
G. Ross Roy
University of South Carolina

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The study of few writers of major stature has been so hampered by the lack of good texts as has that of Burns. The standard text for his poems remains that established by W. E. Henley in the Henley & Henderson edition of 1896-7. No really significant edition of the poetry has been published since then, although there have been over one hundred of them. The situation with respect to Burns’s letters is somewhat better — the DeLancey Ferguson edition (of 1931) brought together over seven hundred letters, collated from the MSS, wherever possible. Not a few letters which survived the poet were used by early editors — notably Currie, Stewart and Cromek — but have not been seen since. Most of these may be presumed to have been destroyed. This would not be so serious if we had full and accurate transcriptions in the printed versions — but we do not. In this respect Currie is particularly blameworthy: the few letters which have come to light have shown that for various reasons (prudishness, "protecting" the names of living people, or just to make them more "readable") Burns’s first editor was ever ready with the scissors.

An example of the poor editing which is so common with Burns may be seen in "Tam O’Shanter." The early printed versions and the MSS. of this poem contain the following lines after line 142 ("That even to name wad be unlawful":—)

Three lawyers’ tongues, turn’d inside out,
Wil’ lins seam’d like a beggar’s clout;
Three priests’ hearts, rotten, black as muck,
Lay stinking, vile, in every neuk.

Upon the advice of Alexander Tytler, Burns dropped these lines from the 1793 edition of his poems. Currie included them in the Appendix to his edition of 1800. The lines were printed, although never in the text, in other important editions (but not that of Robert Chambers) including Henley & Henderson. The situation has deteriorated during the twentieth century. The most ambitious edition (Boston, 1926; London, 1927; 10 vol.) does not even mention what Burns intended to be a part of the poem and removed only in order not to jeopardize the sale of his works. This instance is only one of many which could be cited to show how badly an authoritative variorum text of the poems and songs is needed.
A step in this direction has been taken by Professor John C. Weston of the University of Massachusetts with his elegant limited edition of *The Jolly Beggars*. The ribald piece, which Burns apparently tossed off, seems not to have made a lasting impression on the poet, for he wrote to George Thomson in September 1793 that he had kept no copy of it nor could he remember any of the songs in it. One may wonder whether or not Burns was in earnest: he may well have sensed that Thomson would not be willing to use any of the songs and was closing the issue.

Fortunately two holograph MSS. survived and from one of these *The Jolly Beggars* was first printed in 1799 in the famous Stewart & Meikle chapbooks. Its success must have been immediate for the pamphlet was twice reprinted that year, and again in 1800. In 1801 it was printed at least six times: in *Miscellanea Pertbensis* and in five editions of Burns's poems, among them Stewart's *Poems ascribed to Robert Burns*. In 1800 and subsequent editions Currie erred on the side of prudence and omitted the cantata. In fairness to Currie it should be pointed out that Hugh Blair had eliminated it from the Edinburgh edition of 1787. But the work had its champions too — Sir Walter Scott, in reviewing R. H. Cromek's *Reliques of Robert Burns in The Quarterly Review* (February 1809), took Cromek (and Currie) to task for omitting the cantata which he found "inferior to no poem of the same length in the whole range of English poetry . . . It is certainly far superior to anything in the *Beggars' Opera*, where alone we could expect to find its parallel." Half a century later Matthew Arnold could safely assert that *The Jolly Beggars* had "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."

Mr. Weston has meticulously collated the two holograph MSS., a third MS. (not holograph), the first printed version (1799), the Earl of Rosebery's unique *Merry Muses of Caledonia* (c. 1800), and Cromek's *Select Scottish Songs* (1810) in which the editor included the work after Scott's complaint mentioned above. The reason for collating this latter is that there is evidence that Cromek had access to a MS. now lost or destroyed. The *Merry Muses* is, of course, unreliable as a text; the Burns songs it contains may well have been printed from transcriptions (at second, third or fourth hand) of the original MSS.

There are certain interesting problems connected with *The Jolly Beggars* which Weston has examined previously [see his article "The Text of Burns's *The Jolly Beggars*" in *Studies in Bibliography* (1960)]. He concludes that Burns did not intend the Merry-Andrew sequence to
be included in the completed work, having discarded it as inferior to the remainder. (Weston includes the sequence in the textual notes, however.) Other characters with their songs have been lost: a sailor, a sootyman, a quack doctor (Hornbook?), and Racer Jess (Poosie Nansie's daughter who, with "twa-three whores," appears in "The Holy Fair").

In addition to the textual notes, the editor has included a section of useful editorial notes and a short Afterword. Scots words which might give the reader difficulty are glossed in the margin. One could question some of these, for instance Weston glosses "raucle Carlin" as "sturdy old girl." Today "old girl" suggests familiarity and affection (infrequently old), whereas the S.N.D., in quoting this passage from *The Jolly Beggars* as an example, defines the word: "a woman, generally an old woman and often in a disparaging sense." But these are *nuances* and would in no way detract from the reader’s understanding and enjoyment of this, one of Burns’s greatest works. I cannot, incidentally, subscribe to Professor Weston’s claim that this is the best in Burns.

Burns produced several outstanding satires and songs but only once did he attempt a tale like "Tam O'Shanter" or a cantata like *The Jolly Beggars*. We can only must upon why he did not leave the world more examples of such superior works.

G. R. R.

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