

## Burns, Satan, and the sin of rhyme

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DOI:

[10.3366/rom.2022.0562](https://doi.org/10.3366/rom.2022.0562)

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*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Ward, M 2022, 'Burns, Satan, and the sin of rhyme', *Romanticism*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 208-221.

<https://doi.org/10.3366/rom.2022.0562>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

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Matthew Ward

## **Burns, Satan, and the Sin of Rhyme**

### Keywords:

Burns, the comic demonic, Satan, Romantic poetry, rhyme, ribaldry.

### Abstract:

In this article I consider the ways that two of the chief influences on Burns's creative life, the satanic and the sexual, are bedfellows and reveal Romantic ribaldry. Both sources of inspiration were discovered in his youth; both appear as mysterious, uncontrollable impulses that are not only depicted with humour but also suggest that, for Burns, comedy is drawn from and aligned with transgressive powers that are instinct with the making of poetry. Burns's comic demonic is crucial to appreciating the distinctive character of his writing, but it also allows us to better appreciate the ways in which the ridiculous is aligned with the Romantic. Burns was no 'Heaven-taught ploughman' as we know. Though he played up to the image, he must have been tickled by it too, given how far from 'heaven taught' he liked to imagine his muses being. The laughter of Burns's Satanism provides a vital contrast to the sublime, visionary company we have long associated with Romanticism. Encouraged by and combining the bawdier moments of Milton's *Paradise Lost* with the supernaturalism of rural Scottish folklore, Burns's comic demonic is something we would do well to take more seriously if not more solemnly as regards Romantic Satanism.

## **Burns, Satan, and the Sin of Rhyme**

In August 1787, one year after the publication of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* brought him fame, and freshly returned from being lauded by Edinburgh's literati, Robert Burns wrote a 'history of MYSELF' to Dr John Moore.<sup>1</sup> Originally from Glasgow, Moore had by this time resided in London for almost a decade, and was something of a minor literary celebrity since the publication

of *A View of Society and Manners in France, Switzerland, and Germany* in 1779. Frances Dunlop, friend of both Moore and Burns, sent the physician a copy of the Kilmarnock edition in 1786 and encouraged their correspondence. Burns delayed writing to Moore for several months, but the eventual letter, outlining the formative influences on his life and poetry, is an artfully constructed, self-conscious performance that combines eighteenth-century manners with rustic charm. Keen to promote still further his reputation south of the border and play up to the qualities of authentic passions and native genius with which he was associated, Burns practises the art of litotes so familiar in his poetry, rhetorically downplaying his talents in order to talk up his evolution as a poet whilst identifying that growth with particular kinds of emotional experiences in his youth.

In this article I consider the ways that two of the chief influences on Burns's creative life referred to in the letter, the satanic and the sexual, are bedfellows and reveal Romantic ribaldry. Both sources of inspiration were discovered in his youth; both appear as mysterious, uncontrollable impulses that are not only depicted with humour but also suggest that, for Burns, comedy is drawn from and aligned with transgressive powers that are instinct with the making of poetry. What I am calling the comic demonic is crucial to appreciating the distinctive character of Burns's writing, but it also enables us to better appreciate how the ridiculous is aligned with the Romantic. The laughter of Burns's Satanism offers a comic riposte to, or interlude from, the sublime company that have long been centre-stage in Romanticism. Similarly, while critical focus on Milton's influence on Romantic poets focuses on how they are said to have developed from him a faith in the revolutionary power of the imagination to compensate for the failure of political revolutions, or the political and moral character of the Satanic School, I detail a rude and rhyming Miltonic inheritance via Burns that combines with the supernaturalism of rural Scottish folklore. Though he associated the rise and fall of his poetic imagination with the trajectory of 'Lucifer' (*Letters*, i. 123), Burns's comic demonic treads its own funny path, one we'd do well to take more seriously if not more solemnly as a way of better appreciating humorous forms of Romantic Satanism.

Though Burns played up to the image of a 'Heaven-taught ploughman' he must have been tickled by it too, given how far from heaven taught he saw his muses being:

I owed much to an old Maid of my Mother's, remarkable for her ignorance, credulity and superstition. – She had, I suppose, the largest collection in the county of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraips, giants, enchanted towers, dragons and other trumpery. – This cultivated the latent seeds of Poesy; but had so strong an effect on my imagination, that to this hour, in my nocturnal rambles, I sometimes keep a sharp look-out in suspicious places; and though nobody can be more sceptical in these matters than I, yet it often takes an effort of Philosophy to shake off these idle terrors. (*Letters*, i. 135).

This is typically Burnsian in the way it combines scepticism and satire toward the supernatural forces and superstitious beliefs he grew up on, with pleasing self-mockery about his own susceptibility to being seduced by them, and comic acknowledgement of how the irrational continues to shape his vision of things. The phantasmagoric and ludicrously expanding catalogue of rural folklore is reduced to 'trumpery', which carries its French etymology of 'deceit, fraud, imposture, trickery', amidst reference to abstractions or beliefs, ceremonies, practices, or ornaments considered idle or superstitious.<sup>2</sup> Burns plays on another meaning still current for things 'Of little or no value; trifling, paltry, insignificant', the joke being that these trivialities sparked his nascent imagination and continued to hold a powerful sway over him. These foolish 'idle terrors' that take an effort of philosophy to shake off are also what 'cultivated the latent seeds of Poesy', while Burns's vernal imagery and rural setting combine to locate the supernatural in the bucolic, and amidst the feelings of his 'boyish days'.

Burns then reminisces about his adolescence working on the farm when

I first committed the sin of RHYME. – You know our country custom of coupling a man and woman together as Partners in the labors of Harvest. – In my fifteenth autumn, my Partner was a bewitching creature who just counted an autumn less...she altogether unwittingly to herself, initiated me in a certain delicious Passion, which...I hold to be the first of human joys, our dearest pleasure here below...the tones of her voice made my heartstrings thrill like an Eolian harp...my pulse beat such a furious rataan when I looked and fingered over her hand, to pick out the nettle-stings and thistles. – Among her other love-inspiring qualifications, she sung sweetly; and 'twas her favourite reel to which I attempted giving an embodied vehicle in rhyme. (*Letters*, i. 137).

The 'sin of RHYME' captures Burns's licentious creative instincts; it puts a more salacious spin on the sentimentally pitched assertion in the Preface to the Kilmarnock edition that he was 'a Rhymer from his earliest years, at least from the earliest impulses of the softer passions'.<sup>3</sup> This 'sin of RHYME' pairs the blossoming of his passion for poetry with the burgeoning of carnal desires, sex with aesthetics. As with Sterne, whom he admired greatly and learned much from, Burns's sentimentalism is accompanied by sexual innuendo. The combination of affection and eroticism recalls the amatory performance of sentimental fiction, as emotions mingle with sensual thrills. The witty rendering of his tender and sexually charged attention toward her 'nettle-stings' picks up on those 'heartstrings' that 'thrill like an Eolian harp', while to speak of the 'tones of her voice' and the 'beat' of his 'pulse' is to gesture toward the cadence of verse. The experience inspired song at the time, while (in retrospect) Burns delights in associating the instincts of the body with his impulse to make art: 'Thus with me began Love and Poesy', Burns concludes. Elsewhere he says 'I never had the least thought, or inclination, of turning Poet, till I got once heartily in love; & then

Rhyme & Song were, in a manner the spontaneous language of my heart'.<sup>4</sup> Adam's dream of Eve in *Paradise Lost* colours Burns's own Eden:

her looks [...] from that time infused  
Sweetness into my heart, unfelt before,  
And into all things from her air inspired  
The spirit of love and amorous delight.<sup>5</sup>

It is a passage Burns knew well.<sup>6</sup> Yet Burns revels in the fact that love and poetry are steeped in sin from the start, while one senses that it was the 'houghmagandie' (his preferred Scots term for fornication) that got his quill most in a quiver.<sup>7</sup> The euphemistic 'country custom' puts in view (and in earshot) what sort of 'coupling' this was.

There are good reasons to think that when Burns refers to 'the sin of RHYME' he uses rhyme as a synonym for poetry. A writer of misrule, he imagined his poetry as a form of disobedience that went against the grain of religious piety and cultural propriety. Hence, a little later in the letter he refers to "The Holy Fair" and 'Holy Willie's Prayer' meeting with 'a roar of applause' even as the latter 'alarmed the kirk-Session so much that they held three several meetings to look over their holy artillery, [to see] if any of it was pointed against profane Rhymers' (i. 144). To talk of oneself as a rhymer is to affect a kind of self-effacement about one's poetry: the OED gives 'rhymer' as 'a poet whose verses are of inferior quality', as well as simply 'a poet who uses rhyme'.<sup>8</sup> Burns liked to present himself as both, and downplaying his poetry was also a means of toying with what constitutes value in the first place. His references to being a rhymer are often done with mock humility, as in 'Second Epistle to Davie' where the litotes of calling his writing 'my puir, silly, rhymin' clatter' (6) becomes part of an ironic refrain proving his virtuosity – or, as Burns put it, his 'hiltie, skiltie...scrivin'" (36).

There are equally just reasons for believing that Burns's 'sin of RHYME' is about rhyme specifically as well as poetry generally. The phrase recalls his rude rhymes and invites us to wonder about the relation between carnal pleasures and the act of rhyming. His reference to 'our country custom of coupling a man and woman together as Partners in the labors of Harvest' implies a natural link in rural life between toiling in the fields and sweating through other means (where all tends to the fruits of the earth). Yet 'coupling' likewise weds Burns's amorous and rustic ways with the erotics of rhyme. As Burns points out, poetry is an 'embodied vehicle'; to rhyme is to pair up words or couple them off. A rhyme is a conjunction, a word which in Burns's time still referred to sexual union. Rhyme encourages expectation, anticipation, gratification; it brings moments to climax, and occasionally anti-climax. Rhyme encourages attention on the 'end' of a word, while in its 'backward allusion' it winks at 'words' back parts' as Gillian Beer tactfully puts it.<sup>9</sup> Rhyming words move through desire, only achieving their end as rhyme by bedding down with a word partner. The fecundity of rhyme was something Burns took pleasure in and produced poetic pleasure from. Many of the terms in 'Nature's Law' ('be fruitful and increase' 'share', 'correspondent breast', 'double portion', 'multiplying joys') might describe the agency of rhyme as easily as amorousness.<sup>10</sup> Burns loved approaching rhyme with sexual mischief: one of his poetic pranks was to rhyme 'Pater' and 'Mater' with 'Fornicator' for example, which has the advantage of being true even if it isn't something any of us want reminding of ('The Fornicator', 30-2, 38-40).

Rhyming is a way for Burns to imply links between his promiscuousness and poetic talent:

I am nae *Poet*, in a sense,  
 But just a *Rhymer* like by chance,  
 An' hae to Learning nae pretence;  
 Yet, what the matter?  
 Whene'er my Muse does on me glance,

I jingle at her ('Epistle to J. Lapraik', 49-54).

This is less about modesty and more to do with mischievously defining his craft on his own provocative terms. Burns presents himself as a poetic chancer: if his muse glances in his direction, why not 'jingle at her' and see what comes of it? The lines remind us of the chanciness inherent to rhyme – that while Burns is a rhymers by chance, rhyme itself plays through chance. That 'chance' / 'glance' not only weds the act of rhyme to his poetic muse but, with its full, confirmatory chime it adds an air of inevitability about it too. Burns flaunts just how naturally in tune his rhymes are with the source of poetic pleasure. Soon he tells the learned 'Critic-folk' with their 'jargon o' your Schools...Latin names...Grammers' that they would be better off 'taen up *spades* and *shools*, / Or *knappin-hammers*' (55-66). These implements, along with his 'pleugh or cart' serve as reminders of his skill, such that 'My Muse, tho' hamely in attire, / May touch the heart' (76-8). The sympathetic pitch to the affections belies the sexual undertones of his implements, since it isn't just hearts Burns talks of touching here. Byron would soon enjoy making euphemisms of his (poetic) instruments, and was also 'fond of rhyme, / Good workmen never quarrel with their tools' (*Don Juan*, I. 201). Burns's more rustic employment leaves even more room for it, particularly his 'ploughing'.

Still, amidst his bluster we have rhymes that don't quite come off. '[S]ense' extends to 'pretence', but can't quite fit with 'chance', even as that beds down easily with 'glance'. Ends of lines that in Standard Habbie are grouped round a single rhyme here become two, or force the reader to contort the sound into better sense. There is a kind of deliberate bathos in such moments, a risking of failure that relays the challenge of courting rhymes. Burns's deployment of the Standard Habbie – and his use of other demanding forms – is incredibly dexterous, but also draws attention to how easily a poet might be undone by his choice of instrument. In 'Epistle to James Smith' he announces 'I rhyme for *fun*' (30). Yet that light-hearted nonchalance skips around the fact that his versifying isn't effortless even as it produces satisfaction by often appearing easy. From the start



of this 'Epistle' we see how the pleasures of rhyme are bound up with the possibility of not bringing them to fruition. In the first stanza he resorts to the hackneyed 'hearts' / 'arts' (4, 6) for his dimeter lines, and by the second he offers the tautological: 'you' / 'you' (10, 12). Such moments perform the art of being undone by rhyme as well as the artfulness needed to employ them.<sup>11</sup> A rhymer like Burns, then, teeters on the brink of farce but by having invited it.

Rhyme is close kin to the superstitious and supernatural. Like superstition, rhyme encourages or confers meaning without rational merit, implies relations where none actually exist. Rhyme, we might say, is a superstitious enterprise. The idea that the occult is closely tied to poetic inspiration, meanwhile, has a long history stretching back in the West at least to the *Ion* where Plato suggests that poets are animated by a sort of daemonic possession. Poetry is something of 'a dark art, a form of magic', to borrow a phrase from Don Paterson, 'because it tries to change the way we perceive the world'.<sup>12</sup> Rhyme feels especially implicated in witchery (or, as Burns would have it, 'witchin') as it eerily summons strange sense out of circumstance. Michael O'Neill has said in these pages that 'Rhymes can rearrange the world', or at least kid us into thinking so, for 'their ability fundamentally to change it is a matter of scrutiny for Romantic poetry'.<sup>13</sup> Comic rhymes double-down in that regard, appearing to remake the world whilst playing through irony and the absurdity of the arbitrary. W. H. Auden spoke of the 'pure chance' of the 'effect of a comic rhyme' which means they are particularly good at creating the impression that it 'is as if the words, on the basis of their auditory friendship, had taken charge of the situation, as if, instead of an event requiring words to describe it, words had the power to create an event'.<sup>14</sup> In that doubled 'as if' – its teetering between belief and doubt, its gesture toward the power of coupling words combined with suspicion – hangs the whole effect of rhyme, and it is the stuff of comedy too.

A poem like 'Halloween' makes much of the union between the superstitious, the supernatural and the sexual, while its tumbling rhymes act as amusing reminders of the sort of courting going on in the poem:

The lasses staw frae 'mang them a'.

To pou their *stalks o' corn*;

But *Rab* slips out, an' jinks about,

Behint the muckle thorn:

He grippet *Nelly* hard an' fast'

Loud skirl'd a' the lasses;

But her *tap-pickle* maist was lost,

Whan kiutlan in the *Fause-house*

Wi' him that night (46-54).

This is another 'country custom' stirring Burns's imagination. His gloss on this moment, specifically line 47 and those '*stalks o' corn*', notes that one of the occult rituals at Halloween was for young women to 'go to the barnyard, and pull each, at three several times, a stalk of oats. If the third stalk wants the 'top pickle', that is, the grain at the top of the stalk, the party in question will come to the marriage bed anything but a Maid'.<sup>15</sup> The footnotes are part of Burns's 'rationalising paratexts' which for Nigel Leask 'work in ironic counterpoint to the verse, enforcing the poem's affectionate scepticism concerning popular belief'.<sup>16</sup> Evidently Nelly 'lost' her virginity to Rab, who 'slips out, an' jinks about' and grips her 'hard an' fast'. The rural supernaturalism and superstitious habits referred to throughout the poem wink at the overt carnal customs, or 'sport at night' (9) of the locals, while rhyme links those '*stalks o' corn*' – assumed to be central to the predictions for the future state of conjugal partners – with the 'kiutlin' (cuddling), and what's going on 'Behint the muckle thorn'. Burns's supernatural eroticism is produced and affirmed by the comically suggestive nature of those proliferating triple rhymes.

Thus far I have been suggesting some links between rhyme and the comic erotic of poetic making, and the supernatural and superstitious. I want to think for the remainder of this article about a distinctly Burnsian kind of Satanism not unrelated to all this which contrasts with the

visionary company of Romanticism. We might begin to do so by considering another biographical detail in the letter to Moore. There Burns turns from ‘the sin of RHYME’ to an allusion to *Paradise Lost*, which from its opening lines sings ‘Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit / Of that forbidden tree’ (l. 1-2). Burns informs Moore of ‘nocturnal rambles’ of a sexual sort – his pursuit of Margaret Thomson, known familiarly as Peggy – and relates them to the seduction of Eve by Satan:

I struggled on with my Sines and Co-sines for a few days more; but stepping out to the garden one charming noon, to take the sun’s altitude, I met with my Angel,

“Like Proserpine gathering flowers,  
Herself a fairer flower”

It was vain to think of doing any more good at school. – The remaining week I staid, I did nothing but craze the faculties of my soul about her, or steal out to meet with her; and the two last nights of my stay in the country, had sleep been a mortal sin, I was innocent. (i. 140-1).

Burns draws on Milton’s prolepsis of the Fall as a prefigurement of his own. The quotation from Book IV refers to the innocent Eve before her temptation by Satan later in the poem, an event which will leave her (in Adam’s words) ‘Defaced, deflowered, and now to death devote’ (IX. 901). Milton compares Eve to the fate of the classical Proserpina who was brutally seized by the king of the underworld. Recalling Milton’s simile, William Empson picked up on the ‘implications against Eve’, that ‘Proserpina, like Eve, was captured by the king of Hell, but she then became queen of it, became Sin’, while in ‘Milton’s scheme[...]Eve, we are to remember, becomes an ally of Satan when she tempts Adam to eat with her’.<sup>17</sup> Whether or not Burns saw himself as arch-tempter in

this scene, cruelly plucking the innocent flower, or preferred to view his own Eve as a willing ally in their co-sinning goes unsaid here. What is flagrantly on display, though, is that Burns wishes to relate his sinning to Satan. The archetypal transgressor grants Burns a context for his own disobedience.

Burns sets one variety of education off against another: 'Sines and Co-sines' hides in plain sight the 'mortal sin' to come. The linguistic play between 'Sines' and 'sin' moves between different rules in nature, such that attending to the laws of mathematics is outstripped by the primacy of carnal instincts. The wordplay here is of the 'worldly' eighteenth-century sort examined by Empson,<sup>18</sup> and reminds us, too, that '[t]he pun...carries a powerful charge of satisfaction', to borrow one of Derek Attridge's distinctions.<sup>19</sup> Granted, this isn't one of those puns where one word offers multiple meanings that fit within the context. Not, then, the sort that Milton himself used when describing the 'rural work' of Adam and Eve 'Among sweet dewes and flowers' where 'pampered boughs...needed hands to check / Fruitless embraces' (V. 211-5). There the euphemistic use of 'embraces' sits amidst a representation of mutual dependency in nature, and it is enhanced by the suggestiveness of 'boughs' and 'hands' – each of which can refer to parts of bodies. Neither is it the muse's 'glance' in Epistle to J. Lapraik' quoted earlier which might suggest not only 'a look' but also a gleam of light, capturing the flash of inspiration, and – more suggestively – the fleeting physical contact that makes Burns 'jingle at her'. Nor is it an instance of antanaclasis, a homonymic pun, where the same word is repeated but with different meanings. But punning can include '[t]he use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect; a play on words'.<sup>20</sup> 'Sines' and 'sin' is an example of the latter – known more specifically as paronomasia, a rhetorical figure in which we're offered a close resemblance between words that sound or look alike but differ in their meaning. Burns's 'Sines' and 'sin' plays upon variation whilst picking up on the resemblance in sight and fainter likeness of sound. As such it is a reminder that punning shares common accord with rhyming, not least that each relies on

similarity in difference.<sup>21</sup> We could say that ‘the rhetorical figure behind rhyming’ is the pun, and that ‘all rhymes are quasi-puns’, or perhaps that rhyme is ‘a glorified pun’.<sup>22</sup> With that in mind, in the next sections I turn to crude puns and rhyme in *Paradise Lost*.

Satan’s soaring rhetoric and Milton’s grand style have often been noted. Yet *Paradise Lost* also contains plenty of bawdy wordplay when the occasion grants it. Given that there is a ‘duplicity’ to the pun, and that ‘the pun is a mark of our fallen condition’,<sup>23</sup> it’s fitting that punning tends to proliferate amidst sin and devilment in the poem. An extended instance comes as Satan readies his legions and advises on the use of artillery, what the poem calls their ‘devilish enginery’ (VI. 553), during the war in Heaven:

Vanguard, to right and left the front unfold;  
That all may see who hate us, how we seek  
Peace and composure, and with open breast  
Stand ready to receive them, if they like  
Our overture, and turn not back perverse;  
But that I doubt, however witness heaven,  
Heaven witness thou anon, while we discharge  
Freely our part: ye who appointed stand  
Do as you have in charge, and briefly touch  
What we propound, and loud that all may hear. (VI. 558-67).

In the notes to the Longman edition Alastair Fowler rather humourlessly points out that the ‘pun on *touch* has been made so often [in the poem] that it now seems laboured’ (*PL*, 367). Still, there is something witty about the way Satan gradually builds the sexual connotations of warfare, while his words serve as an ‘overture’ to a violent embrace. His repetition of ‘stand’ encompasses ‘steadfast’ and the readiness of his legion to take a military position, but also a phallic connotation on ‘erect’

too blatant to name. That ‘discharge’ refers to the act of firing a weapon and carrying out or executing a task, but also plays on ‘excrete’ along with ‘ejaculate’, and ‘to achieve orgasm’, with the latter two beginning to be well-known as possible meanings of ‘discharge’ during Milton’s time.<sup>1</sup>

This Satanic section, which soon descends further into scatological humour offering obscene imagery of bowels, entrails and orifices, was infamous in the eighteenth century and discussed by writers Burns knew, which is why I’ve focused on it here. Burns credited *The Spectator* with advancing his knowledge of literature; it may well have been where he encountered *Paradise Lost* and extended commentaries on the poem for the first time.<sup>24</sup> Joseph Addison’s essays were instrumental in expanding upon the notion of Satan as the hero of the poem, and in developing the Miltonic sublime that would come to dominate visions of the poem in subsequent years. But Addison also addressed that ‘devilish enginery’, calling the passage ‘the most exceptionable in the whole Poem...nothing but a String of Puns, and those too very indifferent ones’.<sup>25</sup> While he believed these ‘sentiments which raise laughter, can very seldom be admitted with any decency into an heroic poem, whose business it is to excite passion of a much nobler nature’, Addison, like some others at the time, accepted that lewd punning was natural for rebel angels and soon to be devils.<sup>26</sup> One of the examples later given by Coleridge for a punning humour in fact was ‘Milton’s Devils’, explained by a ‘contemptuous Exultation in minds vulgarized and overset by their success’.<sup>27</sup> Walter Savage Landor declared that ‘the first overt crime of the refractory angels was *punning*: they fell rapidly after that’.<sup>28</sup> Where Addison’s critique focuses on matters of taste, Landor suggests the inferior quality of their wit, ‘worthy of newly-made devils who never had heard any before’.<sup>29</sup> Sharp readers of *Paradise Lost* realised that sardonic and vulgar wordplay is principally the domain of the devils – the low register ideal for angels who have fallen into bathos.

In ‘The Verse’ affixed to the fourth issue of *Paradise Lost* in 1668 Milton claimed that rhyme was ‘the invention of a barbarous age’, and that his ‘neglect’ of it, far from being a ‘defect...rather

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Discharge’, *OED Online*,  
<<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/53708?rskey=flijnC&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>>, [accessed 20 July 2020]

is to be esteemed an example set...of ancient liberty recovered to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming' (*Paradise Lost*, 54-5). The credo became a cause célèbre in the Romantic period, marking out the terrain of political and poetic measures. From Blake's infamous pronouncement that 'Poetry Fetter'd, Fetters the Human Race' (*Jerusalem*, Plate 3) to Leigh Hunt's search in *The Story of Rimini* for a 'freer spirit of versification',<sup>30</sup> poets keen to reprise the ideals of Milton's radical voice were inclined to hear 'the tinkling of rhyme as the clanking of prison chains', whatever they might have done in practice.<sup>31</sup> Yet *Paradise Lost* is actually far from being without rhyme. Like the coarse and caustic puns, they tend to occur amidst devilment or disobedience. For the purposes of this article space does not permit more than brief examples, though there's clearly more that could be said on the matter.<sup>32</sup> Satan's wordplay is sometimes woven with internal and end rhyme, eye rhymes and slant rhymes (all emphases mine):

Thither let us *tend*  
 From off the tossing of these fiery waves,  
 There rest, if any rest can harbour *there*,  
 And reassembling our afflicted powers,  
 Consult how we may henceforth most *offend*  
 Our *enemy*, our own loss how *repair*,  
 How overcome this dire *calamity*,  
 What reinforcement we may gain from hope,  
 If not what resolution from *despair* (I. 182-91).

Hell has lots of rhyme, but it occurs in Eden too, especially in moments connected to the Fall. Eve, whose name Milton uses as a homophonic pun so that language becomes self-fulfilling prophecy, 'O Eve, in evil hour' (IX. 1067), relays a dream when she mistook Satan's voice for Adam's and followed it to the tree of knowledge. Roused by Satan's words telling her she is

‘nature’s desire’, which looks ‘with ravishment / Attracted by thy beauty still to gaze’ Eve tells Adam that ‘alone I passed through ways / that brought me on a sudden to the Tree’ (V. 45-51). An echo of ‘gaze’ accompanies her solitary ‘ways’. She rhymes again to Adam when she admits her transgression and the implications of it for their future:

This happy trial of thy love, which else  
So eminently never had been *known*.  
Were it I thought death menaced would ensue  
This my attempt, I would sustain *alone* (IX. 975-78).

Eve falls into rhyme because of Satan and seems to fall, in part, because of it. After all, Satan archly employs rhyme in his seduction of her, saying;

[...] all that fair and good in thy *divine*  
Semblance, and in thy beauty’s heavenly ray  
United I beheld; no fair to *thine*  
Equivalent or second (IX. 606-9).

Here Satan encourages Eve’s vanity by praising her to the heavens through rhyme, entwining what’s ‘thine’ with the ‘divine’. A textually more ambiguous rhyme appears right at the moment of the Fall:

in evil hour  
Forth reaching to the Fruit, she plucked, she ate:  
Earth felt the wound, and nature from her seat  
Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe,



That all was lost. (IX. 780-4).

Early editions of the poem coupled 'eat' with 'seat'. As with the Longman quoted here, though, most modern editors either use 'ate', or retain 'eat' but point out it would probably have been pronounced 'ɛt'. However, Benjamin Lomas suggested that Milton could have intended a full rhyme in 'eat' / 'seat'.<sup>33</sup> At the very least Milton seems to have opted for an eye rhyme during the Fall, something that most modern editions obscure. If so, the discord between eye and ear feels fitting for such a seismic shift in Eve's perception of the world, while a half rhyme acts as a kind of fall from a perfect one.

Burns certainly appreciated Satan as a figure of sentiment as well as sublimity, while on several occasions he can come off sounding quintessentially Romantic:

I have bought a pocket Milton which I carry perpetually about with me in order to study the sentiments – the dauntless magnanimity; the intrepid, unyielding independence; the desperate daring, and noble defiance of hardship, in that great Personage, Satan. (*Letters*, I. 123).

This letter to William Nicol is written a few weeks before his correspondence with Moore. Here and elsewhere Burns's personal approval of Satan and belief in a dignified and defiantly independent fallen angel evokes the 'Satanic position' we strongly identify with a branch of Romanticism. Blake, Byron, and Percy Shelley, to name just three, have long been seen as diabolic readers of Milton's epic – constitutionally inclined to sympathize with the Devil because of what they interpreted as his resistance to arbitrary power. Like Milton, Satan was used in debates between Jacobins and reactionaries during the American War of Independence and at the outset of the French Revolution. In particular, radicals adopted him as their own. Godwin called Satan 'the spirit of opposition', a heroic character who 'bore his torments with fortitude, because he

disdained to be subdued by despotic power'.<sup>34</sup> Given his leanings it would be natural for there to be traces of the 'politically radical quality' of the Devil in Burns's writing too.<sup>35</sup>

It has become something of a critical commonplace to link a prophetic Milton with a visionary and revolutionary form of Romanticism, where (as Joseph Wittreich frames it) 'poems emerging from one moment of crisis could reflect upon, and explain, another crisis in history, when, once again, tyranny and terror ruled'.<sup>36</sup> There is a Bloomian chain of influence to this narrative, not the least in that Milton's turn toward the inner life after the failure of the English revolution has been seen as precursor to the Romantic visionary company whose revolutionary form of poetry revolves around idealism and the sublime power of poets.<sup>37</sup> M. H. Abrams's claim that Romanticism's move 'from outer revolution to a revolutionary mode of imaginative perception' is another of these deeply influential readings.<sup>38</sup>

Yet, for all that Burns shares some similarity with the devil's party of British Romanticism, it's the devilish punning and Satanic rhymes that tend to fire his imagination and represent another sort of Miltonic legacy. Rather than the sublime Satan, Burns tends to revel in the Satanic ridiculous. He delights in punning duplicity, scatological humour, and satiric mockery that is just as much a feature of Satan's character as the nobility and sublimity Romantic readings bestow. As Burns said, if you aspire to be one of 'the Sons of Satan' you naturally 'intend to write BAUDY' (*Letters*, I. 462). His approach to Satan thrives in being crudely at jest, plays through rude wit and double entendre, relishes lewdness and irreverence. And with his fondness for thinking of poetry as 'the sin of RHYME', Burns's rhyming evokes the fallen figures of *Paradise Lost*.

An eagerness to recall the ruder parts of Satan's nature is evidenced in poems like 'Address to the Deil'. First Burns hails Satan's sublimity and political import for his time via an epigraph drawn from *Paradise Lost*: "'O Prince, O chief of many throned pow'rs / That led th' embattl'd Seraphim to war'". But the poem itself offers a different register for comic effect, quickly dropping Satan down a rung or two by naming him in rather undignified company, and giving him a more dishevelled appearance than his more familiar sublime one:

O Thou! whatever title suit thee –  
 Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick, or Clootie –  
 Wha in yon cavern grim an' sootie,  
       Clos'd under hatches,  
 Spairges about the brunstane cootie,  
       To scaud poor wretches!

Hear me, *auld Hangie* [...] (1-7).

To give Milton's words pride of place only to subvert them is to act as a comic rebel or adversary to poetic authority—to perform a kind of comic Satanic. That first line comes off half respectful, half dismissive. The fallen angel has fallen into the realms of bathos, not least through the allusion to an early moment in Pope's *The Dunciad*: 'O Thou! whatever title please thine ear, / Dean, Drapier, Bickerstaff, or Gulliver' (19-20). Satan's saturnine disposition and hellish condition are burlesqued: he skulks 'in yon cavern grim an' sootie' and, later, has 'reetet duds, an reestet gizz' (98, smoky clothes and scorched wig), and a 'smoutie phiz' (99, smutty face). His filthy appearance confirms his crude intent, taking 'pleasure' in the pain of 'poor *damnèd bodies*' (8), and, with its faint suggestion of sexual kicks, in spanking and scalding 'poor dogs like me' just to 'hear us squeel' (11-2). Later in the poem Burns sounds both wistful and whimsical when recounting Satan's interference in 'Eden's bonie yard, / When youthfu' lovers first were pair'd' (85-6). Original sin is painted as a consequence of the sly trick of a prankster, as Burns refers to Satan as 'ye auld, snick-drawing dog! / Ye cam to Paradise incog, / An' play'd on man a cursed brogue' (91-3). Like Satan's actions towards Job, Burns realises that one reading of the poem is that Paradise was lost by a 'Spitefu joke' (102).

In 'Address of Beelzebub' the Devil appears malign and all-powerful. 'Deil', in contrast, sees Satan's power principally in superstition and the fact that (in a further nod to *Paradise Lost*) his actions cannot be fully traced by a poet 'In Prose or Rhyme' (114). This provides ample opportunity for salacious jokes and sexual innuendo, perhaps nowhere more so than when Burns lays the blame for problems with the male member on devilish interference:

Thence, mystic knots mak great abuse  
On *Young-Guidmen*, fond, keen an' croose;  
When the best *warklum* i' the house,  
By cantraip wit,  
Is instant made no worth a louse,  
Just at the bit (61-6).

A 'warklum' (or 'work-tool') is, as the editor of the Oxford edition of Burns's poems and songs reminds us, an old sexual metaphor in Scots.<sup>39</sup> Burns's pun, then, suggests that the man's 'tool' loses potency at the least opportune moment. The 'cantraip wit' alludes to a kind of magical knowledge that can cast its spell on the '*Young-Guidmen*' to make them incapable of finishing things off. But it also suggests the magical qualities of wit – the way it (humorously or otherwise) conjures an association of ideas. Here the association is between devilment and intercourse embedded in the superstition (which itself plays through an association of ideas), while the comedy of rhyme (especially 'wit' / 'bit') encourages a connection between the spells and the failure to come to completion.

Just as they had in the years after the English civil war, *Paradise Lost* and the figure of Satan sparked debates in the latter half of the eighteenth century around the source and legitimacy of power. Foregrounded by the epigraph's attention toward the 'Prince' and 'chief of many throned pow'rs / That led th' embattl'd Seraphim to war', within the poem it becomes a means of comically

investigating how power and influence operate through irrational fears. For Peter A. Schock the shift in the eighteenth century toward demythologising Satan and Hell is illustrative of ‘the killing off of the figure of the Devil himself’.<sup>40</sup> For Burns, however, any killing off taking place is an amused admittance as much as a satirical critique of the ways the Devil still haunts contemporary life and the imagination of the poet. ‘Address to the Deil’ re-enacts the Burnsian ‘nocturnal rambles’ to which he refers in his letter to Moore: ‘Ae dreary, windy, winter night...Wi’ you mysel, I gat a fright...Ye, like a *rash-buss*, stood in sight’ (37-41). Rather than ‘an effort of Philosophy to shake off these idle terrors’, however, the poem turns to farce as a way of trying to ease fears:

The cudgel in my nieve did shake,  
 Each bristl’d hair stood like a stake;  
 When wi’ an eldritch, stoor *quaick, quaick*,  
                   Amang the springs,  
 Awa ye squatter’d like a *drake*,  
                   On whistling wings (43-8).

Trepidation and panic become hilarity as the Devil seemingly becomes a duck.<sup>41</sup> Yet the incident is redolent of a certain ‘nervousness to the poem’s laughter’.<sup>42</sup> It registers alarm through (rather than in spite of) comedy. The closeness of ‘*quaick, quaick*’ to ‘quake’ is heightened by echoes in ‘shake’ / ‘stake’ / ‘*drake*’ such that gothic terror is contained in, as much as dissolved by, humorous rhymes.

Burns’s funny glimpses of, and addresses to, the Devil become a means of making light of what you find most heavy. The Devil is ‘like a *drake*’, which doesn’t seem quite the same thing as saying he was one from the start or is one now. Simile, playing through similarity and difference, serves as means of alluding to his elusiveness – one of his most troubling, if comically expedient, features. Burns would have us understand that the Devil lurks in all sorts of places that are close

at hand. Indeed, Burns's biggest dread is that the Devil lies 'in the human bosom pryin', for there 'Unseen thou lurks' (23-4). What else can or should one do with such fears other than make merry? Burns's irreverence and supernaturalism are in the Rabelaisian 'comic tradition by which we are often made to laugh, not weep, at what we are really afraid of'.<sup>43</sup> He performs that carnival trick over and over in his poetry. To conceive of hell as a sheep dip, as he does in 'The Two Herds, or The Holy Tulzie', for example, is to make damnation bearable through bathos. A similar trick occurs at the end of 'Address to the Deil', as Burns laughingly turns to thoughts of what his sins on earth might ultimately mean for him:

An' now, auld *Cloots*, I ken ye're thinkan,  
 A certain Bardie's rantin, drinkin,  
 Some luckless hour will send him linkan,  
     To your black pit;  
 But, faith! he'll turn a corner jinkin,  
     An' cheat you yet (115-20).

Turning trickster himself, Burns imagines that he may dodge his fate and cheat the Devil out of one of his sinners. The pun on 'faith' shifts from something like 'forsooth', to 'trust', to thoughts of devotion, and thereby plays on the idea that he'll soon 'turn a corner' morally and evade the Devil. That hope announces his own license to make amends for his sins, which not only scoffs at the power of Satan but also walks the tightrope of Calvinist predestination. If Burns seems to be suggesting that 'faith' alone will save him, he also puts the emphasis on his own agency to 'turn a corner'. Burns hedges his bets in the last stanza, however, by hoping things improve for the adversary: 'fare-you-weel, auld *Nickie-ben*' (121). That cosy and cheerful address suggests an immediate about turn from Burns, abdicating personal responsibility for his fate. Its sympathy is deliciously self-interested, currying favour in the hope that the Devil goes a little easier on him

when the time comes. In 1789, Burns wrote to Mrs Dunlop of ‘a real and eternal distinction between virtue and vice, and consequently that I am an accountable creature’ and that ‘there must be a retributive scene of existence beyond the grave’ (*Letters*, I. 419). ‘Address to the Deil’ shows Burns admitting such fears by playing up to them too, finding curious pleasures amidst the spectre of religious anxiety.

Scottish poetry has a long history of embroiling the Devil in burlesque, while the Calvinism with which Burns was so familiar encouraged the combining of the ludicrous and sacrilegious as a way of satirising the Hellfire preaching of some of the more hard-line ministers. Burns’s profanities are of the sort found frequently on the British stage as well, from medieval mystery and morality plays to the farces and pantomimes popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that took the more familiar tragic and terrifying Satan into the realms of comedy.

Witness the stage-managing in ‘Tam o’ Shanter’, which offers another of those Burnsian ‘nocturnal rambles’ where carnival comedy and the Devil meet and are animated by the sin of rhyme. Beginning with the boozy, sexually flirtatious hedonism of the ale-house, where the ‘minutes wing’d their way wi’ pleasure’ (57), Tam eventually stumbles out into the storm to find his way home. As Tam approaches ‘*Kirk-Alloway*...Whare ghaists and houlets nightly cry’ (87-8), he conceives an ‘unco sight! / Warlocks and witches in a dance’ (114-5). What follows is the sort of comic-gothic Burns excelled at. There, amidst it all,

sat auld Nick, in shape o’ beast;  
A tousie tyke, black, grim, and large,  
To gie them music was his charge;  
He screw’d the pipes and gart them skirl,  
Till roof and rafters a’ did dirl. –  
Coffins stood round, like open presses  
That shaw’d the dead in their last dresses;

And by some devilish cantraip sleight,  
Each in its cauld hand held a light (120-28).

Satan shows little of the deceitfulness witnessed in ‘Address to the Deil’ or the spite of ‘Address of Beelzebub’. Burns’s pun on ‘charge’ signals Satan’s responsibility to provide music for supernatural revelry, but marks also his power to animate the dead with ghoulishly comic life (or ‘light’) – ‘keeping them alive with the powers of his bag-pipe’ (*Letters*, ii. 30). Satan appears grotesque yet gregarious, amenable to providing pleasure for others. He’s a little like the good-humoured landlord, whose laughing ‘ready chorus’ helped smooth the way for Tam and Souter Johnny’s pleasure-seeking in the tavern. In Northern Europe during the eighteenth-century, landlords often appeared in jokes and popular farce in comparison with Satan, so perhaps the affinity is no coincidence.<sup>44</sup> As well as being facilitators of pleasure, the landlord and ‘auld Nick’ both appear peripheral figures in the poem. For J. Walter McGinty the ‘devil plays a minor role’, since he is ‘just the accompanist to the dance’.<sup>15</sup> Yet while others take centre stage, everything in the scene dances to the Devil’s tune:

As *Tammie* glowr’d amaz’d, and curious,  
The mirth and fun grew fast and furious:  
The piper loud and louder blew;  
The dancers quick and quicker flew;  
They reel’d, they set, they cross’d, they cleekit  
Till ilka carlin sway and reekit,  
And coost her duddies to the wark  
And linket at it in her sark (145-52).



Burns's tetrameter couplets feel especially brazen in such moments: whirling with comic vitality the frenzied merriment of the lines suggests metre to match the Bacchic self-confidence of Satan's swaggering tune. As things reach their climax, 'Satan' is depicted in humorously libidinous ways, as he 'glowr'd, and fidg'd fu' fain, / And hotch'd and blew wi' might and main' (187-8). The lewdness of Satan's fidgiting, jerking, and blowing on the pipe take on yet further sexual inference if, as Nigel Leask has suggested, Burns recalls Grose's 'tongue-in-cheek definition of "to bagpipe" in the *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, as "a lascivious practice too indecent for explanation", probably a reference to sodomy'.<sup>45</sup> Bagpipes are an apt choice beyond their ribaldry of course. That they form part of a rural Scottish tradition within the poem is clear, with Satan playing 'Nae cotillion brent new frae France, / But hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels' (116-7). Scottish folklore regularly depicted the devil playing the pipes, especially in a rural setting like the one in 'Tam o' Shanter'. With his musical pipes 'auld Nick' is a poet of a distinctly Burnsian kind: supernatural and comical, powerful yet ridiculous, sexual but absurd. Satan's saturnine disposition is briefly captured in that momentary 'glowr'd' which nicely keeps his sublime power in play, but it is upended by bawdy revelry, rhymes, and laughter.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. G. Ross Roy, 2nd edn (2 vols, Oxford, 1985), i. 133. Subsequent references to the letters are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> 'Trumpery', *OED Online*, <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/206935?redirectedFrom=trumpetry#eid>>, [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> May 2020].

<sup>3</sup> *The Canongate Burns*, ed. Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg (Edinburgh, 2001), 3. Subsequent references to Burns's poetry are to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Burns's note in Glenriddell Manuscripts, qtd in Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, A Biography* (London, 2009), 62.

<sup>5</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, VIII, 474-7, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd edn (London, 1998), 454. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition.

<sup>6</sup> Crawford, *The Bard*, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Burns uses the term liberally in his letters and in 'The Holy Fair', 'Libel Summons', 'There was twa Wives', and 'Gie the lass her Fairin'.

<sup>8</sup> 'Rhymer', *OED Online*, <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/165367#eid25624296>>, [accessed 1 May 2020].

<sup>9</sup> Gillian Beer, 'Rhyming as comedy: body, ghost, and banquet', in *English Comedy*, ed. John Kerrigan, Michael Cordner, and Peter Holland (Cambridge, 1994), 180-96, 181.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Ricks makes a similar point about allusion, in *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford, 2002), 77.

<sup>11</sup> As Douglas Dunn says, 'The more Burns made these Scottish verse-forms his own...the more he became their servant...They controlled him as much as he controlled them'. "'A Very Scottish Kind of Dash": Burns's Native Metric', in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, 58-85, 76.

<sup>12</sup> Don Paterson, *The Guardian*, 6 November 2004,

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/poetry/features/0,12887,1344654,00.html>> [accessed January 2019].

<sup>13</sup> Michael O'Neill, 'Gleams and Dreams: Reflections on Romantic Rhyme', *Romanticism*, 23.2 (2017), 123-32, 131.

<sup>14</sup> W. H. Auden, 'Notes on the Comic', in *The Dyer's Hand & Other Essays* (London, 1962), 380.

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- <sup>15</sup> *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley (3 vols, Oxford, 1968), i. 154.
- <sup>16</sup> Nigel Leask, *Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford, 2010), 200.
- <sup>17</sup> William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Harmondsworth, 1995), 142.
- <sup>18</sup> William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Harmondsworth, 1961), 108.
- <sup>19</sup> Derek Attridge, *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* (London, 2004), 201.
- <sup>20</sup> 'Pun', *OED Online*,  
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/154549?rskey=IV4JjF&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>  
 [accessed 3 January 2019].
- <sup>21</sup> For discussion of the similarity between rhyme and puns see Walter Redfern, *Puns* (Oxford, 1984), 97-102; Debra Fried, 'Rhyme Puns', in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler (Oxford, 1988), 83-99.
- <sup>22</sup> Michael Edwards, 'Exercise in Queneau', *Prospect*, 8 (1978), 45; Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London, 1964), 314.
- <sup>23</sup> Derek Attridge, *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* (London, 2004), 189.
- <sup>24</sup> 'My knowledge of modern manners, and of literature and criticism, I got from the Spectator', he told Moore. *Letters*, i. 138.
- <sup>25</sup> *The Spectator*, No. 279, in *The Works of Joseph Addison* (3 vols, New York, 1845), i. 403.
- <sup>26</sup> *The Spectator*, No. 279, *Works of Addison*, i. 403.
- <sup>27</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia, The Collected Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson and George Whalley (Princeton, 1999), iv. 842.
- <sup>28</sup> Walter Savage Landor, *The Complete Works*, ed. T. E. Welby and S. Wheeler (12 vols, Oxford, 1969), v. 258.
- <sup>29</sup> Landor, v. 258.
- <sup>30</sup> Leigh Hunt, 'Preface' to *The Story of Rimini* (London, 1816), xiv.
- <sup>31</sup> Peter McDonald, *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford, 2013), 3.
- <sup>32</sup> For some discussion see John Diekhoff, 'Rhyme in *Paradise Lost*', *PMLA*, 49.2 (1934), 539-43; David Scott Kastan, *Paradise Lost* (Cambridge 2005), 1-11; Lawrence H. McCauley, 'Milton's Missing Rhymes', *Style*, 28.2 (Summer, 1994), 242-59.
- <sup>33</sup> Benjamin Lomas, 'Rhyme at the Fall in *Paradise Lost*', *Notes and Queries*, 66.1 (March, 2019), 75-7.
- <sup>34</sup> William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (2 vols, London, 1793), i, 261-2.
- <sup>35</sup> Murray Pittock, *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford, 2008), 149.
- <sup>36</sup> Joseph Wittreich, 'Why Milton Matters', *Milton Studies*, 44, (2005), 22-39, 22.
- <sup>37</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (London, 1971).
- <sup>38</sup> M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolt in Romantic Literature* (New York, 1971), 338.
- <sup>39</sup> *Poems and Songs*, iii, 1131. Burns's cancelled stanza arguably made the sexual allusion plainer. *Poems and Songs*, i. 170.
- <sup>40</sup> Peter A. Schock, *Romantic Satanism* (Basingstoke, 2003), 12.
- <sup>41</sup> Fiona Stafford offers an intriguing reading of this moment in relation to *Paradise Lost* in *Local Attachments* (Oxford, 2010), 192.
- <sup>42</sup> Leask, 197.
- <sup>43</sup> M. A. Screech, *Rabelais* (London, 1979), 38.
- <sup>44</sup> See Michael Frank, 'Satan's Servants or Authorities Agent? Publicans in Eighteenth-Century Germany', in *The World of the Tavern: Public Houses in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Beat A. Kümin and B. Ann Tlustý (Aldershot, 2002), 12-43.
- <sup>45</sup> Walter J. McGinty, 'Milton's Satan and Burns's Auld Nick', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 34 (2004), 1-14, 9.
- <sup>45</sup> Leask, 268.