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“The Apple at the Glass”: Halloween and Scottish poetry

I'd like to start my discussion of Halloween and Scottish poetry by quoting from a broadside. Printed in 1821 by John Muir in Glasgow, it is, 'An Account of a Strange and Wonderful Apparition which appeared to Kathrine Grant, on Halloween last'.ⁱ In an attempt to see her future husband, Grant carried out the prediction ritual of winnowing three weightful of nothing:

You go to the barn, and open both doors, taking them off the hinges...for there is danger that the being, about to appear, may shut the door and do you some mischief. Then take that instrument used in winnowing the corn which, in our country dialect, is called a wecht; and go through all the attitudes of letting down corn against the wind. Repeat it three times; and, at the third time, an apparition will pass through the barn, in at the windy door and out at the other, having both the figure in

question, and the appearance or retinue marking the employment or station in life.

Grant managed to 'conjure up the Devil in her husband's likeness'. She saw 'a tall spectre in dead clothes' and the resulting shock caused her to take to her bed: 'no life is expected of her' (*An Account* 1821).

I wanted to start with this account because it epitomises the ambivalent associations of Halloween in early nineteenth century Scotland. Halloween, for adolescents, was an exciting, sexually charged time, as well as a dangerous, supernaturally powerful one. These aspects, equally, feature in the three eighteenth century poems I'd like to consider today: Robert Fergusson's 'Hallow-Fair', Robert Burns's 'Halloween' and Janet Little's 'On Halloween' (Fergusson 1772; Burns 1786; Little 1792; the last-mentioned is reproduced here as an appendix).

Fergusson's 'Hallow-Fair' of 1772 commemorates an Edinburgh celebration. Also known as *Alhallowmas Fair*, and

recorded as early as 1447 (see Banks 1939: 181), it lasted from November 1st for eight or fifteen days. It was held in fields off the Falkirk road, about half a mile west of the Grassmarket (see Crawford et al 1987: 370). Fergusson assumes a community of knowledge about the festival, shared by the reader and the poet. The verses, in fluent Scots, are in the 'Christis Kirk' stanza, following Allan Ramsay's use of it in his continuations to 'Christis Kirk on the Green' (a poem which has been attributed to both James I and James V). This form is often used for social commentary.

This is very much holiday poetry, in the vein of Fergusson's own 'Leith Races' (1773) and Burns's later 'Holy Fair'. Perhaps it is significant that the poem has thirteen verses, but there is little hint of the supernatural, beyond a reference to fortune-telling 'spae-wives' in the fourth verse, in this realistic poem. Halloween is presented as a time for celebration, full of fun and noise, from 'dinlin drums' 'nickering' horses, and 'yellowchin' people.

Fergusson presents a collection of highly colourful fair-goers including 'horse-coupers', 'tinklers' and a 'recruiting sergeant'.

'Country John in bonnet blue' comes (unsuccessfully) to woo 'Meg' with 'sappy kisses' in verse three. Chapmen, in the fourth verse, offer 'bonny wallies', or goods, to the bargain-seeking 'wives' of the sixth verse. In verse five, the Aberdonian stocking salesman 'Sawny' offers competitively priced 'shanks' that are as 'guid' as anything from a 'weyr', or knitting needle, or the 'leem'. The last term is, perhaps, a double-entendre, in that the Scots term can refer both to a loom, and the penis. It may be that Fergusson is making a knowing wink towards the sexual freedom at fair time which would feature explicitly in Burns's later poem.

Edinburgh's Halloween is definitely a time for indulging bodily appetites. In the second verse, the 'browsters' offer their best ale, and the salty 'kebbucks' or cheeses are brought out from pantries. While women make purchases, men gather in tents to drink and 'rant an' roar like wud' (verse 8). This can lead to danger, but it is a worldly danger rather than the supernatural threats Grant faced. A 'birkie' stands the real risk of ending up in the 'Council-chawmer, or magistrates' court, in verse thirteen. In the ninth verse (with

somewhat incongruous references to ‘Phoebus’ and ‘Thetis’) Jock Bell is attacked by a Lochaber axe—‘he gaat a clamihewit’—and his body, ‘spew the reikin gore’ as he lay ‘peching’. He faces a groat fine for drunkenness, from the Highland sergeant of the ‘black squad’ or the City Guard, compared to ‘savages’ here. The encounter is indicative of the civic tensions Fergusson profiles elsewhere, relating to the Gaelic-speaking ‘black banditti’ Guard. Incidentally, the Guard included the Gaelic poet Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir (Duncan Ban Macintyre, 1724–1812).

For Fergusson, in short, Hallow fair functions as an ambiguous space where social rules are relaxed, during a carnivalesque holiday. People enjoy their break by drinking copiously, brawling and by spending, or earning, money. A sense of community pervades the poem as ‘strappin dames and sturdy lads’ extract themselves from daily life for a short escape.

Fergusson’s spirited poem proved a resonant model for Burns. Burns’s ‘Hallowe’en’, again in the ‘Christis Kirk’ form, is firmly set in his native Ayrshire, with references to Cassilis, Culzean Castle, the

Doon, and Carrick. As in Fergusson's poem, the prevailing atmosphere is of holiday and, like Fergusson, Burns presents a nocturnal occasion. Burns, though, goes far beyond Fergusson's social commentary.

Burns's poem is much earthier than Fergusson's, exploring sexual tensions between 'lasses...cleanly neat' and 'lads sae trig' (verse three). Burns, too, pays closer attention to the supernatural, exploring courting 'freits' or prediction rituals (the aspect of Halloween which would fascinate later commentators, from James Napier, in *Folk Lore* (1879), to Macleod Banks in *British Calendar Customs* (1937-41).

Whereas Fergusson assumed his readers would share his knowledge of Hallow Fair, Burns distances himself from the celebrants. He includes lengthy, ethnographic footnotes which recall his 1790 letter to Francis Grose on the 'Witch Stories' which inspired 'Tam o' Shanter' (see Burns 1931: Letter 401). Reflecting recent social changes, Burns anticipates a polite audience which might either not be familiar with traditional practices or might choose to

feign ignorance. The culture of the peasantry was seen by contemporary critics, like Henry Mackenzie and Hugh Blair, as both appealing, in that it represented neo-classical simplicity, and as repulsively primitive. Here, Burns, as an Enlightenment man, comments on, as he states in his headnote, 'human nature in its rude state'.

Burns, however, is ambivalent to his own stance. While on the one hand he offers 'entertainment to a philosophic mind', on the other he foregrounds a Goldsmith quotation, praising the 'simple pleasures of the lowly'. Because of this juxtaposition, I profoundly disagree with Butler Waugh's interpretation of 'Hallowe'en' as 'parochial satire', mocking the 'foolish underlying concern' of traditional beliefs which throws the participants' Christianity into question (Waugh 1967: 11). Burns, rather, offers a complex treatment of Halloween from the point of view of the 'Heaven-taught ploughman': caught between the *literati* culture he aspired to, and the oral traditions which formed his poetic roots.

Burns gives his full attention, from the fourth verse onwards, to Halloween predictions. In the note to that verse, for instance, he profiles the custom of pulling kail: 'if any *yird*, or earth, stick to the root, that is *tocher*, or fortune; and the taste of the *custoc*...is indicative of the natural temper and disposition' of the spouse to be. This custom is well documented: it is referred to, for instance, by Thomas Pennant in his 1769 *Tour in Scotland* and was recorded as late as 1904 in Aberdeenshire by Miss I.F. Grant (see Banks 1939: 122-23).

Burns indicates, though, that predictions do not always turn out as hoped. For instance, in the eighth verse the nut representing Jock, 'started up the lum' and left 'Jean' alone. Similarly, in verse twelve Merran, casting the blue-clue into a pot, ends by fleeing from the figure which holds on to her yarn. This might be the devil, or a *bauchen* (or *bogle*) but might, equally, be the predatory Andrew Bell.

The poet hints that many rustics do not take Halloween, and its predictions, seriously, unless they coincide with their existing desires or provide them with an opportunity. In verse six, for

instance, Rab seizes the chance to grip Nelly, who is pulling her oat stalk in the fields, leading to the euphemistic loss of her 'tap-pickle' (literally her oat stalk). Later, in verse 10, the 'loving bleeze' of their nuts in the fire, is interpreted by Nell as evidence of their lasting union; Rob, more pragmatically, uses this as license to kiss, 'her bonie mou'.

For Burns, Halloween is a carnivalesque night of passions which blaze into 'white..ase' (ash) (verse ten). In verse twenty one Meg goes to the barn to seek 'Tam Kipples'; the name is a double-entendre: kipples, in Scots, are rafters, but the word can also mean coupling. The implication is that Meg will soon be on her back, looking up at the rafters.ⁱⁱ Halloween, for Burns, is a time where nature and supernature, sex and danger coincide. In this context adolescents function, in Victor Turner's terms, as 'liminal entities', leaving behind the dependency of childhood but not yet subject to the constraints of marriage (see Turner 1969).

This is a community-based Halloween, centred on the familiar fermtoun landscape of home and fields. It features domestic details,

some based on real people. In the thirteenth verse, for instance, Burns introduces a girl based on his cousin, Jenny Brown. She was ten years old in 1775 when Burns lodged with her parents. This, incidentally, along with the brief reference to 'toddlan' children copying their elders with their stocks, in the fifth verse here, is the only occasion in the three poems when a child is mentioned. For the eighteenth century child, as today, terror is contained. Jenny asks her granny to accompany her, so she can 'eat the apple at the glass' (to see her future husband) in safety.

This is not to imply that Burns ignores the actual supernatural dangers of Halloween. He comes very close to the broadside dangers I started with in the tale within the tale which begins in the fourteenth verse. This section is different to the footnoted examples above: it is presented as a first-hand observation, moving into the real world of the supernatural. Graunie, warning Jenny that Halloween, when the '*foul Thief*', or the Devil, is abroad, is not for 'sportin', tells a story from 1715. When Rab McGraen sought to

conjure up his love by using hemp seed (the custom is explained in the note to verse sixteen) and was 'sairly frightened' in the process.

Suggesting an ambivalence, however, towards Halloween beliefs Burns has Jamie Fleck who, in verse seventeen, mocks the hemp custom, terrified by a 'grane an' gruntle' which then out to have been Grumphie, the pig. Mistakes seem to be common in the fraught atmosphere of Halloween. In verse twenty two Meg, like Grant, decides to perform 'three wechts o' naething'. The 1821 broadside's description of the ritual is so close to this it seems likely Burns was its source. Meg, like Grant, is so terrified she runs through the dung heap. It transpires, though, that she merely saw a rat. Similarly Will, in verse twenty three, mistakes a gnarled tree for a witch, or the Devil, and Leezie, in verse twenty four, practising dipping her left sleeve into a burn (see Wilkie 1815) is startled, not by the Devil, but by a cow.

By the end of the poem, Burns has moved away from the 'they' position at its start, into a more inclusive description. He finishes by describing the special foods (sowans) and convivial

atmosphere of Halloween, with its 'merry sangs...friendly cracks...unco tales, an' funnie jokes'. The poet, ultimately, shows a deep and abiding affection for the customs and beliefs of rural Ayrshire.

Critics have often found this poem 'unsatisfying'; in *Robert Burns* (1950) David Daiches called it 'tedious'; 'of more interest to the expert in folklore than to the general reader' (as if this undercuts its value) (see Daiches, qtd Waugh: 10). I disagree: besides its folkloric interest (which, given his copious notes, Burns fully intended), the poem is a vibrant exploration of Halloween from a young man's perspective: Burns revels in its sexual opportunities, and suggestive supernaturalism.

Little's 'Hallowe'en' is slightly different. Her involvement in Halloween is much more personal than either Fergusson's or Burns'. There is no judgement implied here: she is wholly participant-observer. Like Burns, with whom she shared Mrs Dunlop's patronage (see Bold 1992), Little presents herself as an Ayrshire poet although she tries, perhaps, to be more nationally

representative as 'the Scotch Milkmaid'. Intriguingly, her language is far lighter in flavour than her predecessors' and so, perhaps, more attractive to a polite audience. This poem mixes Scots idioms, 'ilka witch her neebour meets' with English, 'when elves at midnight hour are seen'. Sometimes this happens in the same phrase: 'Then lads an' lasses aft convene, / In hopes to ken their fortune' in the first verse. Due to this linguistic choice, her poem is designed to appeal to a wider, perhaps British rather than Scottish, audience.

Like Fergusson, Little creates a realistic account of one particular (and perhaps quintessential) Halloween 'convention' at Jennet Reid's: 'Of lasses fair and fine' and 'sprightly youths, frae Loudon-kirk'. Little's Halloween is a time for predictions and for courtship. The natural and supernatural worlds converge and, in this respect she exemplifies Jack Santino's description of Halloween as a time when 'the gates that separated the worlds of the living and the dead, of this world and the world of spirits, were opened' (Santino 1994: xv).

As in Burns' poem, predictions are carried out, including putting nuts onto the hearthstone; the outcome, too, is similar. In verse 4, for instance, the unpredictability of Halloween predictions is stressed: 'some gat lads, an' some gat nane, / Just as they bleez'd the gither'. So too, in the fifth verse (in a custom which Burns does not mention), 'lad an' lass, baith auld an' young, / Did try to catch the apple' in vain. In verse six Little cites the use of the dishes; like Burns's old bachelor, Little's Mall must go 'to the garret' alone: 'Because sae aft she's answer'd no'. So, too, James, in the following verse, keeps touching the toom bowl, and fears the consequences.

Little's is a far tamer and less earthy Halloween than Burns's. Here, 'mirth', as explained in verse 8, is the goal: when the 'cushion game' is played, involving catching a bolster, a rather innocent 'routh o' kissing' ensues. At Reid's Halloween 'rocking', lads and lasses do not finish in the rigs together, but leave at nine o' clock, 'exempt from false aspersion'.

When Little's Halloween poem is taken alongside those of Fergusson and Burns's poems, though, a comprehensive picture is

given of Halloween customs in late eighteenth century Scotland.

There is no dressing up but there are demonic transformations. This is a time of misrule which lends itself to narrative relish as a storytelling occasion, as well as one of frights. It is, primarily, a carnival occasion, which offers escape from everyday routine. Just as Michael Taft, in his article in Santino's volume on Halloween, has noted in relation to modern Saskatchewan, Halloween in eighteenth century Scotland is both "scary" and ; "fun" and, above all, fosters 'a renewed sense of community' (Santino: 159).

However, the three poets engage with Halloween differently, hinting at the distinctive way in which individuals consume calendar customs. Fergusson appreciates Halloween as a worldly, and commercial occasion. Little presents Halloween as a belief-focussed occasion, but a relatively chaste one. Burns, however, sees sexual innuendo, as well as relishing the festival's supernatural aspects.

I'd like to finish, as I started, with a quotation from that broadside, as a warning anyone thinking of going abroad on

Halloween, particularly if part of the plan is to practise winnowing
three weightful of nothing:

We would advise all persons from prying into futurity by
these wicked means; for if we are to believe many well
authenticated stories, much mischief has been done and
many persons have lost their lives by frights, which they
have gotten at these unlawful projects.

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to Kathrine Grant, on Halloween last, in her Master's barn, in
the Mearns Moor, as she was playing her project, as is usual
by young people on that night; with an account of the dreadful
Shapes and Gestures in which it appeared, which so terrified
the Girl that she now lies dangerously ill.* Glasgow: John Muir.
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Appendix: Janet Little, 'The Scotch Milkmaid': 'On Halloween'

First published *The poetical works of Janet Little, the Scotch Milkmaid*. Air: John & Peter Wilson, 1792.

1. Some folk in courts for pleasure sue,

An' some ransack the theatre:

The airy nymph is won by few,

She's of so coy a nature.

She shuns the great bedaub'd with lace,

Intent on rural jokin

An' spite o' breeding, deigns to grace

A merry Ayrshire rockin,

Sometimes at night.

2. At Hallowe'en, when fairy sprites

Perform their mystic gambols,

When ilka witch her neebour greets,

On their nocturnal rambles;

When elves at midnight hour are seen,
Near hollow caverns sportin,
Then lads an' lasses aft convent,
In hopes to ken their fortune,
By freets that night.

3. At Jennet Reid's not long ago,
Was held an annual meeting,
Of lasses fair and fine also,
With charms the most inviting:
Though it was wat, an' wondrous mirk,
It flopp'd nae kind intention;
Some sprightly youths, frae Loudon-kirk,
Did haste to the convention,
Wi' glee that night.

4. The nuts upon a clean hearthstane
Were plac'd by ane anither,

An' some gat lads, an' some gat nane,

Just as they bleez'd the gither.

Some sullen cooffs refust to burn;

Bad luck can ne'er be mended;

But or they a' had got a turn,

The pokefu' nits was ended

Owre soon that night.

5. A candle on a stick was hung,

An' ti'd up to the kipple:

Ilk lad an' lass, baith auld an' young,

Did try to catch the apple;

Which aft, in spite o' a' their care,

Their furious jaws escaped;

They touch'd it ay, but did nae mair,

Though greedily it gaped,

Fu' wide that night.

6. The dishes then, by joint advice,
 Were placed upon the floor;
Some stammer'd on the toom ane thrice,
 In that unlucky hour.
Poor Mall maun to the garret go,
 Nae rays o' comfort meeting;
Because sae aft she's answer'd no,
 She'll spend her days in greeting,
 In ilka night.

7. Poor James sat trembling for his fate;
 He lang had dree'd the worst o't;
Though they had tugg'd and rugg'd till yet,
 To touch the dish he durst not.
The empty bowl, before his eyes,
 Replete wi' ills appeared;
No man nor maid could make him rife,

The consequence he feared
Sae much that night.

8. Wi' heartsome glee the minutes past,
Each act to mirth conspired:
The cushion game perform'd at last,
Was most of all admir'd.
From Janet's bed a bolster came,
Nor lad nor lass was missing;
But ilka ane wha caught the same,
Was pleased wi' routh o' kissing,
Fu' sweet that night.

9. Soon as they heard the forward clock,
Proclaim 'twas nine, they started,
An ilka lass took up her rock;
Reluctantly they parted,

In hopes to meet some other time,
Exempt from false aspersion;
Nor will they count it any crime,
To hae sic like diversion
Some future night.

Glossary

1. *rockin=gathering of [women] neighbours*

2. *ilka=each; freets=presages; prediction rituals*

3. *mirk=dark, gloomy; flopp'd=[flypped? To turn out]*

4. *bleez'd=blaces; cooffs=fools, rascals; pokefu=bagful; nits=nuts;*

owre=too

5. *kipple=V-shaped rafter; ilk=each; aft=often*

6. *stammer'd=stumbled; toom=empty; maun=must; greeting=crying*

7. *dree'd=dreaded; rugg'd=pulled/tugged; durst=dared; sae=so*

8. *heartsome=hearty; ilka=each; routh=plenty of/an abundance*

9. *ilka=each; sic-like=suchlike*

ⁱ I am grateful to Julie Coleman, of the Department of Special Collections at Glasgow University Library, for bringing this broadside to my attention.

ⁱⁱ I am grateful to Gerry Carruthers for drawing my attention to this implication.