The Christis Kirk Tradition: Its Evolution In Scots Poetry To Burns: Part IV

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The Christis Kirk Tradition:
Its Evolution In Scots Poetry To Burns

Part IV
John Mayne

Before we turn finally to consider the work of Burns, two pieces by
the little-known poet John Mayne (1759-1836), entitled Hallowee'n
and The Siller Gun, deserve mention.1 Although both of these poems are
in the famous six-line "Habbie stanza" or "Burns stanza," in all other
respects they are closely related to and strongly influenced by the Christis
Kirk tradition. Hallowee'n, a brief and undeveloped description of a
rural Hallowee'n celebration, has added historical interest in being the
germ of Burns's poem of the same name. The Siller Gun, a much more
ambitious work, portrays in the distinctive Christis Kirk way an annual
shooting competition or "Waponschaw" held in Durnfries on the King's
Birthday (June 4), in which the townspeople competed for the prize of
a silver gun. Mayne began work on The Siller Gun about 1777, when
he published the first version, a short poem of twelve stanzas, in Dum-
fries. After this modest beginning, Mayne gradually expanded the
poem, working on it at intervals through most of his long lifetime, pub-
lishing four long cantos in 1808, and finally completing the work in five
cantos (1650 lines) in 1836, the year of his death. Although the later
versions fall outside the strict limits of this study, since they were
written in the early nineteenth century, after Burns, all versions are
deeply indebted to the Christis Kirk tradition, as Mayne himself ac-
knowledges by using the first four lines of the original Christis Kirk as
his motto. The following, from Canto IV of the final version, is a
typical stanza. In the midst of the shooting competition, which Mayne
describes with humorus and satiric comment on the bragging and the

1The text of Hallowee'n is available in Geo. Eyre-Todd ed. Scottish
in 4 and 5 cantos, respectively, see Mayne, The Siller Gun (London, 1808
and 1836). A lengthy and enthusiastic contemporary review of The Siller
Gun may be found in Blackwood's Magazine, XXXIX (June, 1836), 842-856.
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bungling of the marksmen, a brawl breaks out between the tailors and
the "sutors" (cobbblers):

Frac Johny Groats house to the Border,
Was ne'er sic tumult and disorder:
Here Discord strawe new broils to forder:
    There, Beagles flew
To haud the Sutor-lads in order,
    But nought wou'd do.

further
constables
hold

Here Mayne is dealing with the typical Christis Kirk situation, viewing
it from the typical satiric point of view, and using a rhetorical pattern
strongly reminiscent of the famous opening of Christis Kirk itself
("Was nevir in Scotland hard nor sene/ Sic dansing nor deray," etc.).
Though at times Mayne's style takes on a stiff artificiality, on the whole
The Siller Gun is a spirited and competent piece of work and deserves
to be better known.

Robert Burns

It would seem almost inevitable that Burns, ardent student of Scots
poetry that he was, would sooner or later try his hand at the Christis Kirk
genre. As a matter of fact, he produced six substantial poems more
or less closely related to the genre, a group of poems which, taken to-
gether, represent the last brilliant flowering and culmination of the
Christis Kirk tradition. These poems were all composed in the years
1785 and 1786, the period of Burns's greatest creativity, as follows:
A Mauchline Wedding (August, 1785), Hallowe'en (November,
1785), The Jolly Beggars (ca. November, 1785), The Ordination (ca.
November, 1785), The Holy Fair (autumn, 1785), and A Dream
(June, 1786). Three of these, A Mauchline Wedding, The Ordina-
tion, and A Dream, may be treated briefly.

A Mauchline Wedding seems to have been Burns's earliest exper-
iment in the Christis Kirk genre. He enclosed the manuscript of this

2 For the best texts of these poems, see The Poetry of Robert Burns, edd.
Wm. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson, The Centenary Ed., 4 vols. (Edinburgh,
1896, 1897), II, 42-4; I, 88-99; II, 1-19; I, 210-215, 36-47, 68-74. This
edition is hereafter cited as Poetry. It should be noted that a later ephemeral
production of Burns, the second of his four Ballads on Mr. Horon's Election,
1795, entitled Ballad Second: The Election (Poetry, II, 193-197), and be-
ginning, "Fy, let us a' to Kirkcudbright," is modeled on The Blythsome
Bridal and is, therefore, remotely related to the Christis Kirk tradition.

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fragment in a letter to Mrs. Dunlop of August 21, 1788, but the piece was almost certainly composed in August of 1785, at the time of the actual wedding which it portrays. Slight though it is, A Mauchline Wedding is of considerable interest as a very early example of Burns's developing satiric style which was shortly to flower in masterpieces like Holy Willie's Prayer. The poem is a burlesque description, mildly bawdy and high-spirited, of a local wedding in Burn's own country town of Mauchline. Written in the traditional stanza form, A Mauchline Wedding strikes the reader as a hastily written occasional piece, not intended for publication, but nevertheless marked by Burns's characteristic skill and vitality. Both in subject matter and form it obviously belongs to the Christis Kirk genre, and is even more closely tied into the tradition by the fact that Burns echoes passages in all three of the Christis Kirk poems of Fergusson. The opening lines of Burns's first two stanzas, for example, read as follows:

When Eighty-five was seven months auld,                eighth
And wearing thro' the aught,                                bold
When rotting rains & Boreas bauld                     struggle, fight
Gied farmer-folks a faught . . .                        name of a local bill
The rising sun o'er Blacksideen                       Was just appearing fairly,
Was just appearing fairly,                               
When Nell & Bess get up to dress                      Seven lang half hours o'er early!
Seven lang half hours o'er early!

These lines are clearly similar in conception to the corresponding lines in the first two stanzas of Fergusson's Hallow-fair:

At Hallowmas, when nights grow lang,                  stars
And starnies shine fu' clear,                           folk, defoes
"When fock, the nippin caid to bang,                  mantles
Their winter hap-warms wear . . .                       chimney
Upo' the tap o' ilka lum                                peep
The sun began to keek,                                 spruce
And bad the trigg made maidens come                    sweetbairns
A sightly jock to seek . . .                           

A picture of girls rising earlier than usual on a festive day also appears in stanza six of Leith Races. Much more conclusive than these passages,


4 For a fuller discussion of these parallels, summarized here, see Allan H. MacLaine, "Some Echoes of Robert Fergusson in Burns's 'A Mauchline Wedding,'" Notes and Queries, N.S. VIII (July, 1961), 265-6.

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however, are the final lines of A Mauchline Wedding, depicting the emergence of the bride's father:

And auld John Trot wi' sober phiz
face
As braid & bra's a Bailie,
portly and finely dressed
His shorrers & his Sunday's g'z
shoulders; wig
Wi' powther & wi' ulzie
powder; oil
Weel smear'd that day.

Here Burns is unmistakably recalling the sparkling second stanza of Ferguson's The Election:

Haste, EPPS, quo' John, an' bring my gez, wig
Take tent ye dinn't spulzie:
beard; spoil
Last night the barber ga't a friz
curl
An' strakit it wi' ulzie.
stroked; oil
Hae done your PARITCH lassie Liz,
porridge
Gie me my sark an' gravat;
shirt; tie
I'se be as braw's the Deacon is
When he taks AFFIDAVIT
O' FAITH the day.

There can be no doubt about these verbal parallels, which clearly show that Burns, in this first casual attempt, was writing not only within the general limits of the tradition but also in direct imitation of Ferguson's masterpieces in this genre.

The Ordination is a daring satire on Ayrshire church politics. In general, it is concerned with the struggle within the Kirk between the rigidly orthodox Calvinists or "Auld Lichts" and the Moderates or "New Lichts," Burns, of course, favoring the latter. More specifically, the poem was occasioned by the presentation of James Mackinlay, a staunch "Auld Licht," to the Leight Kirk in Kilmarnock, where he succeeds a series of Moderates and where he will be counted on by the orthodox, including Russell (a fellow minister in Kilmarnock), to exspirate the former heresies and restore the pure faith. Burns's method of attack in The Ordination is to write an ironic celebration of this victory of orthodoxy. He portrays, with mock approbation, the vulgar, gloating triumph of the "Auld Lichts" in such a way as to make them appear as repulsive and ridiculous as possible. He makes his poem read like a wild, bacchanalian celebration, and uses the swinging folksy

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5 For helpful commentaries on this poem, see David Daiches, Robert Burns (New York, 1920), pp. 198-200; and Crawford, pp. 62-5.
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rhythm of the *Christis Kirk* stanza, with conscious irony, to depict this theological victory over "common sense."

Curst Common-sense, that imp o' hell,
Camm in wi' Maggie Lauder:*
But Oliphant aft made her yell,
An' Russell sair misca'd her:
This day Mackinlay taks the flail,
An' he's the boy will blaud her!  
Slap
He'll clap a shangan on her tail,
An' set the barns to daud her
Pels
Wi' dirt this day.

*The Ordination* lacks the kind of universal significance which has made *Holy Willie’s Prayer* (also written on a local and ephemeral issue) one of the classic satires of all time. The poem is not great, but is very effective as far as it goes; and it remains quite readable today. Burns’s satiric method here is a brilliant conception in itself, the product of a shrewd and powerful intellect, and serves the author’s purpose admirably. One could scarcely think of a better way of ridiculing the “Auld Lichts” on this occasion. Burns here uses Ramsay’s form of the *Christis Kirk* stanza, but he manipulates it deftly to suit the special effects he intends, using feminine rimes in the trimeter lines throughout to reinforce the tone of witty mockery. The execution of the poem as a whole is, in fact, masterly and highly original. This hard-hitting satire represents, indeed, a bold new departure in the *Christis Kirk* tradition, which is here for the first time adapted as a vehicle for an attack on local church politics, an extension of the genre which was probably suggested to Burns by Fergusson’s success with *The Election*, a political satire.

*A Dream*, the other political piece which Burns composed in the *Christis Kirk* stanza, is less successful than *The Ordination* and deserves only cursory comment. Apart from meter, *A Dream* bears little resemblance to the *Christis Kirk* type. It is really a monologue in which the poet addresses in a dream King George III and other members of the royal family at the birthday levee of June, 1786. The poet’s remarks are not in the best taste, combining some rather forced expressions of respect and good wishes with condescending advice and unpleasantly familiar comments on the King’s family. Stanza 5, in an admonishing vein, will illustrate the general tone:

Far be’t frae me that I aspire
To blame your legislation,

*Maggie Lauder was the wife of an earlier “New Licht” minister.

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Or say, ye wisdom want, or fire
To rule this mighty nation:
But faith! I muckle doubt, my sire,
Ye've trusted ministration
greatly
To chaps wha in a barn or byre
Wad better fill'd their station, cow-shed
Than courts yon day.
would have

Burns, of course, handles the Christis Kirk meter here with his usual skill and vigor (note the feminine rimes as in The Ordination); but the poem as a whole fails to ring true.

Hallowe'en, Burns's second poem in the Christis Kirk genre, was written about November, 1785. This is a very ambitious piece, Burns's longest work in the Christis Kirk stanza, and was, as might be expected in an early attempt, strongly affected by the work of both Ramsay and Fergusson, though the immediate suggestion came from Mayne's Hallowe'en. Fergusson's influence shows up in Burns's use of four rimes in the octave, a modification of the traditional stanza which, as we have seen, was introduced by the Edinburgh poet. There are, moreover, one or two verbal echoes of Fergusson in the poem.7 But although Fergusson was undoubtedly the model for the skillful technique of the poem, Ramsay's influence on its content was decisive and unfortunate. We have noticed in Ramsay's sequels to Christis Kirk on the Green the antiquarian emphasis and the introduction of old-fashioned marriage customs, such as the "bedding" of the bride, the "creeling" of the groom, and "riding the stag." In Hallowe'en Burns builds his entire poem around the Ayrshire folk customs connected with this festival. As a result, Hallowe'en is a paradise for the folklorist, but rather a bore for the lover of poetry. Burns crams his twenty-eight stanzas with Hallowe'en superstitions recorded one after another. This self-conscious antiquarianism makes his description of a merry gathering of country folk on this night seem unnatural and forced; the characters are inadequately sketched and are made to go through a long series of superstitious rites. They do virtually nothing else in the poem. Burns simply puts them through their Hallowe'en paces, failing to render a really convincing impression of what such a celebration must have been like. Many of the customs he describes, moreover, are very much of a kind and become monotonous. That Burns was fully aware of the studied antiquarianism of his poem is clear from his own foreword: "The passion of prying

7 Compare, e.g., Burns's "Great cause ye hae to fear it" (Hallowe'en, stanza 14) with Fergusson's "Great cause he had to rue it" (Hallow-fair, stanza 9). A penetrating analysis of Hallowe'en may be found in Crawford, pp. 123-130.

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into Futurity makes a striking part of the history of Human Nature in its rude state, in all ages and nations; and it may be some entertainment to the philosophical mind, if any such should honour the Author with a perusal, to see the remains of it, among the more enlightened in our own. Since the poet had this objective in mind, it is no wonder that Hallowe'en gives the impression not so much of an actual party at which Burns had been present, but rather of an artificial conglomeration of all the Hallowe'en rites he had ever observed or heard about. And many of the customs he describes are of so specialized and local a nature that they are apt to be entirely lost on the general reader. Take, for example, stanza 4:

Then, first an’ foremost, thro’ the kail,
Their stocks maun a’ be sought an’ce;
They seek their een, an’ grape an’ wale
For muckle anes, an’ straught anes.

Poor hav’r’l Will fell off the drift,
An’ wandered thro’ the bow-kail,
An’ pow’r, for want o’ better shift,
A runt, was like a sow-tail,
Sae bawt that night.

Burns apparently realized that such a stanza would be utterly unintelligible to many readers, and he was therefore obliged to prepare an elaborate set of notes to explain his poem to the uninitiated. His explanatory note on the stanza cited above, for instance, is much longer than the stanza itself.

It is unfortunate that Burns insisted on packing this poem with folklore, for in many respects Hallowe’en is an excellent piece of work. It is, of course, strictly within the Chrisit Kirt tradition, embodying most of the characteristics of the genre. We have here the typical peasant celebration as the subject, the use of dialogue, the frequent transitions, the satire of cowardice, the lighting up of individual characters and incidents, the broadly humorous treatment, and the point of view of the amused spectator. Notwithstanding the touches of genial satire, Burns’s attitude toward the superstitious country folk in the poem is, of course, wholly sympathetic.

Hallowe’en is of further interest for its experimental technique. Burns takes the hint from Fergusson not only in his use of Fergusson’s four-rime octave, but also in his attempt at internal rime. We have noted that Fergusson introduced internal rimes sparingly and judicious-

*Poetry, I, 356-357.
*Poetry, I, 358.
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ly, once in Hallow-fair (stanza 2) and once in Leish Races (stanza 8). Burns in Hallow'e'en tries this technique on a more ambitious scale, working internal rimes into the tetrameter lines throughout stanza 1, and in the first quatrains of stanzas 3 and 6. After stanza 6, he wisely gives up the attempt. In these passages Burns seems to be exercising his technical virtuosity for its own sake, without a sound artistic reason. Consequently, the internal riming in stanzas 1 and 3 appears heavy and forced. In stanza 6, however, where the internal rimes do not interfere with the natural development of the thought, he achieves a pleasing effect:

The lastes staw frae 'mang them a',
   stole
To pou their stalks o' corn;
   pull
But Rab slips out, an' jinks about,
   dodges
Behind the muckle thorn.

Despite this largely unsuccessful experiment with internal rime, Hallow'e'en is, on the whole, brilliantly executed. The rhythm and movement of the poem are brisk and spirited; Burns handles the complex verse form with accomplished skill. As Ramsay and Fergusson had done before him, Burns frequently changes the pace of his stanzas by using feminine endings in the trimeter lines of a whole stanza or the second quatrains of a stanza. This device tends to vary the tempo and is often quite effective. In view of this fine craftsmanship, Hallow'e'en might have been a first-rate poem had Burns been less self-conscious in the handling of his folk materials.

We come finally to two of Burns's greatest masterpieces, The Jolly Beggars and The Holy Fair. In the immense variety of its materials, the multiplicity of its sources, and in its dazzling synthesis of distinct poetic styles, The Jolly Beggars is certainly the richest and most complex of all Burns's works. This unique poem (there has never been anything quite like it before or since) has had its sources traced, its main features clarified, and its extraordinary appeal analyzed by a host of commentators, including Henley and Henderson, who, in a now famous sentence, epitomized it perfectly as an "irresistible presentation of humanity caught in

10 Later, as noted above, Burns used feminine rimes exclusively in the trimeter lines of The Ordination and A Dream.
the act and summarized for ever in the terms of art."\textsuperscript{11} It is not my purpose here to launch into a full discussion of this many-sided "cantata," but only to demonstrate its connection with the \textit{Christis Kirk} tradition. Surprisingly enough, this connection has been neglected in the numerous critiques of \textit{The Jolly Beggars}, except that the bare fact that three of the stanzas are in the \textit{Christis Kirk} form is usually mentioned. But the relationship to the genre is much closer, as I will try to show.

Let us look first at the verse forms of \textit{The Jolly Beggars}. Burns, in this piece, employs a great variety of meters, including the pure \textit{Christis Kirk} meter in the three stanzas mentioned above which comprise the seventh \textit{Recitativo}. Here Burns uses Ramsay's two-rime octave, but replaces the "that day" refrain with "that night" in the bob line as he had done in \textit{Hallowe'en}. The influence of the \textit{Christis Kirk} meter, however, extends beyond this single passage. In addition, there are three other stanzas in the \textit{Recitativo} sections which are in the \textit{Christis Kirk} form without the final tag line: the single stanza of the second \textit{Recitativo} (Ramsay's two-rime octave), and the two stanzas of the sixth \textit{Recitativo} (Ferguson's four-rime octave). Taking all six stanzas together, we find that nearly half of the total lines of the \textit{Recitativo} sections are in the \textit{Christis Kirk} stanza or in a modified form thereof. Finally, the caird's song is also in this stanza, without the bob but with the internal rimes in the tera-meter lines which Burns had experimented with in \textit{Hallowe'en}. Altogether, some sixty-seven lines of \textit{The Jolly Beggars} are in the pure or modified \textit{Christis Kirk} stanza, a total which makes it by far the most important verse form in the poem, the \textit{Cherrie and the Slae} stanza being second with forty-two lines. The full significance of this metrical influence from the \textit{Christis Kirk} tradition upon \textit{The Jolly Beggars} has never been recognized.

Secondly, I am convinced that Burns's careful study of the \textit{Christis Kirk} poems had much to do with the original conception of \textit{The Jolly Beggars} and with the handling of the materials in the poem. The obvious and immediate sources of the poem are, of course, well known. First of all, there was the beggar theme, which came to Burns from his

keen observation of real beggars about the Ayrshire countryside and also, undoubtedly, from his reading of parts of the vast literature about beggars, a literature which had its roots deep in the medieval past. Burns certainly knew several specimens of this beggar-poetry, including *The G Aberlanzie-Man* and *The Jolly Beggars*, ascribed to King James V of Scotland; *The Merry Beggars* and *The Happy Beggars* in Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany*; and Gay's *Beggars' Opera*. As for his "cantata" form, Burns clearly got the idea for this from *The Merry Beggars* (which, incidentally, he echoes in several phrases of his poem), and from Ramsay's worthless effort, *A Scots Cantata*, with probably additional suggestions from Gay and from Ramsay's *Gentle Shepherd.* But in putting his beggar theme and cantata form together, Burns had another large body of poetry to draw upon — the *Christis Kirk* tradition. Burns had in the *Christis Kirk* poems, which he knew intimately and had already followed in *A Mauchline Wedding* and *Hallowe'en*, a wealth of precedent for an ambitious and artistic poem of social description. In these poems he had observed descriptions of boisterous lower class celebrations, presented within a narrative framework and interspersed with dialogue. In *The Jolly Beggars* the cantata scheme required formal songs, which take the place of dialogue; but, except for dialogue, most of the ingredients of the *Christis Kirk* formula are there. We have the usual opening stanza, setting the scene and the scene, and then move swiftly into the first brilliant little vignette, that of the "sodger" and his "tozie drab." In *The Jolly Beggars* as in all of the *Christis Kirk* poems, the technique is to light up an individual character (or group of characters) picked out from the general confusion of the celebration, show him in action, and then go on quickly to the next and the next. Through this highlighting of specific details, a vivid impression of the whole is achieved. A study of the *Recitative* sections of *The Jolly Beggars* reveals that Burns here uses precisely the same kind of brief characterization, rapid transition, rollicking tempo, and broad humor which we have observed as typical of the *Christis Kirk* genre. The drunkenness, the horseplay, the tolerant satire are here, too, and the point of view of the superior and detached spectator. (It should be noted, though, that Burns's detachment is not complete: he seems at times to be putting his own sentiments into the beggars' mouths.)

Although there is no evidence that Burns had any particular *Christis Kirk* poem in mind when he wrote *The Jolly Beggars*, the general influence of the *Christis Kirk* genre that he knew so well is, I think,

12 See Meyerfeld, Ritter, and Robertson (above, note 11) for these echoes of earlier works.
undeniable. It is true that Burns found suggestions for his theme, his cantata form, and for specific details elsewhere; and it is equally obvious that there are many elements in this rich and complex poem that have nothing to do with the *Christis Kirk* tradition. Nevertheless, in view of the broad general resemblances noted above, it seems clear that in his overall conception of *The Jolly Beggars* and in his handling of the Recitativo sections Burns had his favorite *Christis Kirk* poems in mind and followed their traditional pattern as far as his cantata form would allow.

The fact that he uses the *Christis Kirk* stanza more than any other verse form in the poem supports this position. In short, the *Christis Kirk* tradition is an important part of the background of *The Jolly Beggars*; and *The Jolly Beggars*, uniquely different though it is, may legitimately be considered as part of the *Christis Kirk* tradition.

Apart from the trivial *Dream* (June, 1786), *The Holy Fair* was Burns's final effort in the *Christis Kirk* genre; and this magnificent poem makes a fitting culmination of the ancient tradition. The *Holy Fair* is a socio-religious satire, happily combining the familiar type of satiric social description with the new kind of anti-clerical religious satire on local themes that Burns had already tried in *The Ordination* and other works. The poem falls strictly within the *Christis Kirk* pattern, being in the traditional stanza, dealing with a rural celebration, and having all the other distinctive features of the genre. It describes a "Holy Fair" in Burns's village of Mauchline, an important religious occasion on which congregations from several parishes gathered together to hear their various ministers preach in turn. That most of the folk who came to this religious festival also took advantage of the opportunity for some hearty socializing is made delightfully clear in the poem.

In writing *The Holy Fair* Burns leaned heavily on earlier *Christis Kirk* poems, especially on Fergusson's *Hallow-fair* and *Leith Races*, though there are also a few verbal echoes from elsewhere. But the vital stimulating influence behind *The Holy Fair* was unquestionably Fergusson. Burns here uses the four-rime octave of *Hallow-fair* and *Leith Races* once again, and, significantly, parallels Fergusson's opening references to the season:

*Hallow-fair:*
At Hallowmass, when nights grow lang,
And starnies shine fu' clear . . .

13 For excellent discussions of this poem, see Daiches, pp. 124-131; and Crawford, pp. 67-75.

14 Compare, e.g., Burns's "An' snuff the caller air" (stanza 1) with Ramsay's "To snuff the cauler air" (Gentle Shepherd, l. i). There are also some very effective Biblical references: compare I. 104 with Job 1.5.
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Leith Races:
In July month, ae bonny morn,
When Nature's rokelay green...
cloak

Holy Fair:
Upon a simmer Sunday morn,
When Nature's face is fair...

Hallow-fair provided Burns with several other scattered suggestions, including his opening description of sunrise ("The rising sun, o'we Galston Muir, Wi' glorious light was glintin"), which follows Ferguson's ("U'p the tap o' ilk ha' lum/ The sun began to keek"). Similarly, Burns's portrait of country farmers coming into the fair ("Here farmers gash, in ridin graith") parallels Hallow-fair ("Here country John in bannet blue"), while his reference to Sunday clothes ("I'll get my Sunday's sark on") echoes the same poem ("And eke his Sunday's claise on"). But more important than these incidental suggestions from Hallow-fair was Burns's imitation of the entire opening section of Leith Races. Burns takes over Ferguson's introductory machinery, transforming his "Mirth" into "Fun" and adding two extra mythological figures, "Superstition" and "Hypocrisy." The two poems parallel each other with extraordinary closeness in these opening stanzas. Burns's "Fun" performs precisely the same function in the poem as her counterpart in Leith Races: she is a fresh and jolly girl who offers to accompany the poet to the fair for the fun of observing and laughing at the sights to be seen there, especially the antics of Superstition and Hypocrisy:

"I'm gaun to Mauchline Holy Fair,
To spend an hour in daffin:
Gin ye'll go there, ye runk'd pair,
We will get famous laughin
At them this day."

Moreover, as in Leith Races Burns's "Fun" sets the tone of light-hearted observation and tolerant satire which prevails throughout the poem. It should be noted further that, in addition to incorporating Ferguson's introductory method, Burns also follows in a general way the structure of Leith Races: after the mythological introduction, Burns portrays the various folk on their way to the fair, then the activities at the fair itself, and finally the aftermath. Burns's final stanza, incidentally, resembles in content the last stanza of Leith Races and, more closely, the ending of Ramsay's Christis Kirk, Canto II. These extensive borrowings from Ferguson and others in The Holy Fair are significant in showing that in this poem Burns was fully aware of the tradition in which he was
writing and was consciously modeling his work on earlier masterpieces in the Christis Kirk genre.

Yet in spite of the fact that Burns here followed the traditional pattern in a general way, that he borrowed machinery and other suggestions from Fergusson and elsewhere, The Holy Fair remains inimitably Burns’s own—a fresh, daring, and original piece of work. In The Holy Fair Burns recreates the age-old Christis Kirk tradition in terms of his own experience and special purposes; and he does so with superb artistry. Perhaps the most important feature of the poem, which sets it apart and makes it a different experience, is its mixture of religious and secular satire, its delightful emphasis on the paradoxes and incongruities emerging from the intensely human scene at the fair.

Here some are thinkin on their sins,
   An' some upo' their claes;
clothes
Ane curses feet that fyl'd his shins,
   Anither sighs an' prays:
soiled
On this hand sits a chosen swatch,
   Wi' screw'd-up, grace-proud faces;
sample
On that a set o' chaps, at watch,
   Thang winkin on the lasses
   To chairs that day.
busy

Notice the gay mockery of the Calvinist doctrine of Election implicit in the phrase “a chosen swatch.” The whole poem is, in fact, brilliantly organized to show this glaring contrast between the ostensible religious purpose of the fair and the boisterous and thoroughly irreverent activities which go on there. Burns focuses attention in one stanza on the pulpit where the preachers are thundering out hell-fire sermons, and in the next stanza on the crowd of country folk round about, many of whom are thoroughly enjoying themselves, eating, drinking, gossiping, napping, and making love, utterly uninhibited by the sound of the preacher’s voice bringing “tidings o’ damnation.” The poem flashes back and forth, illuminating the religious and social aspects of the fair in turn, as Burns makes hilarious fun of the different preachers and lights up humorous scenes in the crowd with breathtaking verve and rapidity. The final stanza, where the poet comments on secular love-making and drinking in terms of the theological jargon of the preachers, brilliantly sums up the point of the whole poem:

How monie hearts this day converts
   O’ sinners and o’ lasses!
Their hearts o’ stane, gin night, are gane
   As saft as onie flesh is:
by nightfall

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There's some are fou' love divine;
    There's some are fou' brandy,
An' monie jobs that day begin,
    May end in boughmagandie
    Some ither day.

The fact that The Holy Fair is based on this two-fold satiric theme
and skillfully arranged to illustrate a single, fundamental contrast gives
it firmer structure, more clear-cut direction, sharper emphasis, and more
profound significance than either Hallow-fair or Leith Races, or, for
that matter, any other of its predecessors in the pure Christis Kirk tradi-
tion. And the execution of the poem is equally brilliant. Burns had
learned much from his study of the fine craftsmanship of Fergusson, and
here he surpasses the Edinburgh poet in the incisive force and incom-
parable expressiveness of his style. The Holy Fair is an almost faultless
poem, bursting with vitality, rich in its texture, delightful in its humor
—every stanza a work of art. Take, for example, Burns's uproariously
comic portrait of the preacher Moodie:

    Now a' the congregation o'er
    Is silent expectation;
For Moodie sweeps the holy door,
    Wi' tidings o' damnation:
Should Hornie, as in ancient days,
    'Mang sons o' God present him;
The vera sight o' Moodie's face
    To's ain het hame had sent him
    Wi' fright that day.

    Hear how he clears the points o' Faith
    Wi' rattlin and thumpin!
Now meekly calm, now wild in wrath,
    He's stampin, an' he's jumpin!
His lengthen'd chin, his turn'd-up snout,
    His eldritch squeel an' gestures,
    O how they fire the heart devout—
Like cantharidian plaisters
    On sic a day!

The Holy Fair is certainly one of Burns's very greatest performances, and
it is also, in my opinion, the most perfect single poem in the long his-
tory of the Christis Kirk tradition.

It should be clear from what has been said above that Burns, in his
Christis Kirk poems, followed the lead of Fergusson in making the genre
a vehicle for social criticism, for the treatment of local and contem-
porary issues. But Burns went farther than Fergusson in this direction,
treating political questions (A Dream), for example, even more specifi-
ically than Fergusson had done, and extending the subject matter of the genre in *The Ordination* and *The Holy Fair* to include religious satire. Additionally, in *The Jolly Beggars* he used the genre to expound revolutionary social ideas. Only in *Hallowe’en* does he hark back to a kind of Ramsayesque antiquarianism. Before Burns, all of the *Cristis Kirk* poems (even Fergusson’s) had been intended almost exclusively as entertainment; most of them were seasoned with good-natured social satire, it is true; but by and large they were meant only to delight and amuse the educated classes. Burns was the only poet to employ this ancient poetic tradition to attack what might be called “burning questions” of the day. His treatment is always, of course, comic in mood; but its implications are serious and pointed to an extent unapproached by any of the earlier practitioners in the genre with the possible exception of Fergusson in *The Election*. We find, then, a new kind of emphasis which gives Burns’s poems added significance and power, a kind of undertone of vitality and passionate interest. Burns gives us something more than robust humor and whimsical observation. And in doing this as brilliantly as he has — at least in his three best poems in the genre, *The Ordination, The Jolly Beggars,* and *The Holy Fair* — Burns added a new dimension to the whole *Cristis Kirk* tradition.

**Conclusion**

Looking back over four centuries of the *Cristis Kirk* tradition, one is struck by the remarkable versatility and vitality of the genre. Beginning with genial social satires of peasant manners, the *Cristis Kirk* form was early adapted to anti-clerical satire (*Symmie*) and then combined with the mock tournament genre by Dunbar, Lindsay, and Scott. In the seventeenth century it turns up again, slightly disguised, in Drummond’s *Polymo-Makinia*, a mock-heroic macaronic poem satirizing country life. Then, after declining into songs of the *Blythsome Bridal* and *Hallowe’en* type, the genre was revived and restored to its original status by Allan Ramsay and his followers, Nicol and Skinner. At the hands of Robert Fergusson, the old tradition underwent change and adaptation once again, its subject matter being extended to include city life and political satire. Finally, with Burns the genre reached its most versatile development, being used for social, political, and religious satire as the occasion demanded. As we have seen, the *Cristis Kirk* tradition was adapted through the ages by many different poets to a wide variety of artistic purposes. This ready adaptability of the form was certainly one of the most important reasons for its amazingly long life.

Another reason was surely the innate vitality of the genre itself.
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The rollicking tempo, broad humor, exciting action, good-natured satire, and abounding vigor of the Christis Kirk poems made them beloved favorites of the Scottish people. The lasting popularity of the early poems, especially of Christis Kirk on the Green, encouraged later poets to follow the same pattern, thus giving the tradition renewed momentum. And the genre itself had a kind of universality of appeal which made it largely independent of changes in poetic fashions. Many of the older Scottish genres, such as the allegorical love-poem (James I's The Kingis Quair), or the various types of moral allegory and dream-vision poems (Dunbar's Golden Targe), were essentially medieval in character, and simply died with the Middle Ages. The major changes which took place during the Renaissance in European thought and art made such genres outdated, no longer usable because no longer pertinent to the new artistic purposes and interests. But the Christis Kirk tradition was mainly unaffected by these great intellectual movements. A good poem satirizing country life and characters has a kind of human appeal which makes it interesting in any age. Thus the Christis Kirk genre was able to survive the death of the old tradition and the barren years of the seventeenth century.

Its survival was aided further by the characteristic fondness of Scottish poets for traditional forms of expression, and by the fact that a number of good poets chose to write in this form. The better Christis Kirk poems, including Peebles and Christis Kirk, Scott's Justing, Drummond's Polemo-Middinia, The Blythome Bridal, Ramsay's Christis Kirk sequels, Ferguson's Hallow-fair, Leith Races, and Election, and Burns's Ordination, Jolly Beggars, and Holy Fair, are still eminently readable today, and represent a large body of good poetry. The high level of performance in many of these poems certainly had much to do with perpetuating the tradition.

We can, then, discern five major reasons for the almost continuous development of the Christis Kirk tradition through four centuries of Scots literature: (1) the adaptability of the genre; (2) its innate vitality and popular appeal; (3) its universality of interest; (4) the Scottish fondness for traditional poetic forms; and (5) the high quality of many of the poems themselves.

Taken as a whole, the Christis Kirk genre is a magnificent illustration of the principle of continuity in Scots poetic tradition. It is a distinctively Scottish genre (there is nothing like it in English poetry), and well demonstrates that ability to make distinguished poetry out of the most ordinary stuff of life, out of seemingly "unpoetic" materials, which has always been a feature of Scots poetry. The Christis Kirk tra-
dition represents, further, one of the major strands in the poetry of Scotland, extending through four tumultuous centuries of Scottish history; and the study of its development has the advantage of affording a long-range view, a kind of vertical section of the history of Scots poetry through Burns. Finally, the study of the long growth of this extraordinary genre reveals the tremendous wealth of traditional materials which lay behind Burns's creation of masterpieces like The Jolly Beggars and The Holy Fair, and provides, as well, a graphic illustration of just what use Burns made of such materials.

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