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Patricia Ower

The Minor Characters in Hay's *Gillespie*



John MacDougall Hay's *Gillespie*, published in 1914, is one of the works of Scottish literature which deserves more critical attention than it has received until now.¹ For a first novel, it is extraordinarily powerful and well-executed.² Much of the effect of *Gillespie* comes from its careful construction. Hay's craft can be seen not only in the development of his strong plot line and the drawing of his protagonist, Gillespie Strang, but also in his handling of the minor characters. These figures, who include Galbraith, his wife, Lonend, Maclean, the women of the Pump and their husbands, define Gillespie as foils and commentators. They also create the "sense of place" in the novel, and, to a large extent, provide the motivation of the action. This essay will examine some of the minor figures and their role in *Gillespie*.

Books I and II of the novel are the most important for the delineation of the minor characters and their interaction with Gillespie. In Books III and IV, the focus of interest moves mainly to Gillespie and his family, to the growing storm at home. Much less is seen of the figures that the reader meets in the early pages of the book. The family troubles are presented, however, against the understood background of the hostility of the town and of the hatred and plotting of some characters like Mrs. Galbraith and Lonend. But until the confining of Mrs. Strang and Eoghan, the townspeople are definitely

of lesser interest in the second half of the book. They reappear in the final chapters quite literally to bury the Strang family and to assert the continuance of life and the values which predate Gillespie.

We are told in the first chapters of Book I that Gillespie is deliberately raised to be interested only in the mundane and the materialistic, in order to counteract the effects of the unfortunate and romantically tragic history of his mother's family. However, we are not aware of just what a monster can be created by such a policy until we see Gillespie move against Galbraith, the first of his victims. Gillespie is generally in ill odor with the people of Briston because of his hybrid life--he follows neither the land nor the sea exclusively. In fact, this versatility and stepping out of traditional ways are basic to Gillespie's success in business and in dealing with his victims. But it is not until we are told of Galbraith's feelings that Gillespie is a vulture, a fox with a voice like Satan, that we begin to see the really negative side of Strang. When he comes to foreclose on a loan he made to Galbraith, the farmer is ploughing, an activity which is described as a work of hope and redemption, but not for Galbraith, whose labors assist only in "turning Gillespie's key in the lockfast box."³ The spiritual balance implied in the view of man's relationship with earth as mutually refreshing and regenerative is thrown out of kilter with Gillespie's taking over of the farm as a purely commercial venture and the eviction of Mrs. Galbraith. It is not restored until the final pages of the novel when, after Gillespie's death, Mrs. Galbraith sees a distant figure ploughing the lea on Muirhead Farm, "ministering to the faith that is imperishable in the breast of man" (p. 446).

Galbraith dies of a broken blood vessel after being denied a bank loan to pay off his creditor, and this event, fortuitous for Gillespie, brings about an uneasy agreement between the protagonist and Hector Logan of Lonend, a neighboring farmer. The latter is a pale copy of Gillespie, but his grasping surpasses his intelligence. Throughout the novel, he appears to be always a step or two behind his son-in-law. In the scene in which the takeover of Muirhead Farm is agreed upon, a bargain to be sealed in part by Strang's marriage to Lonend's daughter, we see Gillespie's cunning in the setting up of the terms. However, though Lonend does not see the loophole that will eventually break up the partnership and lead to mutual enmity, Gillespie is shown as moving uncertainly with Lonend. He does not yet appear to be in an invincible position vis-à-vis others as he so often does later in the novel. Even a report of gossip, such as Lonend's statement that Doctor Maclean publicly blames Gillespie for Galbraith's death, strikes fear in the protagonist, his hand shaking so visibly that he must

put it in his pocket. Further on in the action, Gillespie's impassivity in the face of massive setbacks is a matter of wonder to onlookers. But at this point, he is shown by Lonend to be still vulnerable.

It is not only Maclean that accuses Strang; Mrs. Galbraith does also. Maddened with grief over her husband's death and her anger at being dispossessed, she swears vengeance, despite Maclean's warning not to meddle, "I'll never be content till the snow is his winding-sheet; till I see him without house or home or coffin" (p. 73). Thus begins her role as catalyst of trouble for Gillespie. The animal imagery which Galbraith used to describe Gillespie is also used by his wife in a truly demonic picture of her persecutor. She speaks of him as a pirate with leprous carrion eyes and a sour smile on his wolfish face. To deal with such a man, Margaret Galbraith, despite her considerable education, turns to sortilege. The biblical passage which she finds before her is "Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (p. 76). Thus feeling herself confirmed in her self-appointment as the "vicar of the wrath of God" (p. 76), Margaret undergoes a terrible degeneration of character. This decline in a way parallels the disintegration of the town as a result of its contact with Strang. Margaret is first described in Chapter 4 as highly educated, a reader of Thomas à Kempis and Tennyson, a person of ideas, not action. A refined woman, after her eviction she moves as far as possible from the Back Street and keeps her distance from the fisherwomen. From this somewhat idealized characterization, she descends, because of her hatred and monomania for revenge, to the point of effecting the debauch of Morag Strang and of agreeing to marry Lonend in return for the burning of Gillespie's fishing fleet. The nadir of her development comes when she refuses Topsail's plea to help Mrs. Strang. The imbalance of her mind and moral sense is described in detail in Book IV, Chapter 7, and it is only the multiple tragedies which befall the Strang family, in particular the death of Eoghan, which purge and purify her heart. Only after the death of Gillespie, "her terrible vigil done" (p. 446), can she again react wholly to the work of redemption being done on the hill. The degeneration she suffers and her inability to be free of spiritual taint until Gillespie is removed from the scene is symptomatic of the plight of Brieston as a whole. The "sickness" of the society, caused partly by its own sins of self-interest, blasphemy and atheism, and partly by its contact with Gillespie, which has brought out its sins, is also incapable of alleviation until the source of infection is eliminated. However, in comparison to the townsfolk, Mrs. Galbraith stands in the novel as a constant and implacable source of opposition to Gillespie.

The power of her will and mind make her appear more formidable a challenge to Strang than Lonend, her sometime ally, despite his actions of burning the boats and of scheming with McAskill to charge Gillespie with embezzlement and fraud. Her hatred of Strang is also more unwavering than that of the townsfolk in general, whose feelings for Gillespie fluctuate greatly according to their self-interest.

It is through the townspeople of *Gillespie* that Hay makes us most aware of the Scottish setting of the novel. Firstly, the language of the characters is a hybridization of Gaelic and Lowland Scots which presumably reflects the geographic position of Brieston, a West Coast village at the end of the Nineteenth Century. This speech gives the impression of being the "true voice" of that particular people. Gillespie's speech is wholly Lowlands as is appropriate to his background and mercantile interests, whereas Maclean, Kennedy and Mrs. Galbraith, probably because of their education beyond Brieston, are less definable by their language. Their idiom does not bear a clear local stamp. The townspeople in their character also display the regional verisimilitude shown by their speech. One feels that Hay draws on his own experience in Tarbert or Ullapool to convey convincingly the sense of the fishermen and their experience with the sea, the warm shrewdness of the women at the pump.⁴ Their traditional way of life and the problems involved, such as drought and bad weather, the need for capital and indebtedness to the "company store," strike the reader as true to life and well-drawn, though heightened. The believability of the characters and the obvious vicissitudes of their life form the basis for sympathy for them in their blind drift into the hands of Gillespie.

In Book I, the townspeople are generally seen by the reader as two quite discrete groups: the women of the pump, "home of censure, the seat of wrangling" (p. 39) where "the idol of gossip is set up" (p. 39), and their husbands the fishermen. The former group, Nan at Jock, Lucky, Black Jean, and Mary Bunch in particular, function to a certain extent like a chorus from a Greek tragedy.⁵ They comment on the action and prophesy the future. For example, after the death of Galbraith, they speak of his generosity in giving potatoes and firewood to the poor of Back Street, and on the cupidity of Gillespie--"he'd skin a louse for the creish" (p. 45). Suspense is built up by various prophecies of Gillespie's downfall, either imminent or distant. For example, during the discussion of Galbraith's death, Lucky says "I winna be in his shoes the day for a' the gold in California; they're the shoes o' a deid man" (p. 45). Or further, Mary Bunch in Chapter 19 quite correctly sees that Morag's drinking will bring Gillespie down eventually, a prophecy that Mrs. Galbraith does her best to fulfill. As the novel pro-

gresses, various anecdotes, such as the tale of how Jock Sinclair outdid Gillespie at his commercial squeeze, are told by Mary Bunch and others, and add to the generally unsavory reputation of Strang for the reader and the townsfolk themselves.

In general, the men's view in Book I of Gillespie is like that of the women--they acknowledge that he is bad but are not unduly alarmed about the fact. As Chrystal Logan says, the crab (i.e., Gillespie) will scuttle back to the sea--what he and the others do not realize is how much damage it will do before it does go. In fact, the men do not see behind the manoeuvring of Gillespie to get rid of the farm at his own profit and Lonend's loss, and they assume that Strang is incompetent. This is a view shared by old Mr. Strang, who is gulled by his son out of five hundred pounds to "recoup" his supposed losses. Lonend, having already broken with Gillespie, is understandably more censorious, calling Gillespie a "Jew frae Jericho" (p. 96) who would "rob the apostle Peter off the cross" (p. 91), one of a kind, of whom God had broken the mold rather than make another like him.

However, a very bad mistake in judgment is made by the townspeople as a whole at the beginning of Gillespie's career, a mistake which is natural given the people's lack of experience, but also terribly dangerous in that it exposes them to heedlessness in their dealings with Gillespie. This misjudgment is the initial motivating factor in the action of the novel. The people's innocence, both in the negative sense of ignorance, and in the positive sense of lack of worldly guile, is essential to Gillespie's success:

Gossip being the compass of a people's heart, you will see that Mr. Gillespie Strang was making a definite name for himself. He was held to be grasping, a dealer in any sort of chance commerce. His sign, in the estimation of some, should be--retail trade in all sorts of villainy. Most people knew him to be a sly, sordid huckster, who crept like a pirate through the town with oiled helm; a man whose lance rested on the exposed back of the simple. They judged...that he was no match for the open-eyed. He crept too much like a lapwing to take the high air with eagles or hawks. (pp. 50-1)

But when the reader sees Gillespie deal with Mrs. Galbraith, Mary Bunch and Effie Tosh after Galbraith's death, the villain appears larger and more powerful by contrast to his adversaries, as represented by the three women. His own feeling of growing power is reinforced by the death of Jock o' the Patch, who is at the time the one man Gillespie fears. The reader

also has an increased sense of the protagonist's dangerousness, because in Jock's death we have the demise of a force for good, who was not afraid to challenge Gillespie. Jock's warning not to trust Strang arrives too late for Mrs. Galbraith, and ironically would have been useless even earlier, as Gillespie's rise is beginning to appear inevitable and not opposable by mere human courage or wit.

The naivety of the town's reactions to Gillespie comes in part from the straightforwardness of their life. This is shown for example in Book I where we have the picture of the men as simple heroic figures who "go down to the sea in ships." The heroic life is exemplified in Chapter 11 by the horrendous trip to bring the dying Jock back to Brieston. The men live mentally in the older world implied by Chrystal Logan in Chapter 19, where Gillespie is an intruder and will be eventually expelled. Hay seems to present the men seriously this way in order to make their "fall" later more tragic. He deals much more ironically with the women. There is almost a rhythmic, balancing flow of the ironic and the idealistic in his portrayal of them. For example, their warm communality is balanced with their perception of each other as troops of marauders or corvettes descending on the pump. The extraordinary generosity of Nan when, like Mary Magdalene, she pours scent over her friends in a baptism of love transfigures the amusing naivety of their reactions to the return of Nan's son. Or further, the shrewdness and good-heartedness of Mary Bunch is undercut by the ridiculous picture of her constant belching and drunkenness at Galbraith's farm. The same rhythmic flow of opposing perceptions of the characters occurs also in the first few chapters of Book II where we have alternately heroic and ironic views of Topsail Janet. This rounded vision of the minor women in the novel adds greatly to their complexity of character and to the richness of the general fabric of the work. The clear-sightedness of the author's view of the characters is essential to the establishment of a moral stance in the novel. The author, and thereby the reader, sees clearly both the virtues and the littleness of the townspeople. Thus, the fatal choice they make to serve Gillespie gains substance when seen against the complex picture drawn of them in Book I.

It has been claimed by Hart that Gillespie is a flat character, a Jonsonian humor.⁶ This is a debatable proposition; however, there are two figures introduced in Book I who are indeed such characters. Lowrie the banker and McAskill the lawyer play out the traditional negative roles of their respective vocations, and appear as nothing but caricatures. They have neither the life of the townspeople, nor do they similarly engage the reader's interest. They exist basically as symbols or extensions of Gillespie's power. Maclean also

verges on the stock character, though at the other end of the moral scale. The reader is immediately sympathetic to him and accepts him as a moral standard throughout the novel--unlike Mrs. Galbraith who is tainted by her mania for vengeance. He is unaffected economically by Gillespie and therefore stands outside the snare which encompasses the town. This position allows him to pass judgment on Gillespie and to become one of the father-substitutes that Eoghan finds later in Book III.

Having introduced most of his characters in Book I, Hay is ready in Book II to sketch the passage of the town from innocence through fall and punishment to apocalypse. There are a considerable number of references throughout the novel to biblical figures and states, such as the Fall, which appear to give shape to the action. As one would expect in nineteenth-century Scotland, the perception of other characters as biblical types comes easily to the characters. To mention only a few examples, we have Lonend's view of Gillespie mentioned above; we also have Gillespie variously characterized by his fellows as Satan, Peter, Judas, Christ, the Antichrist and even God; both Morag and her husband on different occasions are said to travel their personal *Via Dolorosas*; and so on. But the biblical influence goes deeper than just affecting how people see each other. The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, provides a typological basis for the action, though this fact is not fully understood by the characters themselves. The people of Briston move from an "innocent" state through a "fall" caused by what might be termed blasphemy and idolatry into a state of hopeless bondage, which is relieved only by the apocalyptic downfall of Gillespie Strang. In fact, one could see the novel as an exploration of life under the Old Covenant and the Law, which, as St. Paul repeatedly says, is a state of condemnation instead of redemption. It is therefore helpful to trace this biblical motif through Book II because, to a certain extent, it underpins the developing action and characterization.

In Chapter 7, the town's opinion of Gillespie is that he is a "rising man." Despite the vocal opinion of Chrystal Logan, everyone sees him as a public benefactor because, for example, he is resupplying illegal trawling nets. The people's naivety, mentioned above, is shown further in their complacency at Gillespie's gobbling up of the town's trade and at his questionable habit of giving no receipts so that financial obligations are unclear. They also do not suspect that he is, in fact, the informer who alerts the government men to the presence of trawling nets which are then confiscated, only to be replaced at a higher price from his own stocks. However, their innocence of vision is not entirely positive and unadulterated. The shortsightedness of the people, mainly undifferentiated by sex in

Book II, is, in part, the result of attention only to their short-term economic interests. Economics becomes the fatal weakness that causes their fall. Partly, the myopia results from their simplicity--a simplicity which is stressed in Chapter 8 where we see the heroic fishermen, as in Book I, Chapter 11, powerless before the commercial world in the form of the buyers who will not buy the bumper haul. Confronted with the sickening necessity of throwing the catch back to rot in the sea, it is not surprising that Gillespie is regarded as a hero when he buys the entire catch and reveals that he is physically able to ship it. However, what is done in Chapter 9 by the men when they say, "we're your men every day" (p. 143) is a parody of Joshua's assertion that "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). The blasphemy/idolatry, as yet unconscious, of making a man into a god is sealed by Gillespie feeding the fishermen bread and beer after they unload their boats. This is obviously a parody of Christ's feeding of the hungry multitudes. Though Gillespie's next commercial venture is as a rag and bone man, the people see him as "not a man, but a god, with his unlimited market, his fountains of beatitude" (p. 152). This "Christ" fulfills all their expectations, unlike the real Christ whom the multitude left because he did not provide a constant diet of physical bread. The blasphemy of the people's view is emphasized in Chapter 10 by the statement that he "became the gates of the town. None could go out or in except through him" (p. 150). His "gospel of commerce" (p. 155) is to be found everywhere, and no one appears to dissent from the favorable opinion of the pump except Mrs. Galbraith and Mary Bunch. However, the reader feels that retribution will come, if not from God through natural agents, then through the unveiling of Gillespie's true colors. And indeed the suspense engendered by this expectation is heightened by the curse laid on Gillespie by Nanny Murray, who blames Strang for her son's madness.

The gruesome Quebec-Rodgers episode shows Gillespie as no more cruel or vengeful than Rodgers, but it does cause a disenchantment of the town with Strang. An unvoiced swell of suspicion and judgment, which does not die down with the official story of Rodgers' death, is confirmed by Gillespie's hard treatment of Mirren Johnstone. Taking advantage of her distress at the death of her father, he drives a hard bargain for mourning clothes. His callous dealing with her is the first of several confrontations with begging townswomen. This occasion involved only clothes, but soon food during a period of starvation is at stake.

The unfortunate results of overfishing by trawling, which include starvation and drinking, are prophetically condemned by Quebec, whom, Maclean says, God has made mad for the pur-

pose of prophecy. Quebec sees Gillespie as the Antichrist and Brieston as condemned because of its commerce with him. From this point on, the townspeople sink further and further into unimaginable misery first from drought and then from plague. Children are immune to the plague, presumably because they have not offended against the cosmic order as their elders have. The obvious parallel with "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is made explicit in Chapter 21 when the statement is made that "the very deep did rot" (p. 208). Instead of being moved to an act of love and affirmation like the Ancient Mariner, the people will not even bury their dead--the final disintegration of community. And after the bad weather which follows the plague, "the horror of Nature" made them "atheistic" (p. 219), and "the men despaired of the glory of the Lord and any Galilean peace more" (p. 220).

Starvation drives the women to beg credit from Gillespie who retorts, "y'd think I was Goäd Almighty to look aifter the sparrows" (p. 221). However, he does take on that role also, and, as he feeds the canaries from the plague ship, he also feeds the women, having snared them into slavery by the extension of credit. It only remains for him to enslave the men through control of their shares in the fishing fleet.

Apart from the episode of Kate of the Left Hand and Red Duncan, the minor characters through their ordeal lose more or less completely their individuality. They are simply lumped together as "the Town" and one assumes their sufferings are like those of Kate and Duncan, both described in terms of Christ's passion. As the minor characters diminish, so the apparent stature of Gillespie grows. His control over the townspeople through possession of the fleet engenders great hatred which is directed by Lonend into a "people's revolt." Lonend and Mrs. Galbraith, having remained economically beyond the reach of Gillespie, are able to precipitate out the hatred into a suicidal gesture of burning the fleet. This communal gesture of despair is voted on in a closed hall, a proceeding reminiscent of Milton's conclave in Hell. Indeed as the harbor is ablaze, Campion on the hill sees Brieston as hell and Strang as Satan.

Book II ends with Gillespie compared to a priest of Baal after the controversy with Elijah on Carmel, having got "the grim judicial award gained by those who would usurp the function and authority of God" (p. 256). On the other hand, the people's rebellion has not been an atoning or efficacious redemptive act--they are simply more in debt and more in the clutches of Gillespie who continues as if nothing had happened. Rather like the ancient Israelites being smitten by various enemies who are the agents of Jehovah, the townspeople do not seem capable of breaking out of their state, and they will be

relieved only by the multiple deaths of Book IV.

Books III and IV focus more closely on the events in Gillespie's own household. The minor characters who appear in the last half of the book, like Barbara and father-surrogates like Iain, Rob, Kennedy and old Mr. Strang, are important mainly in relation to Eoghan. Iain acts as the loving father who exhibits the tender care for Eoghan that Gillespie never did; Rob is the generous hale man of the sea who provides money for books that Gillespie refused; Kennedy cultivates Eoghan's mind and directs his ethical sense with his Polonian farewell and his injunction to suffer his family silently; and lastly, old Mr. Strang provides a sense of true family and decency which is lacking in Gillespie's house. Eoghan's deprivation and isolation, due to the death of all these figures, contributes considerably to the growing despair and madness that drives him in the fall of the house of Strang.

The opinion of the town concerning the Strangs, which was made very clear to the reader in Books I and II, and which bothered Gillespie not one whit, ironically becomes important in its explicit absence in Books III and IV. Eoghan, who is innocent, is driven nearly mad by the real or fancied opinions of the town and the need to control the members of his family so that shame and obloquy could be avoided. For example, he tries unsuccessfully and with mounting despair to keep his mother indoors and sober.

Part of the mounting horror of the last two books comes from the elimination of the minor figures from the main focus of the novel--there is no relief for the reader from the narrowing emphasis on the foundering and highly emotionally charged relations between Gillespie, Morag and Eoghan, a focus not really disturbed by peripheral episodes such as Topsail's expedition to Dunoon. In the main, the townsfolk are merely dark anonymous figures in the streets, that Eoghan overhears talking foully about Morag, her drinking and prostitution. The town reappears only in Chapters 18 and 19. To the coffin come Chrystal and Hector Logan, James the Sailmaker, Stevenson the joiner and Mrs. Galbraith. For Gillespie, there is forgiveness from Chrystal, hatred still from Hector, and simple sympathy from James, while Mrs. Galbraith is started on her journey of understanding what she had attempted to encompass. Our final view of the townsfolk as a whole is of their small sneering triumph over Strang's tragedy. Apart from Mrs. Galbraith, the people have not really undergone much of a spiritual regeneration by the end of the book. In the reactions of some like Chrystal and Sandy there are suggestions of a reinstitution of the old values, symbolized by the ploughing which closes the book, but these are only the first signs.

The way in which Hay controls his minor characters and uses

them in his study of Gillespie can perhaps now be seen more clearly. To summarize, we may say that the characters are developed quite fully in the first half of *Gillespie* in order first, to give an authentic regional flavor; second, to act as foils for Strang, to provide antagonists for him, thereby forwarding the action; and third, to provide commentary on the action and characters involved--this can build suspense or simply give a statement of the varying perceptions of the characters. In the second half of the book, as the downfall of the Strangs is played out, the minor characters fade into the background, having become, for the most part, victims destroyed by Gillespie. They have served their purpose in defining the elements of the family's tragedy. They are reintroduced at the end to show that the world continues without Gillespie, to reassert the universal order which outlasts any individual. The skillfulness with which the author uses the minor figures is symptomatic of the careful craft of *Gillespie* as a whole.

Columbia, South Carolina

NOTES

¹ Passing mention in books on Scottish literature has been made on *Gillespie*. For one such mention, intelligent though brief, see Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*, (Edinburgh and London, 1958), p. 273. A helpful preface by Robert Kemp appears before the 1963 edition of *Gillespie*, published by Duckworth, pp. vii-xiv. For a generally negative assessment of *Gillespie*'s artistic merit, see Francis Hart, "Reviewing Hay's *Gillespie*: Modern Scottish Fiction and the Critic's Plight," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, II (July, 1964), pp. 19-31.

² Hart claims in his article that Hay was muddled and confused in his construction of the novel.

³ John MacDougall Hay, *Gillespie* (London, 1963), p. 12. All further references to the novel are from this edition and page references will appear in parentheses in the text.

⁴ A review from the *Boston Evening Transcript*, quoted by Kemp in his introduction to *Gillespie* (p. xiii), mentions the basis of personal experience in Hay's writing.

⁵ See Wittig, p. 273 for a passing mention of this idea.

⁶ See Hart, p. 23.