ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

The creation of a distinct Scottish Voice in the work of Walter Scott and Robert Burns.

Grace Baird

January 2021

Abstract:

This essay discusses how different Scottish voices are represented in their texts, the purpose of their respective authors, and their effect on the reader. In order to demonstrate this discussion, the essay focuses on Robert Burns poems *Tam o' Shanter* and *To a Mouse,* contrasting with Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor*. The essay argues that there cannot be a single narrative voice that encompasses all of Scottish experience and demonstrates how, although there are aspects of Scottish society with transcend social classes, oral tradition is present at every level of Scottish society. Furthermore, the essay encompasses both Burns and Scott's exploration of the world of oral tradition in their texts, how they convey into their works the rich tapestry of Scottish storytelling, a world, as the author suggests, is often left unexplored. Nonetheless, the essay provides evidence of how although they differ in their purpose and context, they both offer a valid account of the Scottish experience of life. In addition, through the discussion of superstition portrayed in both *Tam o' Shanter* and *The Bridge of Lammermoor,* the essay argues its power and its importance in how belief can shape the course of our lives. At the end of the essay, the author examines the internal structure of the Scottish class system, which allows the final conclusion revealing a strong and distinctive Scottish narrative.

It cannot be said that there is a single narrative voice to encompass all of Scottish experience. Even when narrowing our consideration to the period of Enlightenment and Romanticism we find an array of experience and established voices. In this essay I will focus on the contrast between the narratives created by Robert Burns in his poems *Tam o' Shanter* and *To a Mouse* with that of Walter Scott in his novel *The Bride of Lammermoor*. Burns – through intent or by natural inclination, gives voice to the working man of the lower classes of rural Scottish society whereas Scott explores the tumultuous politics of Scotland's rural upper classes. These voices are distinct from each other, yet both offer an equally valid account of the Scottish experience of life. These two literary icons seem particularly apt to compare as, although they write from very different backgrounds, the themes they explore have a great deal of overlap, notably through their exploration of class systems and superstitions and folklore.

Superstition and faith in supernatural powers are the central driving force in Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor*. Interestingly, Scott provides us with two logical explanations, one of rational logic and one of romantic logic. Both theories work simultaneously throughout the novel to offer the true cause of the untimely demise of our doomed lovers, Edgar Ravenswood and Lucy Ashton. We are presented with a prophecy relayed to Ravenswood by Caleb foreseeing both his and Lucy's deaths.

"When the last Ravenswood to Ravenswood shall ride,

And woo a dead maiden to be his bride,

He shall stable his steed in the Kelpie's flow,

And his name shall be lost for evermoe!" (Scott,178)

Scott provides us with the paradox of having this prophecy fulfilled through a natural sequence of logical circumstance, chance and coincidence. Therefore, we reach a decisive conclusion with an uncertain cause. This is important in enriching the distinct Scottish setting of this tale as Scotland is often presented as a romantic, wild place rife with legends, magic and outdated superstitious beliefs. This stereotype, though exaggerated is not without legitimate basis. Curle notes in his observations of Scotland in the early twentieth century that superstitions "are still cherished and believed in by the natives" (Curle,263) and even referred to the local peoples as a "superstitious community" (Curle,264). To emulate and

project Scottish voices and create an accurate representation of the culture, this belief in the supernatural cannot be omitted. By setting *The Bride of Lammermoor* in the context of a highly superstitious environment we can better understand how Lucy was driven so mad by the threat of the prophecy. Scott offers his logical explanation of her loss of sanity when he claims, "the idea that an evil fate hung over her attachment, became predominant over her other feelings; and the gloom of superstition darkened [her] mind," (Scott,299). From this we are told that Lucy dies due to her descent into madness, yet at the same time we see the predictions of the prophecy come to pass. As readers we are made to question not what has happened but *why* it has happened. Consequently, we are left in a paradoxical world where both forces of the supernatural and the logical operate simultaneously (Miller,101). This is reflective of the shift in Scottish society at the time of writing to the Scottish enlightenment which sought to place science and critical thinking at the core of Scottish society rather than belief in the supernatural (Broadie,127). Yet the belief in the supernatural remained in the folk communities despite opposition from the enlightenment movement and they were even seen as being "counter-enlightenment" (Henderson,12) which created a clash of thinking in Scottish society. This further solidifies our understanding that belief in the supernatural is at the core of Scottish culture and thus the Scottish voice.

The power of storytelling and oral tradition is explored in *The Bride of Lammermoor* perhaps less apparently than in Burns' work, but still with great consequence to the narrative. At various points throughout the novel Scott highlights the importance and power of storytelling, not only in this plot but in a wider Scottish context. Miller notes that "Scott's romantic fiction presents histories that retain the embellished quality of oral traditions" (Miller,104). The two key storytellers in *The Bride of Lammermoor* are Caleb Balderstone, Ravenswood's manservant, and Ailsie Gourlay, a wise woman with a tendency towards witchcraft. In *The Bride of Lammermoor* these characters serve two vital purposes. Firstly, they are the characters who relay the prophecy to Ravenswood (Scott,178) and Lucy (Scott,299), therefore setting the unfortunate events in motion. Secondly, and I would say more interestingly they symbolise an intrinsic part of Scottish society; the local bard or storyteller. Smith claims that "oral traditions […] have been vital to the survival of distinctive Scottish identities" (Smith,3). Oral culture can be viewed as the voice of Scotland. Scottish storytellers are known to blur the lines between fact and fiction in favour of the essence of a story, often to peddle their own agendas (Smith,5). We see that tendency with Ailsie as she feeds Lucy many dark, twisted tales to poison her mind (Scott,299). Scott himself was raised

viewing recorded history and oral tradition as being equally valid (Miller,101) which I feel he explores in *The Bride of Lammermoor.* There is a great deal of uncertainty as to what aspects of the novel are historical fact and what has been of Scott's own invention and embellishment. It seems that Scott's upbringing in Scottish society surrounded by Scottish voices from different backgrounds presenting him with orality had an undeniable influence on his view of society and history leading to a distinctly Scottish voice in his presentation of his historical novel.

Tam o' Shanter is undoubtedly one of Burns' most well-known and widely performed poems (Pittock,10), with a distinctly Scottish feel to its style of language. This is particularly seen through the nature of its humour, focus on the supernatural, and its comedic tone, boasting memorable lines such as "'[w]eel done, Cutty-Sark!'" (Burns,5). As we saw in *The Bride of Lammermoor, Tam o' Shanter* features a conflict of logic. We are presented this story in the context of a bar where this tale is being told to entertain a group of people "[w]hile [they] sit bousing at the nappy,/ An' getting fou and unco happy" (Burns,1). We are immediately placed in the clearly Scottish setting of a forenicht; the term used to describe the Scottish custom of gathering in the evening to share songs and stories with the community (xii,Bruford). Despite the dark and frightening nature of Tam's exploits the poem is undeniably written to be performed and to entertain people in settings such as a forenicht as I mentioned earlier. We can see this through the comedic and relatable jokes made throughout about things familiar to the audience. For example, domestic arguments are touched upon when Burns seeks to remind his audience of their spouse awaiting them at home.

> "Where sits our sulky sullen dame./ Gathering her brows like the gathering storm,/ Nursing her wrath to keep it warm." (Burns,1)

The incorporation of comedic comments throughout the poem remind us of the context this poem is intended to be performed in and the people it is being performed for; normal people most likely in the same context as those in the poem itself. With that setting in mind we are inclined to question the candour of this tale and assume it has been embellished, if not completely fictional, despite the fact that the story is referred to as "[t]his truth" (Burns,1). Yet Burns leaves us with the undeniable fact that Tam's mare is indeed tail-less. Therefore, as with Scott we must question what the true sequence of events were that led to the loss of the tail. Do we take it as proof that the events of Tam's journey are in fact true or if they are the imaginative excuses of a man whose drunken journey home led to the injury of his mare?

Burns' work was criticised at the time, notably by Thomas Carlyle who said that "readers could not connect to a world where tradition was believed" (Barry,1009), however as we have already explored tradition and superstition is widely believed throughout Scotland by the various social classes. Burns presents these beliefs without shame magnifying the beliefs and voices of the general Scottish public. *Tam o' Shanter* was written for Captain Francis Grose as Burns contribution to exemplify Scottish tradition in Grose's collection (Pittock,10). Taking that into consideration we can assume it was Burns' intention to create a distinctly Scottish narrative. It is in this regard we see Burns and Scott share the opinion of the great value and importance of storytelling and oral culture as a distinct aspect of Scottish culture and key to hearing and understanding Scottish voices in the wider world. The aspect of Scottish culture most prominently shown in *Tam o' Shanter* is belief in the supernatural. Burns shows that the supernatural is believed by all generations even children when he states that, "[t]hat night, a child might understand, / The Deil had business on his hand." (Burns,3). We also see how widely known some superstitions were by the lack of explanation provided for them by Burns, as it would be assumed, they were common knowledge. For example, the mention of the "murder'd bairn" (Burns,3) could be a reference to the folklore tale of changeling children which is so widely believed in Scotland that there are documented cases believed to be fully factual (Course,5). Again, at the close of the poem we see Tam prevail due to the Scottish superstition that spirits of the dead cannot cross water (Harris,15). Burns hints at the significance and relevance of oral culture when he presents Tam to be "crooning o'er some auld Scotch sonnet" (Burns,3). Macaulay notes that in the field of oral tradition "Scotland's influence has stretched widely" (Macaulay,1) for a country of such modest size as it has a rich and ancient history of folklore, legends, music and song spreading back through the centuries. We know oral tradition was particularly important to Burns as some of his earliest work was devoted to collecting and eventually compiling traditional oral lyric and music into his book *Scots Musical Museum* (Macaulay). The structure of *Tam o' Shanter* too indicates that it was intended to be performed orally which can be seen through the consistent use of rhyming couplets throughout (Burns,1-6). This style makes it easily memorable along with the regular syllabic meter of two couplets of eight syllables followed by two of nine syllables (Burns,1-6) which create a rolling rhythmic tone when performed orally. With all of this considered it can be said that the narrative Burns presents in *Tam o' Shanter* has a tone that is purposefully distinctly Scottish.

Another way we feel the presence of these writers' Scottish nationality is through their presentations of particular class struggles. The experience of the Scottish people varied greatly between different social classes yet there were mutual struggles shared by the Scots people as a whole. The exploration of these issues so specific to the changing landscape of Scottish society amplifies the distinctly Scottish voices of these two authors despite that fact they give voice to very different classes of society. In *The Bride of Lammermoor* Scott explores the shift in power dynamics in the upper classes of Scotland's rural society. In the sixteenth century there was a shift in power away from the ancient families and clans of Scotland to metropolitan educated businessmen often associated with the crown (Cathcart,210). Scott symbolises this struggle for power with the feud between the Ravenswoods and the Ashtons. We hear Edgar Ravenswood explicitly comment on this shift in power when he proclaims that "we sink under the force of the law, now too powerful for Scottish chivalry" (Scott,155). By doing this, Scott categorises the Ravenswoods as part of the 'we' that is being oppressed by the law. This dynamic power struggle between the upper classes is very distinctive to Scotland as the clan system was not present in other parts of Britain at the time. Scott places the novel not just in the context of general medieval Britain but Scotland, his characters face issues and obstacles unique to Scottish society. It is interesting to consider that perhaps Scott is so fascinated with this encroachment of civilised society on the clan structures because they are effectively his ancestors. Although of course the Ashtons are not Scott's true ancestors, they are the predecessors of his place in society. Scott grew up and was educated in Edinburgh before purchasing a country estate (Miller,103), his life holds undeniable similarities to that of William Ashton. It can be suggested that Scott saw a somewhat autobiographical aspect to his novel. This insightful investigation into the lives of Scotland's rural upper classes does not merely create that strong Scottish voice throughout the novel. It also deconstructs and examines a monumental shift in power that is rarely exposed. Scott brings attention and light to the complexities of Scottish society which is often looked at as being wild and unstructured (McCrone,56), which he seeks to dispel by giving what he views as a more accurate voice to the Scottish upper classes in *The Bride of Lammermoor.*

Burns too explores the structures and issues faced by rural Scots yet he offers a voice to working classes of Scottish society. Although *To a Mouse* is often seen as simply intended to amuse and entertain, when we begin to deconstruct it, we see it tells us a lot about the realities of life for the rural Scot. The dialect employed throughout the poem is consistent

with that of the rural Scot (Pittock,8). Burns employs phonetic spelling and colloquialisms which Wesling claims imposes the accent of the narrator upon any reader regardless of their own accent (Wesling,304) This becomes apparent in the infamous opening stanza of the poem: “WEE, sleekit, cow’rin’, tim’rous beastie” (Burns,109). Immediately, it is established that we are in the world of the Scots, the language understandable yet strange to a speaker of standard English, but instantly recognisable to anyone as the common tongue of the majority of Scots (Currie,268). As I have previously mentioned life was changing for the upper classes in terms of power, however, as modern technology advanced and Scotland and England became joined, change was greatly felt throughout Scotland (Pittock,8). Burns, like his mouse, was beginning to find himself facing troubling times as a farmer and a Scot. It was not only Burns’ personal station but the entire value of his social class that was diminishing (Pittock,9). Burns once wrote in a letter that his quality of life was so poor that he “could exchange lives at any time [with the farm animals]” (Hogg and Noble,96) In the final stanza of his address, Burns professes his jealousy of the simple life of the mouse, unburdened by the afflictions of contemplation, retrospect and foresight (Burns,110). It can be suggested that perhaps Burns’ worries were in regard to the quickly changing nature of Scotland and its uncertain future ahead after the acts of union. It is well known that Burns was a staunch Jacobite through some of his more political works in favour of Scottish independence such as Scots Wha Hae (Burns,330), where he equates English rule to “[c]hains and slaverie” (Burns,330). Though not explicitly mentioned in this poem, one of the main reasons that life changed so drastically for the lower classes was due to the uncertainty of where the power lay in the upper classes - as I have previously explored in *The Bride of Lammermoor*. The clan leaders who had controlled the lands that the lower classes had worked and inhabited for centuries was slowly but surely falling under new rule (Cathcart,210). Because of this, Burns’ desire to lead a simple life like that of his mouse may have appealed to many Scots at the time. There can be no doubt when we arrive at the conclusion, that the working class that Burns explores is not just a generic interchangeable group of peasants. They are Scots, with Scottish humour, Scottish struggles and a Scottish tongue.

As previously discussed, there is no single Scottish voice to encapsulate the experience of a nation. There are, however, aspects of Scottish society which transcend social classes. Oral tradition for example, is present at every level of Scottish society. It brings people from different backgrounds together, connecting them to their ancestors. It is a phenomenon that although not exclusive to Scotland, certainly boasts a strong presence there.

By exploring the world of oral tradition in their literary exploits, Burns and Scott contextualise their works into the rich tapestry of Scottish storytelling – a world often left unexplored. Another key thread we see in the tapestry of Scottish culture and society is that of superstition and belief in the supernatural. In *Tam o' Shanter* and *The Bride of Lammermoor,* Burns and Scott investigate the power of superstition and belief in the supernatural and how that belief can shape the course of lives. Their respective works offer great insight into the importance of belief in Scottish society. Lastly, we see Burns and Scott delve into the study of the internal structures of the Scottish class system which is greatly complex and in somewhat uncharted territory. In conclusion, throughout their works, Burns and Scott create a strong and distinctive Scottish narrative. This is important as it offers a sense of validity to a language and culture often seen as invalid in the academic and literary world. The Scottish voices employed by Burns and Scott in their work live on in their legacy.

Works Cited

Barry, Sean. "'GETTING FOU': *Antiquarianism and Embodied Poetics In Robert Burns's 'Tam O'Shanter*.'" ELH, vol. 83, no. 4, 2016, pp. 1009–1041.

Broadie, Alexander. "Science and Enlightenment*" The Scottish Enlightenment: the Historical Age of the Historical Nation,* Birlinn Ltd., 2007.

Burns, Robert. *Burns's Poetical Works*. Oxford UP, 1904, Great Britain.

Cathcart, Alison. *Kinship and Clientage : Highland Clanship, 1451-1609*. Brill, 2006.

Course, Magnus. "Changelings: Alterity beyond Difference.". *Folk Life,* Vol. 55, No. 1, 2017.

Curle, A. O. *"Superstition in Scotland of To-Day."* The Scottish Historical Review, vol. 9, no. 35, 1912, pp. 263–267.

Currie, J. *The works of Robert Burns with an account of his life, and a criticism on his writings. To which are prefixed, some observations on the character and condition of the Scottish peasantry. In four volumes,* Volume 1, Gale, 1800.

Bruford, A.J., "Introduction", *Scottish Traditional Tales,* Birlinn, 2017.

Harris, Jason Marc. "Perilous Shores: the Unfathomable Supernaturalism of Water in 19th-Century Scottish Folklore." *Mythlore*, vol. 28, no. 12, 2009, p. 5-23.

Henderson, Lizanne. "Fixing the Limits of Belief" *Witchcraft and Folk Belief in the Age of Enlightenment,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, London.

Hogg, Patrick., and Andrew Noble. "Letters of Burns". *The Canongate Burns*, Canongate, 2001, Edinburgh.

Macaulay, Cathlin. "Dipping into the Well: Scottish Oral Tradition Online." *Oral Tradition*, vol. 27 no. 1, 2012. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/ort.2012.0000.

McCrone, David et al. *Scotland – the Brand*, Edinburgh UP, 1995, Edinburgh.

Miller, Emma Rose. *"Fact, Fiction, or Fantasy: Scott's Historical Project and The Bride of Lammermoor."* Wenshan Review: Literature and Culture, vol. 13, no. 1, 2019, pp. 101–127

Pittock, Murray. "Robert Burns." *Scottish and Irish Romanticism*, Oxford UP, 2008, pp. Chapter 6

Scott, Walter. *The Bride of Lammermoor*. J. M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1906, London.

Smith, Donald. *Storytelling Scotland*, Polygon, 2001, Edinburgh.

Wesling, Donald. "Mikhail Bakhtin and the social poetics of dialect." *Papers on Language & Literature*, vol 29, no. 3, 1993, pp. 303-306.

Further Reading

Mackay, James A. RB : a Biography of Robert Burns. Mainstream Publ., 1992

Sutherland, John, et al. The Life of Walter Scott : a Critical Biography. Blackwell, 1995.

Brown, Ian, and Berton, Jean. Roots and Fruits of Scottish Culture. Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2014.

Henderson, Lizanne. Fantastical Imaginations : the Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture. J. Donald, 2009.

Bartie, Angela, and McIvor, Arthur. “Oral History in Scotland.” Scottish Historical Review, vol. 92, no. Supplement, 2013, pp. 108–136