The Devil and John Barleycorn: Comic Diablerie in Scott and Burns

James W. Tuttleton

University of Wisconsin

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Notes and Documents

The Devil and John Barleycorn:
Comic Diablerie in Scott and Burns

Sir Walter Scott's "Wandering Willie's Tale" is often praised as one of the finest short stories on a supernatural theme ever composed. Its sources and parallels have been extensively studied and its relationship to *Redgauntlet*, in which it appears, has been suggestively analyzed. But only David Daiches, to my knowledge, has ever linked Scott's tale with what to my mind is one of its most interesting analogues — Robert Burns's "Tam O'Shanter." In his essay, "Scott's *Redgauntlet*," Daiches remarks in passing that Willie's tale is "the perfect counterpart in prose, from the point of view of technique though not of content, of Burns's 'Tam O'Shanter.'" Why the two works have never been extensively compared, however, is not difficult to discern. For the formal distinctions between a prose short story embedded in a novel and a narrative poem suggest a limitation to the depth and success of such a comparison. But to compare them, I submit, yields interesting insights into the originality Scott shared with the older "heaven-taught plowman" poet whom Scott at sixteen had been so eager to meet. The following paragraphs explore what I consider to be the major similarities between the two narratives, similarities which confirm Daiches's observation that "Wandering Willie's Tale" is "the perfect counterpart in prose" of Burns's "Tam O'Shanter."

First, the characterization of Steenie Steenson and Tam O'Shanter provides interesting parallels in that both are honest, happy peasants who love music; Tam is a crooner of auld Scotch sonnets, Steenie a player of the bagpipes who incidentally learned "Well hoddler, Luckie" from a warlock who played it at Satan's worship. Both are favorites of their neighbors: Tam's cronies are the blacksmith, the miller, Kirton Jean,

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the landlady of the cosy tavern, and Souter Johnnie — his "ancient, trusty, drouthy crony." Steenie is also a favorite in the neighborhood — often called upon to play the pipes and able, if necessary, to scrape up a loan from his neighbors. Perhaps as a consequence of their genial characters, both have flaws that play important parts in the narratives. In the first place, both like to sit bousing at the nappy. Tam of course has the more notorious reputation for haunting the tavern and getting unco fou; Steenie is less given to spirits but likes a drop of brandy now and then. But both are affected identically by alcohol — they become comically rash. Tam intrudes on a dance of warlocks and witches in Kirk Alloway, and Steenie utters an intemperate oath that gets him transported off to Hell. Each has a second flaw, not identical but of like functional significance in the framework of the two narratives: though married to Kate, Tam admires too much a brawlie wench; and Steenie "hadna the saving gift." It is Tam's second flaw that brings on the chase by Nanny in her cutty sark; and Steenie's flaw precipitates the whole action of Scott's story. These common characteristics link the two principal characters of the tales.

The plots of the narratives are also strikingly similar at least in those scenes where the Devil and his gang are confronted. The most noteworthy considerations are these: both Tam and Steenie ride alone on their way home at the witching hour. Both men have been tippling to excess. Steenie has drunk enough in two draughts to put many a man under the boards. Tam, though, has been at the cups all night, "Fast by an ingle, bleezing finely." In such a condition, each encounters the Devil as he rides homeward. He appears to Steenie in two forms: as a mysterious rider who follows up Steenie's oath and boast to go one step further than the gates of Hell to get the rent receipt; and as Redgauntlet himself within the confines of Hell. Tam encounters Old Nick and his hellish crowd dancing in Alloway Kirk. The dance of witches and warlocks, in fact, occurs in both narratives. As Steenie enters the outer courtyard of the infernal Redgauntlet manorhouse, he can see "pipes and fiddles, and as much dancing and deray within as used to be in Sir Robert's house at Pace and Yule, and such high seasons."2 Similarly, Tam sees:

Warlocks and witches in a dance;
Nae corillon brent new free France,
But hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels,
Put life and merrit in their heels.
A winnock-bunker in the east,

There sat auld Nick, in shape o' beast;
A towzie tyke, black, grim, and large,
To gie them music was his charge:
He screw'd the pipes and gart them skirl,
Till roof and rafters a' did dree.'

Both peasants are of course spellbound by the situations in which they find themselves. And both break the spells — Steenie by deliberately uttering "I refer myself to God's pleasure and not to yours"; and Tam by involuntarily blutting out "Weel done, Cutty Sark." Immediately supernatural darkness surrounds both. The major after-effects of these comments, however, are not alike: the warlocks and witches chase Tam out of the Alloway Kirkyard, but Steenie awakes in the dark old kirkyard of the Redgauntlet parish.

The narrative technique or point of view in both stories is also similar. Scott's tale is told by Steenie's grandson Willie many years later. By assigning to Willie a narrative of bygone days, Scott has provided himself with an effective frame for the story and the opportunity to report it in more or less native dialect by a peasant who would religiously have believed the superstitions of the district. Burns's poem is also narrated by a Scots peasant who, like Willie, comments on the action of the narrative as he tells it. One significant parallel between the points of view is the effect of the excitement of the action on the teller of each tale. Willie, as one critic has put it, "begins in a calm, unhurried tone, with only a hint of terror in his voice, but ... grows breathless with horror and excitement" as his narrative reaches the critical point. Burns's narrator not only grows breathless in narrating the chase but loses his sense of time and perspective: he gets inside the story in order to spur on the mare Meg as the witches begin gaining on Tam — as if the action and the narration of it were simultaneous events (p. 95):

Robert Burns, "Tam O'Shanter," The Complete Works of Robert Burns, ed. Alexander Smith (London, 1900), p. 93. Hereafter, page numbers from this edition will appear in parenthesis before the quotation. There is a significant contrast to be pointed out here, I believe, between the portraits of the Devil in each narrative. Scott's Devil, the mysterious stranger who calls Steenie's bluff and holds him to his oath, belongs to the familiar tradition of Satan as The Adversary, the sinister embodiment of all the forces of Evil — a figure commonplace in the traditional lore of demonology. The Devil in Burns's poem, however, belongs to another tradition of diablerie more common to Scotland, perhaps, than elsewhere. He is the "tricky rascal" who, in Professor Kurt Wittig's words, "likes to enjoy himself, courts the lasses, whistles, dances, drinks, cannot get rid of his cloven hoof, and frequently disguises himself as a fisher or a workman, or in a dark suit like a kirk-elder." He is a halfway appealing Dell who goes by such familiar and affectionate names as Auld Clootie, Hornie, Nickie Ben, or (as here) Auld Nick. See Kurt Wittig's The Scottish Tradition in Literature (Edinburgh, 1918), p. 212.

Ah, Tam! ah, Tam! thou'lt get thy fairin!
In hell they'll roast thee like a herrin!
In vain thy Kate awaits thy comin!
Kate soon will be a woeful woman!
Now, do thy speedy utmost, Meg,
And win the key-stone of the brig.\(^b\)

Both narrators, in addition, immediately develop an atmosphere of fear and supernatural danger. Burns's narrator takes great care to suggest that the sensual pleasures of life which Tam enjoys are all transitory (p. 92):

But pleasures are like poppies spread,
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;
Or like the snow-falls in the river,
A moment white — then melts forever.

This sober reminder is deepened and intensified, moreover, by the howling storm outside the tavern which provides the proper setting for the supernatural events which are about to envelop Tam as he rides homeward (p. 92):

The wind blew as 'twad been its last;
The rattling show'r's rose on the blast;
The speedy gleams the darkness swallow'd;
Loud, deep, and long, the thunder bellow'd;
That night, a child might understand,
The Deil had business on his hand.

\(^b\) The narrators have, of course, their differences. Willie is thoroughly a peasant, naive in his uncritical acceptance of the supernatural story he tells. Burns's narrative, though based on the traditions of oral storytelling, betrays signs that it is primarily intended to be read rather than told ("Now, wha this tale o' truth shall read"). Thomas Crawford has argued that Burns is here "speaking with several different voices" in several different dialects [Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 235; but on the matter of dialects, see Wittig, p. 203]. The tension between the oral and written features of the poem may arise because there are actually two narrators in the poem. The first is the "implied narrator" whom Burns has created to speak for him. This person is prudent, excitable, superstitious, and given to melancholy moralizing. He is also a Scots rhymer who knows his own poetic limitations ("But here my muse her wing main cour; / Scif flights are far beyond her pow'r"). Like Tam he loves a lassie but is no fool for a withered beldam or baw. (In these respects the "implied narrator" is somewhat like Willie.) The other narrator is of course Burns himself, the ordering intelligence who brings comedy out of the juxtaposition of event and comment, of fact and delusion, and out of experience narrated and meaning assigned it. Although it is not easy to distinguish the voices at all points, Burns does seem at times to express his own views: "'(Auld Ayr, whom ne'er a town surpasses, / For honest men and bonie lassies.)' In the moralizing lines beginning "Now, wha this tale o' truth shall read" we hear the voices of both narrators: the "implied narrator" means the moral to be taken literally; on the basis of Tam's experience, the moral contains his sober advice. An octave below, however, we detect the voice of Burns the sophisticated writer having his fun not only with Tam and the witches but also with the grave moralist and his admonition to the reader.
Willie also develops the atmosphere of fear and dread surrounding Sir Robert Redgauntlet when he remarks "our fathers used to draw breath thick if ever they heard him named." Later Willie observes, "Far and wide was Sir Robert hated and feared. Men thought he had a direct compact with Satan... The best blessing they wared on him was 'Deil scowp wi' Redgauntlet'" (p. 101). When Steenie visits him with the rent money, his face looks "as gash and ghastly as Satan's." In addition, he has an "ill-favored jackanape" of a monkey called Major Weir, "named after the warlock that was burnt."

Another similar technique which Burns and Scott employ is the catalogue of horrors which accompany the Devil — a piling on, as it were, of horrible details and personages. Steenie encounters Middleton, Rothes, Lauderdale, Dalyell, Earlshall "with Cameron's blude on his hand," and Bonshaw "that tied blessed Mr. Cargill's limbs till the blude sprung." Dunbarton Douglas, MacKenzie, and Claverhouse himself are also encountered, not to speak of their wicked serving-men — all of them detested persecutors of the Covenanters. Tam likewise sees a catalogue of hair-raising sights (p. 93):

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Coffins stood round like open pressers,
That shaw'd the dead in their last dresses;
A murderer's banes in gibbet stairs;
Twa span-lang, wee, unchristen'd bairns;
A thief, new-cutted frae the rape,
Wi' his last gasp his gab did gape;
Five tomahawks, wi' blude red rusted;
Five scymitars, wi' murder crusteed;
Wi' mair o' horrible and awfu',
Which ev'n to name wad be unlawfu'.
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The same comic moral also comes through both tales, although Burns is more explicitly writing with tongue in cheek. As a result of the horrors which he had seen, Steenie swore off pipes and brandy for a long year; "... it was not even till the year was out, and the fatal day passed, that he would so much as take the fiddle, or drink usquebaugh or tippenny" (p. 116). Burns's narrator also warns us, in language Scott might have remembered, that "Wi' tippenny, we fear nae evil; Wi' usquebae, we'll face the devil!" (p. 93), and he concludes his narrative with the justly famous moral (p. 95):

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Now, wha this tale o' truth shall read,
Ilk man and mother's son take heed;
When e'er to drink you are inclin'd,
Or cutty-sarks run in your mind,
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Think, ye may buy the joys o'er dear,
Remember Tam O'Shanter's mate.

It is worth observing, finally, that the events in Scott's tale are more rationally comprehensible than those of "Tam O'Shanter." At least, Scott provides at the end of his tale logical alternatives to the supernatural explanation implied by the events. But given the factor of John Barleycorn, Burns's tale, like Scott's, can be "explained" as the hair-raising hallucination of a comic inebriate.

Although aspects of the atmosphere, characterization, and plot structure reflect the traditional conventions of the supernatural narrative in Scotland, it is worth pointing out that Scott was, as one critic has put it, not only familiar with Burns's poetry but also "probably better equipped to understand Burns's character and work than any other man of his generation." Both of them shared a native Scots tradition in language and lore — and were best as writers when they worked within that tradition. In view of these facts and parallels, it is perhaps not unreasonable to suggest that Burns's poem might have unconsciously shaped the composition of "Wandering Willie's Tale."

JAMES W. TUTTLETON

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN


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