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Society at Poosie-Nansie's

Robert Burns's "The Jolly Beggars" is commonly thought to be a tribute to anarchy, a violent refutation of society. David Daiches says that it "has an abandon, a fierce and almost anarchistic acceptance of man at his lowest social level." "The concluding song," he notes, "marks the high point both of conviviality and of anarchism."¹ Maurice Lindsay calls this last song "a complete poetic expression of pure anarchism."² And Thomas Crawford says that the cantata is "in opposition to . . . every kind of social stability and institutional cohesion."³ For Miss Christina Keith the beggars are "the rankest individualists—are incapable every one of them of a thought or feeling outside self, of an interest even."⁴ One cannot deny that the central thrust of Burns's cantata is to glorify misrule, defy established society, and delight in that defiance. To say, however, that it contains the "expression of pure anarchism" or that its characters are "the rankest individualists" is to misread "The Jolly Beggars." Such overemphasis on anarchism violates its dramatic structure and makes its author, who wrote "The Cotter's Saturday Night" at about the same time, a much more ambiguous figure than he need be.

Daiches admits that the cantata "accept[s] society, but only in the sense of freely chosen companionship."⁵ He also finds that "a world, an attitude, a way of life have been cumulatively distilled as the cantata moves to its close" but that "the critic is at a loss to define the process of distillation."⁶ However, the process by which social cohesion forms among the beggars can be described; and this can explain some of the cantata's dramatic force. Otherwise, its progression seems direct and linear rather than dramatic: from moderate and individual defiance at the beginning to a more powerful and convivial defiance at the end. If the beggars remain anarchists, their conviviality is a negative kind of unison which depends only on their rejection by society. Yet at the end of the cantata a positive, cohesive force is operating among the beggars allowing them to defy institutionalized society in the magnificent unison of the last song.

¹ David Daiches, *Robert Burns* (London, 1966), p. 196.

² Maurice Lindsay, *Robert Burns* (London, 1954), p. 67.

³ Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 132.

⁴ Christina Keith, *The Russet Coat* (London, 1956), p. 91.

⁵ Daiches, p. 206.

⁶ Daiches, p. 208.

The opening Recitativo shows the beggars gathering at Poosie-Nansie's not for one another's company but because it is cold outside:

When hailstones drive wi' bitter skyte
 And infant frost begin to bite,
 In hoary cranreuch drest;
 Ae night at e'en a merry core
 O' randie, gangrel bodies
 In Poosie-Nansie's held the splore
 To drink their orra duddies.

Not only is it cold outside, but society outside is cold to those within Poosie-Nansie's. The soldier who sings the first song is a worn-out hero no longer needed or wanted, but he sings with the swaggering braggadocio and reckless sense of patriotism that everyone recognizes as soldierly virtues:

Yet let my country need me, with Elliott to head me
 I'd clatter on my stumps at the sound of the drum.

This irony ingratiates him to his fellow beggars, but their sympathy is only that which they have also for themselves. They too are rejects, and his song gives them a just complaint against society.

His and his doxy's roles in society become suspect in her song. His lust for war differs little from her "delight . . . in proper young men." As he chose to be a soldier, she chose to be a soldiers' prostitute: and as long as there was war, he could be admired and she forgiven. "But the peace," she says, "it reduc'd me to beg in despair." Surely this is dramatic irony. "I'm better pleased to make one more / Than be the death of twenty," Burns said elsewhere in a song against war.⁷ The soldier and his doxy have been rejected by a society formerly useful to them for the gratification of their own lusts. So far companionship among the beggars depends only on their love of liquor, lust, and song, and on their defiance of society. But these remain self-gratifying pleasures that establish no positive bond among them. This is obvious as the third Recitativo introduces the fool who "Sat guzzling wi' a tinkler-hizzie." He has not yet joined the chorus:

They mind't na wha the chorus teuk,
 Between themselves they were sae busy.

Instead of participating in the usual affairs of men, the fool stands apart as the critic, "a fool by profession." Although he cuts to the bare truth ("The chiel that's a fool for himsel, / Guid Lord! he's far dafter than I"), one suspects his reasons for choosing his present audience.

⁷ "I murder hate," as quoted by Daiches, p. 66.

Society may have been unwilling to sustain its critic, but the fool has been unable to continue facing the opposition. And now he attacks society where he has no professional need to do so—among a sympathetic company. He is perhaps the nearest to an anarchist of anyone in the beggar company.

In the next song the widowed "raucle carlin" attracts sympathy for her plight and the cause of her John Highlandman by appealing to a primitive social code more binding than the laws of an impersonal government:

The Lalland laws he held in scorn,
But he still was faithfu' to his clan.

A pigmy fiddler, moved by her song, now wants her for himself. His character is worth noting, especially because he has been confused with the bard.⁸ He fiddles neither for the sake of art nor for the joy of tune-ful companionship. Rather, he is a fiddler by trade "wha us'd to trystes an' fairs to driddle." He provided professional entertainment for a price "at kirns an' weddins," and he is as much a prostitute with his talent as the soldier's doxy. But he is not to have the woman. A tinker intimidates the fiddler and wins the woman for himself. In presenting himself as the more worthy suitor he reveals his boorish, insensitive nature and his material sense of values:

Despise that shrimp, that wither'd imp,
With a' his noise an' cap'rin,
An' take a share wi' those that bear
The budget and the apron!

And when "th' unblushing fair / In his embraces sunk," the obsequious, cowardly fiddler "wish'd unison between the pair."

The hearth-like warmth, shelter, and familial companionship of Poesie-Nansie's suggested by the first Recitativo has not been realized. Ironically, up to this point every character has exhibited the faults that the company attributes to society at large. The beggars are self-seeking and acquisitive. They were at first bound together by the common nature of their defiance and the common direction of their lusts. But these have been insufficient. Their false camaraderie is destroyed when the "raucle carlin" becomes an object of selfish desire for more than one member of their group. If the fiddler were not a coward, "The Jolly

⁸ Miss Keith (p. 88) assumes that the fiddler and the bard are one. Such an assumption is possible because the stanza introduced the bard (ll. 228-236) is unfortunately ambiguous. Yet the bard's character differs radically from that of the fiddler; and in agreement with the majority of critics, my reading depends on his being a separate figure.

"Beggars" would end here with a barroom brawl. The drama has reached its crisis, but complete anarchy obviously is not the resolution Burns is seeking.

The seventh Recitativo introduces the bard, "a care-defying blade" who joyfully relinquishes his woman to the fiddler who has just "rak'd her." He claims that the loss of one woman does not hurt him; there are more to be found, and he "like[s] the jads for a' that." In other words, he exhibits the only non-acquisitive nature in the whole company; for not even in love does he demand lasting possession. In one sense, he is the only real anarchist in the group. He alone demands nothing of society and so does not depend on it. Paradoxically, it is only by his selfless attitude that a cohesive, positive society can be established; and he succeeds in uniting the beggar company. The bard's sense of abandon shows the beggars how to abandon themselves, to give of themselves, and thereby to form a deeply personal, if momentary, bond with one another. They are no longer merely anarchists, "the rank-est individualists," but are integral members of a community not dependent on impersonal, institutional forms. Now they are ready for the poet to lead them in unison as they shout their opposition to selfishly based traditional institutions and sing of liberty as a communal celebration, "a glorious feast.":

A fig for those by law protected!
 Liberty's a glorious feast,
 Courts for cowards were erected,
 Churches built to please the priest!

This transformation of the beggar society at Poesie-Nansie's gives "The Jolly Beggars" its full dramatic force. Moreover, the selfless principle for the basis of society, as it is demonstrated here, may give us reason to see in "The Jolly Beggars" the same Robert Burns who could write sentimental tributes to a traditional, conventional society in which that principle had not been violated. And then it is understandable that he probably wrote both "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and "The Jolly Beggars" during the same productive winter of 1785-6.

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