‘The hour approaches, Tam maun ride’: Tam o’ Shanter and the Uncanny Scottish Gothic

By Oliver Robinson-Sivyer

When Horace Walpole discredited the *Fragments of ancient poetry* (1760) – a ‘found’ manuscript purportedly written by Ossian and published by James Macpherson – only to then publish his own ‘found’ manuscript four years later, the Gothic literary aesthetic became a nationalist battleground. In ‘The Politics and Poetics of the “Scottish Gothic” from Ossian to Otranto and Beyond’,[1] Carol Margaret Davison’s analysis of the relationship between *Fragments* and Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* points to Scotland as the landscape in which the Gothic originated and was stolen from: it is through the lens of the stolen and forgotten north that a rebellion may be literarily presented. A ‘Scottish variant of the Gothic’, as Duncan Petrie explains, ‘is frequently tied to the trauma and identity crisis that followed Scotland’s Union with England in 1707 and its subsequent status as a “stateless nation”.’[2] Given the nature of Scottish tradition to look to the past, and in congruence with Gothic retrospective qualities, Petrie proposes that ‘the past comes to assume a particular significance in its power to haunt […] Scottish cultural expression. This perspective also invokes the (seemingly inescapable) figure of duality that has dominated Scottish cultural analysis.’[3]

Synonymous with Scotland more so than any other literary figure, Robert Burns’s status as Caledonia’s bard enabled him to speak for the nation. In one of his most influential works, *Tam o’ Shanter* (1790), and its embodiment of the anxieties of the nation, we find the origins of the Scottish Gothic as we know it today. The poem tells the tale of Tam, a farmer, and his return home after a market day in Ayr. Hedonistic excess leads to Tam being chased by a ‘hellish legion’ (l. 188), from which he eventually escapes via the Brig o’ Doon in accordance with the superstition that demons cannot cross a body of running water. As Tam escapes, his horse’s tail is removed, providing a permanent warning to Ayr farmers about immorality. First published in Francis Grose’s omnibus *Antiquities of Scotland*,

the tale of *Tam o' Shanter* not only involves a significant bridge – it *is* the significant bridge between Scottish tradition and the Gothic aesthetic, enabling Burns to cement the Scottish Gothic as a viable and distinct literary genre.

In 'Robert Burns and the Scottish Bawdy Politic', Hamish Mathison argues that Burns had established his Scottish Gothic prior to publishing *Tam o' Shanter*, in the 1785 poem *Death and Doctor Hornbook*. Though the points made by Mathison are valid, he does not consider the anxieties of identity that Petrie establishes as a hallmark of the Scottish Gothic. Rather, *Hornbook* illustrates 'a localism centred on the vulnerable individual body', which Mathison argues is 'Scottish Gothic poetry's most distinctive feature'.[4] Arguably, Tam's palimpsestic treatment of local legend, gender and Scottish supernatural knowledge better highlights Burns's Scottish Gothic with stronger, and perhaps more revised, thematic technique. *Tam O Shanter: A Tale* can, then, be regarded as the polished manifesto for the Scottish Gothic, a point highlighted by the 2001 anthology *Damage Land: New Scottish Gothic Fiction*, edited by Alan Bissett. *Tam o' Shanter* is listed at the beginning of the collection's chronological bibliography, with Bissett admitting 'though the first [entry] is a poem; it would have been a dreadful omission'.[5] Tam's appearance on the list, right at the start, positions the poem as the definitive genesis of the literature now regarded as official Scottish Gothic.

Written in iambic tetrameter couplets, *Tam o' Shanter* shows Burns adhering structurally to a verse form long-established in Scotland by writers including John Barbour and Sir David Lindsay and through which he creates a distinct performative voice to tell his tale. At 224 lines the poem is an epic, which Burns acknowledges by quoting from another example of the form – Gavin Douglas's translation of Virgil's poem *The Aeneid*, 'Of Brownyis and of Bogillis full is this buke' – that further serves to foreshadow the poem's supernatural content.[6] At first glance, the poem is a cautionary tale of the 'dangers of drink and sex',[7] but one must look deeper to read *Tam o' Shanter* in respect of the Scottish Gothic. A political and nationalist reading emboldens the end results which are, themselves, controversial. In the poem, this controversy is presented through gender, a prevailing theme due to the inversions and conflicts that arise throughout between the masculine and feminine.

An epic is 'a long narrative poem celebrating the great deeds of one or more legendary heroes, in a grand ceremonious style',[8] with the hero typically a male of noble disposition. To begin, Burns uses the mock-epic nature to criticise Tam, to whom we are introduced as readers through the silent frustration of his wife, Kate:

> *Whare sits our sulky, sullen dame,*
> *Gathering her brows like gathering storm,*
> *Nursing her wrath to keep it warm.*
> *This truth fand honest Tam o' Shanter*
> *(ll. 10–13)*

As we soon find out, Tam is already in conflict between his friend 'Souter Johnie' and his 'ain wife', Kate; Burns's tongue-in-cheek description of our 'honest' hero, who has incurred his wife's 'wrath' against which his trustworthiness is framed, brings gender to the fore of the tale. Kate represents the safe familiar space – the realm of home, morality and sobriety – and the voice of reason: 'How monie lengthen'd sage advices / the husband frae the wife despises!' (ll. 35–36). Yet Burns turns these qualities on their head through the use of mocking sibilance, 'sits our sulky, sullen dame' (l. 10), to show Kate dampening Tam's spirit. In contrast, his feelings for Johnie are fond and fraternal – he 'lo'ed him like a very brither' – despite being a poor influence, the two having 'been fou for weeks thegither' (ll. 43–44). The juxtaposition of the inn's warmth, drunken excess and its loving atmosphere contrasts the cold and wet sibilance of Kate. The influence of drink, excess and extramarital proclivity in the homosocial space with Johnie is celebrated whereas the morality and sobriety of Kate is scorned. Despite this, Tam's duty to his wife wins out: 'The hour approaches, Tam maun ride' (l. 68). Kate, it appears, represents the first instance of Burns's underlying gender subversion: women are the power and drive the narrative. It is through Kate's sobering hold over Tam that we see a dramatic change, not only in tone, but stylistically and linguistically. After the hubristic stanza of Tam in ecstasy at the inn – 'Care, mad to see a man sae happy, […] O'er the ills of life victorious!' (ll. 53–58) – the seventh stanza provides stark contrast:

> *But pleasures are like poppies spread:*
> *You seize the flow'r, its bloom is shed;*
> *Or like the snow falls in the river,*

A moment white – then melts forever;
Or like the borealis race,
That flit ere you can point their place;
Or like the rainbow's lovely form
Evanishing amid the storm –
(ll. 59–66)

This sudden and incongruous reflection on pleasure as fleeting written stylistically in, as Daiches puts it, perfect 'English neo-classic poetic diction'.[9] This thematic chiaroscuro is jarring and the shift from warmth to the 'snow' and 'storm' conjures up the influence of Kate over the joy Tam experienced in the inn, but this stanza has political connotations, too. The excess and fun of the preceding stanzas are halted by this sudden transition to English. The linguistic shift mirrors the act Burns had to maintain for his anglocentric literary peers, trying 'uncomfortably to present himself to genteel Edinburgh as the natural man the literati discussed in their theoretical works'.[10] Burns's disjuncture of language illustrates the conflict of identity he experienced in literati circles. This, too, is a disruption of Scottish identity, a dramatic contrast of reflective, morose anxiety. The political subtext of this insertion provides further criticism when viewed ethnographically, with the negativity a commentary on the Gothic dispute for the nation's literary imagination. The invasive English here represents the Radcliffean English Gothic's attempt to claim Scotland, as seen in *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789). Burns highlights this invasion, but implements Scotland's literary strength in poetry to assert dominance of the genre. Burns's execution of flawless English poetry alongside his strong Scots lyric shows dominion over the English Gothic invader in the context of Daiches's statement, that 'the one phase of Scottish literature in which the literati consistently failed' was 'that of poetry'. Through this, Burns effectively bolsters the Scottish Gothic themes of identity and mourning.

Returning to the story, we are introduced to another prominent, doomed female figure: Meg, Tam's horse. If Kate is the driving force to return home, Meg is the vehicle – and the story's real hero. The introduction of Meg – 'Weel mounted on his gray mare, Meg' (l. 79) – is another instance of Burns's gender criticism that further highlights the mock-epic nature of the poem. Here, Meg is the Scottish Uncanny, with Burns subverting the expectation of the hero to be astride a noble

white steed. As Timothy Baker explains, prior to its incorporation into the English Gothic aesthetic, the uncanny was a Scottish imagining: 'Critics of the uncanny, itself often associated with Gothic, or even used as the primary definition of Gothic, similarly point to Scotland as a chief exemplar.'[11] Instilling the uncanny in Meg shows Burns laying another staking claim for Scotland, and this inversion from noble steed to mare holds further significance. It is Meg who saves Tam from the 'hellish legion' at her own expense; she retains her nobility, sacrificing her body for Tam. She is not black but grey, her colour indicating a lesser purity than a white male counterpart as well as an uncanny uncertainty that reflects Scotland. At the end of the poem, it is Meg who is permanently marked through transgressive male immorality. However, the final didactic lines – 'Think! ye may buy the joys o'er dear, / Remember Tam o' Shanter's mare' (ll. 223–24) – leave readers with an abrupt ending that shows no consequence for the mock-hero. Here, Burns criticises the heroic expectation of Tam and shows him to be saved by the female as opposed to the expected inverse.

Tam views the sabbath with the cautious Meg. Here, we are introduced to the final female influence: Nannie, the witch-antagonist of the tale, whom Tam labels 'Cutty-sark' (l. 105). Despite being a young witch Nannie is destined for growth in power, a looming threat acknowledged, as Daiches comments, by 'a parenthetical description of her that once she grew to her full witch status she would do serious damage'.[12] This dramatic irony only enhances the stakes of Tam's leering, his overt masculinity ultimately his downfall. Naming her 'cutty-sark' – meaning short nightdress – commoditises Nannie despite her significantly higher power. To Tam, Nannie is a consumable female and his drunken male gaze Gothicises her into a sexual object. Tam's overt masculinity as voyeur drives him to, drunkenly, pleasure himself at the scene:

> *Thir breeks o mine, my only pair,*
> *That ance were plush, o guid blue hair,*
> *I wad hae gi'en them off my hurdies,*
> *For ae blink o the bonie burdies!*
> *(ll. 155–58)*

Whilst this appears to be the narrator telling Tam of what he would sacrifice to see the witches, it is also the comical drunken thought process as Tam removes

his breeches. This consuming of Nannie gathers momentum as she does. Her movement even excites Satan and drives him to improve his piping. With such sexual power, we see Tam's temptation come to breaking point:

> *Even Satan glowr'd, and fidg'd fu fain,*
> *And hotch'd and blew wi might and main:*
> *Till first ae caper, syne anither,*
> *Tam tint his reason a' thegither,*
> *And roars out, 'Weel done, Cutty sark!'*
> *And in an instant all was dark:*
> *(ll. 185–190)*

This is Tam's only utterance, and it is an ejaculation; both verbal and physical. This culmination in overt masculine pleasure is promptly quashed by a darkness led by the monstrous feminine, Nannie. This is a sobering moment of horror for Tam. As Botting explains:

> *It is the moment of negative sublime, a moment of freezing, contraction and horror which signals a temporality that cannot be recuperated by the mortal subject. Horror marks the response to an excess that cannot be transcended.*[13]

The fact that Burns writes the response of darkness, but does not use it to conclude the stanza, shows the very abrupt and horrific response to excess. The Scottish Gothic supernatural tropes of the sabbath and the result of Tam's overt masculinity are effective teachings of morality. Botting continues, 'the supernatural is revealed to be no more than hypocrisy or the concealment of very human crimes'.[14] The sabbath is uncanny given its supernatural nature in its mirroring of the inn: both are gatherings, places of ecstasy, and deal heavily with the immorally excessive. In the male sphere, we see extra-marital activity and drink; in the sabbath we see physical exertion in the case of the witches who 'swat and reekit' until they 'coost their duddies to the wark' (ll. 148–49) and consort in ritualistic practices with the devil. This mirroring of immoral individuals – Tam and Nannie – casting off their clothes for their indulgences, shows a gendered uncanny duality, separated by Burns's Gothic supernatural.

The poem's conclusion sees masculinity defeated, influenced and saved at the

hands of feminine power. This is a fantastical story, but what if it is too fantastical? If Tam survives this and the only evidence to show for it is a tailless horse, then perhaps this is a fabrication of events? As Cammy Goodall states:

> *After a market day in Ayr, [he] spends a little too much time in the pub and he makes a habit of this, and he's got to concoct a story to tell his wife when he comes home […] particularly because he's lost a bet, and someone has cut the tail off his horse.*[15]

The removal of a phallic tail is an insult to the masculinity of the horse's owner. However, Tam's tale could be a Scottish Gothic reimagining of events to inspire a romanticised heroic story. This is consistent with Punter's argument:

> *the principal point is that these different versions of a 'minor' incident also constitute (re)writings of history and the attempt to expunge the story of a humiliation; or, even more, to replace it by an alternative version.*[16]

This alternative version theory demonstrates this Punterian explanation of a Scottish Gothic trope. Much like the romanticising of the Jacobite rising, the alternative version defends the psyche of a defeated Scotland – Tam – and presents a duality in this history. If Punter is correct, then Tam is Burns's manifesto to illustrate this anxiety, seizing back control from England when politics cannot. In reclaiming the Gothic aesthetic, Burns does so defiantly through the one medium the literati failed: poetry.

The duality of stifled patriotism encapsulates the anxiety many Scots felt after an uncomfortable Union. The Gothic and Scots traditions vocalise these anxieties in an articulate manner. Within the anglo-centric battle for literary dominance, Burns's Scottish Gothic was formed. While the Scottish Gothic continues to capture imaginations with the seminal works of Stevenson, Scott and Hogg, it is arguably to Burns they owe this lineage. His epic relates the Uncanny to concepts of gender, morality and identity, allowing Scots tradition to find solace. Burns's culmination is this defiant nationalist genre. *Tam o' Shanter: A Tale* is named so intentionally: this homophonous 'tale' is a story of pride, the tail itself a gothic body metaphor whose meaning, much like Scottish identity, is uncertain. The gendered reading of male immorality and female heroism offers an inverted

understanding of the masculine and feminine. Although Meg, the heroic female and representative of Scotland, loses her tail – part of herself – to the supernatural Uncanny, her marked and defeated body returns to the Scottish homeland of familiar space, transforming defeat into defiance. Whilst Burns' mock-epic was noble in will and origin, let it be known that he started it with the rear end of a horse.

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(c) The Bottle Imp