided conception of what the poem actually has to say to us.

Burns's own attitude toward *The Jolly Beggars* is somewhat enigmatic. He withheld the poem from the press during his lifetime, and his only recorded comment on it occurs in a letter to the publisher George Thomson written in 1793, eight years after the time of composition: "I have forgot the Cantata you allude to, as I kept no copy, and indeed did not know that it was in existence; however, I remember that none of the songs pleased myself except the last---something about

Courts for cowards were erected,  
Churches built to please the priest."<sup>4</sup>

None of these statements is believable. The brilliant finish of the cantata, the evidence of hard work and extensive revision by Burns,<sup>5</sup> show that he certainly intended it for publication in 1786. But he withheld it, and in 1793, the time of the letter, he was under fire and his Excise position threatened as a result of his open sympathies with the French Revolution. At this juncture, writing to Thomson who was an influential man of very conservative views, Burns had strong reasons to dissociate himself as much as possible from *The Jolly Beggars*.<sup>6</sup> Hence the conscious attempt to play down the importance of *The Jolly Beggars* and to pass it off to Thomson as a sort of bagatelle, a trivial and unsuccessful work of his earlier years, not to be taken seriously since the author himself has "forgot" it. Yet it is curious that Burns chose to quote the two most radical lines in the cantata; as a consequence his own comment tended to support the idea that *The Jolly Beggars* was a dangerous work.

Rightly or wrongly, and no doubt on the advice of prudent literary friends in Ayrshire and later in Edinburgh, Burns concluded that *The Jolly Beggars* was too risky a production to put into "guid black prent." It was not published until 1799, three years after the poet's death.

Yet it is an extraordinary fact that *The Jolly Beggars*,

this reputedly radical and dangerous work, has been consistently praised by critics of all political persuasions. John Gibson Lockhart, the biographer of Carlyle and hardly a sympathizer with social revolutions, had this to say about *The Jolly Beggars* in 1828:

*Beggar's Bush*, and *Beggar's Opera*, sink into tameness in the comparison; and indeed, without profanity to the name of Shakespeare, it may be said, that out of such materials, even his genius could hardly have constructed a piece in which imagination could have more splendidly predominated over the outward shows of things--in which the sympathy-awakening power of poetry could have been displayed more triumphantly under the circumstances of the greatest difficulty.<sup>7</sup>

And later in the same year (1828) Thomas Carlyle himself, that thunderer against "big, black Democracy," echoed Lockhart's enthusiastic assessment of *The Jolly Beggars*, calling it "the most strictly poetical" of all Burns's poems, and the most perfect thing of its kind in literature.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Matthew Arnold, a critic who was often unsympathetic and generally completely wrong-headed on the subject of Burns, was overwhelmed by *The Jolly Beggars*.

"That puissant and splendid production," he called it; "the piece is a superb poetic success. It has a breadth, truth, and power which make the famous scene in Auerbach's Cellar, of Goethe's 'Faust,' seem artificial and tame beside it, and which are only matched by Shakespeare and Aristophanes."<sup>9</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century (1896), W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson, in their fine edition of Burns, summed up *The Jolly Beggars* in a now famous phrase as "this irresistible presentation of humanity caught in the act and summarized forever in the terms of art."<sup>10</sup> And twentieth-century critics have been equally effusive. This chorus of praise, extending all the way from reactionary Carlyle to socialistic Crawford, suggests not only a purely aesthetic appreciation of the artistry of *The Jolly Beggars*, but also some degree of approval of the thought content in the work. There must be something politically appealing for every kind of reader in *The Jolly Beggars*. Besides the nihilistic philosophy of the songs on which so much emphasis has been laid ("Courts for cowards," etc.), there must be a guiding intelligence in the cantata that is basically conservative and eminently sane. I submit that there is such a counterbalance and that it is to be found in

the attitude of the narrator.

I have already quoted Daiches' comment on the universal appeal to "humanity's unofficial self." This is undoubtedly true, but it does not get us very far in explaining the secret of *The Jolly Beggars*, because it is also true of *all* beggar literature. The shoddiest, third-rate eighteenth-century song in celebration of beggars' "freedom" also appeals to this universal instinct. The difficult question is: Why does *The Jolly Beggars* have a unique kind of potency? My thesis is that the special power of *The Jolly Beggars* arises out of a tension between two opposed points of view: (a) that of the beggars themselves, and (b) that of the narrator. The beggars in their songs speak in voices that are indeed radical, anarchic, amoral, contemptuous of all the institutions of Western society. They express the traditional beggar philosophy as found in the literature of roguery through the centuries. The narrator's attitude, on the other hand, is basically conservative, realistic, and socially orthodox. And it is the thrust of the one idea against the other that gives *The Jolly Beggars* its extraordinary power.

A brief review of the immensely rich literary background to *The Jolly Beggars* will support my contention that the high originality and uniqueness of the cantata lie in its presentation of two opposed attitudes in the songs and narrative framework. All commentators agree that in composing *The Jolly Beggars*, Burns had a voluminous international literary tradition to draw upon--the literature of roguery, of beggars, thieves, and vagabonds, extending back to medieval times and including some of the poems of François Villon in France, the narrative song of *The Gaberlunzieman* in Scotland, and dozens of English ballads, songs, and prose tracts. Of this earlier literature the poet probably had some fragmentary knowledge. Certainly he was familiar with much of the beggar literature, both in English and Scots, of his own century.<sup>11</sup> Songs glorifying the carefree, irresponsible, "free" life of beggars and vagabonds were much in vogue in the early eighteenth century. Of the scores of such songs in common circulation, many were accessible to Burns in two large collections--Thomas D'Urfey's *Wit and Mirth: or Pills to Purge Melancholy* (London, 1719-20) and Allan Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany* (Edinburgh, 1723). In the latter, which grew from one to four volumes in successive editions and which Burns certainly knew in detail, there are several beggar songs, including *The Happy Beggars* and *The Merry Beggars*. *The Merry Beggars*, wherein six characters tell their stories in turn, unquestionably suggested to Burns the basic structure for *The Jolly Beggars*. In the same collection there is a brief, undistinguished effort, attributed to Ramsay himself, called *A Scots Cantata*, with two recitative sections and

two songs, which surely provided the specific model for Burns's cantata form.

In all of the suggestive wealth of beggar songs, there is a consistent theme of celebration of the beggar philosophy, of beggars' "freedom"; there is no hint of any contrasting point of view. This is true also of the immensely popular *Beggar's Opera* (1728) of John Gay which Burns almost certainly knew. Nevertheless, Gay's brilliant ballad opera, with its many new songs written to old and popular tunes and set in a dramatic framework exposing the lives of Macheath and his gang of thieves and vagabonds, is an important part of the background to *The Jolly Beggars*. Furthermore, Gay draws parallels between the mores and morality of the London underworld (where Peachum, the master "fence," functions as chief manipulator or prime minister) with those of the British Court circle, a device of social satire that reappears in *The Jolly Beggars*.<sup>12</sup> Of course, *The Beggar's Opera* has implications that go far beyond the simplicities of the beggar songs and the beggar philosophy. It is, in fact, a penetrating comment--at once hilarious and devastating--on the depravity of human nature in general and on the amorality of the ruling class in particular. But in his *method* Gay stays strictly within the limits of the beggar tradition in literature. *The Beggar's Opera* is, in short, a self-contained world in which we get a seemingly straight-forward exposition of the values of the beggar philosophy. In Gay's work no other set of values is directly expressed; on the contrary, Gay suggests that "polite" society has basically the same amoral values as the underworld of the beggars. Consequently, *The Beggar's Opera* provided no precedent for the kind of dual vision we find in Burns's *The Jolly Beggars*.

Such a precedent, however, was readily at hand for Burns. He found it in native Scots poetry, outside of the beggar tradition, in the genre of *Christis Kirk*. The unique pattern of this type of poem is as follows: the poet portrays from a detached and superior point of view a lower class celebration of some kind, a confused scene of horseplay, drunkenness, noise, etc.; and he does this by highlighting individual scenes among the general ruckus, with concise characterizations and considerable use of dialogue. The separate vignettes are given a semi-dramatic kind of treatment, and are usually tied together with a slender thread of narrative, so that through cumulative impressions the reader gets a vivid picture of the crowded and boisterous scene as a whole. This is precisely the technique of *The Jolly Beggars*, except that the cantata form requires the use of songs in place of the dialogue sections in the *Christis Kirk* poems. Burns, of course, was steeped in this Scots poetic form, from its fif-

teenth-century prototypes, *Christis Kirk on the Green* and *Peblis to the Play*, through the later work of Alexander Scott, Ramsay, Fergusson, and others.<sup>13</sup> He had already tried his own hand in this genre in a *A Mauchline Wedding*, *The Holy Fair*, and *Halloween*, and he turned the wealth of knowledge and skill thus acquired to good account in the composition of *The Jolly Beggars*.

The crucial thing about the *Christis Kirk* tradition with respect to *The Jolly Beggars* is that in the *Christis Kirk* poems we have a satirical narrator who describes, comments on, and laughs at the antics of the characters. In other words, in these poems there are two very different points of view presented: (a) that of the lower class characters as revealed in their speeches, and (b) that of the superior narrator as expressed in his satiric description of and comment on the behavior of the characters. In essence, this is exactly the method of *The Jolly Beggars*, with its opposed and contrasting attitudes of beggars and narrator. In terms of literary precedent, therefore, the special quality of *The Jolly Beggars* results from Burns's unique fusion of the beggar tradition with its themes of "freedom" and defiance of convention and the *Christis Kirk* tradition with its methods of genial satirical narration.

Before examining the text in detail, let us first consider the overall structure of the work to see how Burns's dual vision is embodied in its poetic architecture.

If we exclude the "Merry-andrew" section which Burns wisely chose to delete,<sup>14</sup> the cantata as we have it consists of seven "recitativo" passages and seven songs, the whole forming a tightly integrated dramatic structure. In all, seven distinct characters are presented: a Soldier and his "doxy," a Pickpocket ("raucle Carlin"), a Fiddler, a Caird (tinker), a "Dame," and a Bard (ballad-singer). Each of these, with the exception of the Dame, sings a song; the Bard sings two. In organizing this material, Burns cleverly interrelates all seven characters.

Burns opens with a brilliant narrative section, depicting first with bemused tolerance the wild scene of merriment in Poesie-Nansie's, and then focussing in on his first vignette of the Soldier and his Doxy with sharper comic emphasis on their squalor and lust. At this point the Soldier staggers to his feet with a swaggering song of praise for his two careers, first as a soldier, now as a beggar. In the second recitative, the Fiddler is momentarily brought in, foreshadowing the large part he plays later, and then the Soldier's Doxy rises to match the Soldier's song with a rousing and uninhibited one of her own, recounting her sexual "life story" as a camp follower. (Apparently, Soldier and Doxy are a couple who mated in youth,

separated, and are now reunited in middle age.) The third recitative introduces a husky female Pickpocket, whose song of mourning for her dead "John Highlandman" is an envious reaction to the Doxy's joy in rediscovering her "old boy." The "pigmy" Fiddler, depicted in two brilliant, farcical stanzas (fourth recitative), is stricken by the charms of the massive Pickpocket and, moved by her grief, he consoles her with his song and offer of love. The song, of course, is lively, sexual, amoral. At this point (fifth recitative), the "sturdy CAIRD," also smitten by the Pickpocket, intervenes; the narrator in a passage of hilarious satire shows the Caird thrusting the trembling Fiddler aside, then embracing and serenading the "raucle Carlin." After the Caird's song we get the superlative sixth recitative in which the Caird "prevails" with the Pickpocket, while the poor Fiddler finds consolation "behint the Chicken cavie" with a Dame who turns out to be one of the three "wives" of the Bard. The latter, catching them *in flagrante delicto*, is not offended; since he still has two wives left he wishes Fiddler and Dame luck in a rousing song. This sixth narrative section, full of sharp but genial satire, is the richest in the whole work. The Bard's second song, ("A fig for those by law protected!") demanded by the whole company, brings the scene of drunkenness and profligacy to its crashing climax.

This brief summary of the cantata reveals not only its tight dramatic organization, but also suggests Burns's ambivalence in the contrasting ideas and attitudes of beggars and narrator. (The style of the poetry itself is also highly significant, as we shall see later.) As for ideas or views of life, these are expressed directly only in the songs, and they are the traditional ones of beggar literature: "freedom" (all characters), sexual amorality (Doxy, Fiddler, Bard), contempt for property values (Pickpocket, Caird, Bard), contempt for the requirements of social respectability (all characters, but especially the Bard), and so forth. The narrator, on the other hand, has no ideas; he pretends simply to report what he sees, without comment or evaluation. But the narrator's *attitude* emerges indirectly through his selection of detail (as well as language), and in this way his point of view is differentiated sharply from that of the beggars. The narrator is under no illusions; he is relentlessly realistic, choosing details which tend cumulatively to bring out both the absurdity of the beggars' pretensions and the squalor of their lives. Burns, after all, had seen much of actual beggary in Ayrshire, and had feared being reduced to it himself.<sup>15</sup> His sympathy for these vagabonds comes out in the heroics of the songs, but his clear grasp of the realities of their way of life is shown in the satiric attitude of the narrator.



The language of *The Jolly Beggars* supports the central thesis of this essay in broad terms. The situation, however, is complex; the differentiation between narrator and beggars is not marked by a clear-cut stylistic dichotomy. Indeed the beggars themselves sing in a variety of voices. Nevertheless, certain general tendencies may be discerned and set forth as follows:

(1) The language of the songs tends to be more idealized than that of the narrative framework, with frequent use of heroic or romantic touches and echoes of serious sentimental-aristocratic literature. The idealization is made to seem natural in songs presented (as these are) as spontaneous outbursts of lyric emotion. At the same time, we are allowed in some of the songs (especially those of Doxy, Fiddler, Caird, and Bard) to catch glimpses of the sordid realities, and this technique heightens the comic incongruity of the highflown diction.

(2) The language of the narrator is, on the whole, much more sober, realistic, and down-to-earth, often with deliberate emphasis on squalid images. However, the narrator also introduces mock-heroic devices for hilarious satiric effects. These effects are used sparingly at first, but become very prominent toward the end in recitatives 4, 5, and 6, as though Burns, pleased with the comic power of incongruous language in the early songs, decided to exploit it further in narrative sections. The difference is that whereas in the songs the fancy diction is made to seem unconscious and ludicrously naive, in the recitatives it is clearly deliberate and satiric.

(3) Burns's juxtaposition of styles enhances the total satiric effect; that is, each song is "set up" in the preceding narrative passage. The recitative is always realistic, giving a clear picture of the gamey goings-on in Poesie Nansie's; then this is immediately followed by a song--heroic or sentimental--in high style. The contrast is devastatingly funny. In this way, moving from narrative to song and back to narrative, Burns achieves a kind of contrapuntal comedy.

Let us turn now to the text to see how some of these stylistic effects are worked in practice.

The opening stanza, with superb economy of expression brings us inside from bitter November weather into the warm, hectic conviviality of Poesie Nansie's, as Burns immediately begins to establish the narrator's attitude toward the beggars by means of the style of his first description of them:

Ae night at e'en a merry core                      One; evening

O' randie, gangrel bodies,	carefree; vagrant
In Pooisie-Nansie's held the splore,	riotous frolic
To drink their orra dudies.	spare rags

Here we have clearly the point of view of an amused, tolerant outsider. The witty line "To drink their orra dudies," that is, to pawn their spare rags to buy drink, is particularly effective in showing the narrator's clear-eyed perception of the essence of the beggars' way of life--their combination of abject poverty with utterly irresponsible profligacy or "randiness." Similarly, in the second stanza we see the narrator stressing in his choice of language the degradation of the beggars, especially in the phrase "the tozie drab" (drunken slut) for the Doxy, and the earthy image of her holding up "her greedy gab" for more kisses.

The first song, that of the Soldier, is a lively piece of swaggering bravado, followed by a recitative which merits full quotation:

He ended; and the kebars sheuk,	rafters shook
Aboon the chorus roar;	Above
While frightened rattons backward leuk,	rats; look
An' seek the benmost bore:	inmost hole
A fairy <i>FIDDLER</i> frae the neuk,	corner
He skirl'd out, <i>ENCORE</i> .	cried out shrilly
But up arose the martial <i>CHUCK</i> ,	
An' laid the loud uproar--	

In this stanza the narrator brings in his first slight touches of mock-heroic. The picture of the frightened rats scurrying for shelter is, of course, a wonderfully comic way of suggesting both the volume of noise and the squalor of the place; but the whole opening quatrain is also an ironic reminiscence of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, I, 541-3: "At which the universal Host upsent / A shout that tore Hell's Concave, and beyond Frighted the Reign of *Chaos* and old Night."<sup>16</sup> This Miltonic echo enhances the narrator's genial mockery of the beggars. More obviously, his use of the grandiose "martial *CHUCK*" when he means simply "soldier's whore" has the same kind of ludicrous effect.

The Doxy's song which follows, regarded by Cedric Thorpe Davie as one of Burns's supreme achievements as a songwriter in its perfect matching of words to music,<sup>17</sup> is a small masterpiece of ironic language. Here the grubby, abandoned life story of the camp follower, always vulnerable to sudden dire poverty and venereal disease, is recounted in the exalted idiom of sentimental literature. The underlying realities, however, are never lost sight of, as we can see in the open-

ing lines.

I *ONCE* was a Maid, tho' I cannot tell when,  
And still my delight is in proper young men . . .

The Doxy's total promiscuity, made clear in the first line, clashes ironically with "proper young men" in the second. In the next stanza, there is similar comic ambiguity in the line "Transported I was with my *SODGER LADDIE*." The surface meaning of "transported" is, of course, the genteel one--"carried away by powerful emotion," or something like that. In this context, however, the term might also mean "shipped to a prison colony"--and Burns surely intended the line to be read as a delightfully unconscious *double entendre*. In stanza 3 we get even more brilliant examples of the comic contrast between high language and low life:

But the godly old Chaplain left him in the lurch,  
The sword I forsook for the sake of the church;  
He ventur'd the *SOUL*, and I risked the *BODY*,  
'Twas then I prov'd false to my *SODGER LADDIE*.

Yet another kind of comic irony comes out in the latter part of the song in single adjective-noun phrases in which one element is connotatively polite, the other debased, as in "sanctified *Sot*" (stanza 4) or "His *RAGS REGIMENTAL*" (stanza 5).

Altogether, the Doxy's song is of special significance for my thesis, since it expresses perhaps more clearly than any other section of *The Jolly Beggars* the real ambivalence of Burns's attitude. On the one hand, the comic incongruities of language in the song tend to make fun of the beggars, to explode the pretensions of the beggar philosophy, and to suggest that the Doxy (like the others) lives in a world of illusions. Yet, at the same time, these same incongruities give a kind of innocence, even a kind of heroism, to the Doxy's undaunted view of herself and her world. In the end her song becomes a triumphant celebration of total sexual freedom and *joie de vivre*.

The third recitative brings us back to the narrator and his brief sketch of the Pickpocket, the "raucle Carlin." Here the language is generally earthy ("raucle Carlin," sturdy old woman, has a fine Scots pithiness) and realistic:

For mony a pursie she had hooked,  
An' had in mony a well been douked.

After giving us, in a few broad strokes, these details of the

Pickpocket's disreputable career and the fact that her lover had been a Highlander who was hanged, the narrator brings in just a touch of the mock-sentimental:

Wi' sighs an' sobs she thus began  
To wail her braw *JOHN HIGHLANDMAN*.

This touch prepares us for further ironic language in the Pickpocket's very lively song (of grief) which follows--lines like "The ladies' hearts he did trepan," or "adown my cheeks the pearls ran." The employment by this thieving trull of stilted formulas (tears like "pearls") from sentimental literature has the effect of turning her grief into comedy.

With the re-entrance of the Fiddler in the fourth recitative, the cantata moves into a phase of uproarious farce. The narrator describes this "pigmy Scrapper" and his sudden amour with the strapping Pickpocket in a single *Habbie* stanza:

A pigmy Scrapper wi' his Fiddle,  
Wha us'd to trystes an' fairs to driddle,   cattle markets;  
Her strappan limb an' gausy middle,       buxom   <sup>potter</sup>  
      (He reach'd nae higher)  
Had hol'd his *HEARTIE* like a riddle,       pierced; sieve  
      An' blawn't on fire.

The narrator here begins with four lines of straightforward, earthy description of this absurdly ill-matched pair. In the last two lines, however, he gives us a brilliant travesty of a romantic stereotype from aristocratic literature--the hero's heart is pierced, and blown "on fire." This is made doubly amusing here, first by the absurdity of using this exalted formula to describe a crude and ridiculous situation, and second by the couching of the formula in colloquial Scots--"hol'd," "*HEARTIE*," "riddle," "blawn't." His use of the Scots diminutive "*HEARTIE*" (little heart), with very non-heroic connotations, is especially funny and, of course, appropriate to the tiny Fiddler. The second stanza follows roughly the same pattern, with braid Scots description in the first two lines, followed by a passage of macaronic wit wherein the fiddling talents of the "wee Apollo" are portrayed with formal Italian musical terms ingeniously embedded in the Scots texture. The Fiddler is thus made to seem as absurd and pretentious as possible.

The Fiddler's song itself, set to the old tune of *Whistle owre the lave o't* (the refrain has sexual connotations), carries on this method of burlesque of serious literary conventions. The tiny Fiddler, reaching upwards toward the Pickpocket's face, begins:

Let me ryke up to dight that tear, reach; wipe  
 An' go wi' me an' be my *DEAR* . . .

The first line is again a travesty (concealed in vernacular Scots) of the common formula in sentimental novels or poems where the hero consoles the weeping heroine and wipes tears from her eyes. Similarly, the second line is a faint but definite parody of Marlowe's *The Passionate Shepherd to his Love*; and, indeed, the remainder of the song follows the general rhetorical structure of Marlowe's poem. Within this elevated poetic pattern, however, the pleasanter realities of vagabond life are earthily depicted--drinking, fornicating, and so forth. Then, in the final stanza a special burlesque effect is achieved:

But bless me wi' your heav'n o' charms,  
 An' while I kittle hair on thairms tickle; guts  
*HUNGER, CAULD*, an' a' sic harms such  
 May whistle owre the lave o't. over the rest

In the first line the phrase "heav'n o' charms" is a euphemism for the female genitals drawn from sophisticated courtly literature. But in the second line we have a sudden drop in style from the courtly to the "hamely" with "kittle hair on thairms" (tickle hair on guts; that is, play the fiddle), clearly a bawdy pun.<sup>18</sup> The overall result of these devices is, of course, to make the Fiddler's "fine" language seem ludicrous in the light of the very vulgar things he is actually saying.

In the fifth recitative, the narrator comes back with further verbal ironies, as we learn that the Pickpocket's "charms" had smitten the robust Caird as well as the Fiddler. The Caird brutally forces the Fiddler, under threat of violent death, to "relinquish her for ever," another example of the narrator's deft burlesque of serious styles. He then introduces internal rimes to enhance the farcical effect of the whole vignette:

Wi' ghastly e'e poor *TWEEDLEDEE* eye  
 Upon his hunkers bended, haunches  
 An' pray'd for grace wi' ruefu' face,  
 An' so the quarrel ended.

The Caird's own song which shortly follows--another serenade to the Pickpocket ("My bonie lass I work in brass")--carries on the internal rime device. The Caird heaps scorn, in earthy and sexual language, upon the hapless Fiddler ("Despise that *SHRIMP*, that wither'd *IMP*") and embraces the portly Pick-

pocket.

Next comes the sixth recitative, the richest and most imaginatively conceived part of *The Jolly Beggars*. In three *Christis Kirk* stanzas, the narrator manages the final resolution of the Fiddler-Pickpocket-Caird conflict and presents a wholly new dramatic situation--the seduction by the frustrated Fiddler of one of the three "wives" of the Bard and the latter's goodnatured acquiescence. In these stanzas the narrator's (and Burns's) play with contrasting levels of style reaches its peak of brilliance:

The Caird prevail'd--th'unblushing fair  
 In his embraces sunk;  
 Partly wi' *LOVE* o'ercome sae sair,  
 An' partly she was drunk.

Here again the narrator makes use of courtly stereotypes to portray the squalid promiscuity of the beggars. The prettified stock image of "the blushing fair," the heroine of sentimental literature, becomes "th' unblushing fair" in the amoral world of Poosie-Nansie's. Similarly, the reference to capitalized "*LOVE*" in this context is deliciously funny and foreshadows the appearance of Cupid himself in the next stanza:

But hurchin Cupid shot a shaft,           urchin  
 That play'd a *DAME* a shavie--           trick  
 The Fiddler *RAK'D* her *FORE AND AFT*,  
 Behint the Chicken cavie.               coop

With devastating irony the copulation of Fiddler and Dame is thus explained in terms of Greek mythology; and, as in the previous passage, there is a sudden dropping from the realms of romance or classical myth to the sordid, startling reality ("An' partly she was drunk"). The mind of the reader exults in the sheer brilliance of satiric effects such as these. We are reminded of comparable passages in *The Holy Fair* (e.g., "There's some are fou o' *love divine*; / There's some are fou o' *brandy*"), and elsewhere in Burns. As for *The Jolly Beggars*, can any reader viewing these passages doubt that the narrator is consciously *making fun* of his beggars?

The Bard's first song which follows this trenchant recitative carries on some of the same stylistic techniques: the juxtaposition of genteel and "hamely" levels of language, the sprinkling of bawdry, and the device of sinking from the ideal to the earthy. The thrust of the Bard's use of high style, however, is rather different from that of the earlier singers. Whereas in the preceding songs the beggars have tended to

exalt their way of life by naively comparing it with the romantic or heroic, the Bard instead, through his ironic use of the refrain "an' a' that," implies a rejection of the dream world of classical poetry and chivalric love as so much mumbo-jumbo. Like Robert Fergusson in *The King's Birth-Day in Edinburgh*,<sup>19</sup> the Bard finds his poetic inspiration, his "Muse," in strong drink:

I never drank the Muse's <i>STANK</i> ,	pool
Castalia's burn an' a' that,	brook
But there it streams an' richly reams,	froths
My <i>HELICON</i> I ca' that.	call

Similarly, he finds his "love" not in the clichés of the sentimental novel but in earthy, promiscuous sex:

In raptures sweet this hour we meet	
Wi' mutual love an' a' that;	
But for how lang the <i>FLIE MAY STANG</i> ,	fly; sting
Let <i>INCLINATION</i> law that!	determine

In this context the refrain "an' a' that" clearly means "and all that nonsense." The last stanza and final chorus, full of sexual metaphors--"They've ta'en me in" or "My *DEAREST BLUID*" (semen)--are wholly earthy and wholly Scots in language, so that the real world of the beggars appears to prevail at the end.

In the seventh and final recitative the narrator reverts to *The Cherrie and the Slae* stanza<sup>20</sup> of the opening and to a panoramic overview of the whole scene in Poosie-Nansie's as the orgy of the beggars reaches its wild climax. Again we have an ironic stylistic dropping from the elevated, faintly Miltonic tone of the first three lines to the coarse and graphic quality of the second three:

So sung the <i>BARD</i> --and Nansie's waws	walls
Shook with a thunder of applause	
Re-echo'd from each mouth!	
They toom'd their pocks, they pawn'd their duds,	emptied; bags
They scarcely left to coor their fuds	[cover their buttocks
To quench their lowan drouth.	burning thirst

On this note of frenzied drunkenness and excitement the Bard rises, by popular demand, to sing his second song, the finale of *The Jolly Beggars*.

This song, with its famous radical chorus ("A fig for those by law protected!"), sums up the total beggar view of life that has gradually been unfolded in the six preceding lyrics.

It gives us, in standard English, Burns's most conventional expression in the cantata of the grand delusion of the vagabond in literary tradition--the notion that he is truly "free," that he enjoys life more than respectable folk:

Does the sober bed of *MARRIAGE*  
Witness brighter scenes of love?

Life is all a *VARIORUM*,  
We regard not how it goes;  
Let them cant about *DECORUM*,  
Who have character to lose.

With great skill Burns weaves these commonplaces from the literature of roguery into a kind of final ritualistic statement of the beggar philosophy, ending significantly with the word "*AMEN!*" The result is impressively powerful.

Indeed, Burns's very success with this climactic finale, with its rousing, nihilistic chorus, has tended to obscure the satiric role of the narrator and his countervailing, conservative point of view--his mockery of the beggars. Critics have generally equated the Bard and his statement with the poet Burns, and have lost track of the fact that Burns's voice is at least equally present in that of the narrator, that Burns is also the author of the socially orthodox recitatives. A recent commentator, for example, has characterized the final song as "one of the most superb things that ever came from his pen, a proclamation of his faith and of his philosophy which may have shocked the conservative of his day, but which stands firm after nearly two centuries in company with his finest creations."<sup>21</sup> Such a comment, however valid as an aesthetic judgment, fails to take account of that *other* Burns who wrote the narrative sections in this same work in which he makes fun of the beggars and their "philosophy." To suppose that the drunken Bard's "faith" is identical with that of Burns, his creator, is to oversimplify, to ignore the genuine ambivalence in Burns's attitude toward the beggars. To say that the Bard's final song is a proclamation of Burns's faith is to say that Burns really believed that courts for cowards were erected and that might should make right (as it does in Poesie-Nansie's). Surely not. No doubt the dazzling impressiveness of the finale is at least partly responsible for this lopsided view.

The foregoing stylistic analysis of *The Jolly Beggars*, stressing verbal incongruities and Burns's deft play with contrasting levels of style, demonstrates the conservative side of Burns's attitude toward the beggars. He is satirizing their view of life in two basic ways (with some variations).



In the songs the satire is indirect and arises out of the absurdity of the beggars' pretending, in their use of elevated language, to the ideals of heroic myth and sentimental romance in the light of the coarseness and squalor of what they are actually doing. In the recitatives the satire is direct and even more devastating as the narrator--detached, amused, and tolerant--depicts the crude goings-on at Poo-sie-Nansie's with hilarious touches of the mock-heroic and mock-sentimental in his language and imagery.

Of course there is another side to the coin. This essay deals with the matter of radicalism and conservatism in Burns's view of the beggars, but obviously my main effort has been to bring out the conservative aspect. That is by no means to deny the radicalism. Clearly Burns had a great deal of sympathy for these outcasts. He saw them as victims of the same kinds of social and economic injustice and hypocrisy from which he himself suffered. He admired their spirit in the face of adversity; on one side of his mind he applauded their fierce pride and bravado, absurd as these often seemed, recognizing that the beggars had no other resources in facing a hostile world; above all, he relished their humanity, and, like John Gay, saw that in essence they were not unlike their "betters." Certainly, burdened as he was by social pressures, he half envied the beggars' independence and utter irresponsibility. He celebrates their irrepressible *joie de vivre*. In all of these ways, Burns is on the side of the beggars, so to speak, and his cantata is a radical statement concerning the injustice and hypocrisy of society as he knew it. The radicalism is there, and has been more than adequately commented on by others. The trouble is that nearly all Burns critics have seen *only* the radicalism, and have been blind to the counterbalancing orthodoxy of the narrator, to the contrasting conservative attitude that is also there and is implied in the poetic technique of the entire cantata, both in recitatives and in songs.

The fact is that *The Jolly Beggars* is one of the very few masterpieces by Burns which give expression to the full range of his rich and complex personality. In it we hear different voices, as we do in *Tam O' Shanter* and one or two other poems. Yet, paradoxically, all the voices are those of Burns in various moods and attitudes, expressing different facets of his mind but somehow unified by the vibrant force of the one personality. The mixture of styles and perspectives in *The Jolly Beggars* is rare in Burns's work; we are more accustomed to the kind of poem, whether satiric or romantic (*Holy Willie's Prayer* or *To a Mouse*, for examples), where a single overwhelming effect is aimed at and achieved. Perhaps the habit of expecting single effects partly accounts for the

exclusive stress by critics on the radical point of view in *The Jolly Beggars*. Yet there is copious evidence in Burns's other poetry, even more in his letters, of the extraordinary range of his sympathies. We know that the composer of the bawdiest obscenities in *The Merry Muses* was also the author of such orthodox moralities as *Epistle to a Young Friend*. We know that "rantin, rovin' Robin" was also the solid family man who wrote "To make a happy fireside clime / To weans and wife, / That's the true *Pathos* and *Sublime* / Of Human life." The paradoxes and strange contradictions of Burns's personality can be documented ad infinitum from individual poems, songs, and letters. Why, then, should we be surprised to find them together in a single work? *The Jolly Beggars* gives us just that: a radical-conservative paradox, the separate contrasting perspectives of beggars and narrator, the dual vision of the creator Burns. And both points of view have their own kinds of validity.

What I am arguing for, then, is a balanced view of *The Jolly Beggars* as a profound and moving commentary on the human predicament, on the tension between "freedom" and social responsibility. Burns's point is that the beggars' way is not the answer; their vaunted "freedom" is a delusion. The tiny Fiddler is *not* free to have his way with the Pickpocket, but is swept aside by the brutal Caird. In the realm of Poozie-Nansie, might makes right; there is no justice ("Courts for Cowards were erected") and therefore no genuine freedom; the people live and love like animals. Burns saw clearly enough that for himself and for the mass of mankind such a life was impossible. He realized that if most people chose the beggars' way civilized society, which he valued in spite of its own kinds of injustice, would collapse. Consequently, *The Jolly Beggars* is at the same time both a celebration of and a satire on the beggar philosophy; the poet admires and laughs at his characters simultaneously. It is this double vision, this thrust of one point of view against the other, which gives the cantata its tension and much of its unique appeal to all classes of readers. In this masterly work Burns has it both ways.

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#### NOTES

1. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1968), I. 208. All subsequent quotations from *The*

*Jolly Beggars* are from this edition, hereafter referred to as Kinsley. In this definitive edition Kinsley uses the title *Love and Liberty*, presumably on the ground that this is the only name Burns himself is known to have given the cantata. Two manuscripts in Burns's hand have survived: one, the Alloway MS, is untitled; the other, the Don MS, is called *Love and Liberty*. The name *The Jolly Beggars* was evidently invented by the publisher, Thomas Stewart, working from the untitled Alloway MS, in the first printing of the work. Since Stewart's title has become traditional, having been in standard usage for 175 years, I have chosen to retain it rather than to use the historically more authentic *Love and Liberty*.

2. *Robert Burns* (London, 1952), p. 231.
3. *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1960), pp. 132-3.
4. *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson (Oxford, 1931), II, 202.
5. See John C. Weston, "The Text of Burns' 'The Jolly Beggars'," *Studies in Bibliography*, 13 (1960), 239-48; also Weston's Editorial and Textual Notes in his edition of *The Jolly Beggars: A Cantata* (Northampton, Mass.: Gehenna Press, 1968).
6. This convincing explanation was first put forward by Franklin B. Snyder, *The Life of Robert Burns* (New York, 1932), pp. 162-3.
7. *The Life of Robert Burns* (London: Dent, 1959), pp. 232-3.
8. *Essay on Burns*, first printed as a review of Lockhart's *Life* in the *Edinburgh Review* (Dec., 1828), and since reprinted countless times, both separately and in editions of Carlyle's writings.
9. See the section on Burns in "The Study of Poetry" in any edition of Arnold's essays.
10. *The Poetry of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1896), II, 291.
11. For an extremely helpful résumé, with bibliographical data, of the most likely of Burns's sources, together with references to useful general books on the literature of roguery, see Kinsley, III, 1148-9.

12. In the "Merry-andrew" section which Burns deleted there is a clear example of Gay's method in stanza 5 of the fool's song:

Poor Andrew that tumbles for sport,  
 Let nae body name wi' a jeer;  
 There's even, I'm tauld, i' the Court  
 A Tumbler ca'd the Premier.

13. For a full treatment of the history of this genre, see Allan H. MacLaine, "The *Christis Kirk* Tradition: Its Evolution in Scots Poetry to Burns," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 2 (1964-65), 3-18, 111-124, 163-182, 234-250.

14. See Weston, n. 5 above.

15. See, e.g., *Epistle to Davie*, especially stanzas 2-4.

16. Kinsley, III, 1154, suggests a possible parody of some lines from Dryden's *Fables*, but the passage from Milton is far closer.

17. "Robert Burns, Writer of Songs," in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, ed. Donald A. Low (London and Boston, 1975), pp. 167-8.

18. Both of these *double entendres* are noted in Kinsley, III, 1157-8.

19. Compare Fergusson's second stanza:

O Muse, be kind, and dinna fash us,  
 To flee awa' beyont Parnassus,  
 Nor seek for Helicon to wash us,  
     That heath'nish spring;  
 Wi' Highland whisky scour our hawses,  
     And gar us sing.

20. An elaborate 14-line stanza named after the famous Scots poem (a love allegory) written by Alexander Montgomerie in the late sixteenth century; the form was revived by Allan Ramsay in the eighteenth, and used by Burns in several other poems, most notably the *Epistle to Davie*.

21. Cedric Thorpe Davie, n. 17 above, p. 176. In other respects, Davie's essay is a brilliant and expert contribution to our understanding of the musical side of Burns's work as a songwriter.