

Robert Burns Poem – Adam Armour’s Prayer

Years ago I was looking for an inspiration while preparing an Immortal Memory and rifling through Burns’ poems waiting for some phrase that would jump off the page – one that was new to me and less quoted at Burns’ Suppers. Eventually one did –

My curse upon your venom’d stang,
That shoots my tortur’d gums along

How many poets have written about a toothache? Not only does Burns describe the pain and torment he is suffering, he finishes up by wishing a year’s worth of toothache on all of Scotland’s enemies! But the one word that has remained with me since that day is “stang.” I’m not sure why this is so but it is always there in the back of my mind, and recently I came across it again – in a somewhat different context but basically with the same meaning. As a verb it means “to sting” or “to shoot with pain”, and that explains the two lines quoted above. But as a noun the word can refer to a pole or post and has as an additional meaning as a verb “to cause to ride the stang, to subject a wife-beater or an unfaithful husband to punishment by carrying him from place to place astride a pole born on the shoulders of others, accompanied by a noisy and contemptuous crowd.” I guess such a ride would cause considerable pain to the person concerned! Burns uses the word in only three of his poems; in the **Address to a Toothache**, in the **Jolly Beggars Cantata** and in **Adam Armour’s Prayer**.

Just prior to the time Robert Burns was falling out with the Armours over Jean’s pregnancy, there was an incident involving her younger brother Adam who was only fifteen at the time. Adam was a wild boy prone to pranks and together with some of his like-minded cronies decided as a lark to stang a local harlot, one Agnes Wilson. Agnes had already come to the attention of the Kirk Session which noted in its record of March 6th 1786 that she was a servant of George Gibson who ran the Poosie Nansie pub and “*as being of lewd and immoral practices and the occasion of a late disturbance in this place.*” In his book **Old Church Life in Scotland**, Dr. A. Edgar alleges that she was a vagrant woman who had come to Mauchline with a bad reputation for harlotry. She had been plying her trade out of Poosie Nansie’s hostelry for about six months when the incident occurred, and she was supposedly “*haunted and entertained... by George Gibson, the landlord,*” and she was even reputedly the model for the “*Tozie Drab*” [drunken slut], in Burns’ **Jolly Beggars**.

In addition to only being fifteen young Adam was small and referred to in Burns’ poem as being “*little*” and “*scarce as lang’s a guid kail-whittle.*” Adam together with a few Mauchline lads decided by way of a prank to set upon George Wilson’s jurr or servant girl, and they

Stang’d her through the place,
An hurt her spleuchan.

In other words they punished the woman by carrying her through the town on a rough wooden rail made from the trunk of a pine tree, and don’t forget this was in a time when women almost certainly didn’t wear drawers with the result being severe cuts and bruises to her spleuchan (genitalia). The jurr’s employers, George Gibson and his wife Agnes (Poosie Nansie) threatened criminal proceedings against the perpetrators which caused young Adam to go to the Burns’ farm at Mossgiel to lie low until the incident blew over.

Burns’ attitude towards the female sex borders on the amoral with serving girls and farm girls being fair game, but he had a strong detestation to prostitution, with his focus being the trade rather than any of the individual practitioners. In providing Adam with a hiding place Burns did not appear to take the incident

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seriously and treated it as a boisterous romp by a group of high-spirited youngsters. He wrote the poem **Adam Armour’s Prayer** from the standpoint of Adam and his friends requesting God’s pity while feigning remorse over the incident. In the poem Adam calls God’s wrath down on all protesters of the stanging, picking out Geordie, his wife Poosie Nansie, their son Jock and their half-wit daughter hav’rel Jean, known as Racer Jess, for special attention. Adam compares their pursuit of him and his friends with the hunt for William Wallace by soldiers and constables, with both instances intending to result in death at the gallows. The last verse of the poem however calls out a triumphant note of self-justification. The poem would undoubtedly have been savoured in the village of Mauchline with its coarse viciousness and its hints of sadism. The age-old double standard shows in the final two lines;

But may she wintle in a wood,
If she whore mair!

Adam Armour’s Prayer

Gude pity me, because I’m little!
For though I am an elf o mettle,
An can like onie wabster’s shuttle
Jink there or here,
Yet, scarce as lang’s a guid kail-whittle,
I’m uncou queer.

An now Thou kens our woefu case;
For Geordie’s jurr we’re in disgrace,
Because we stang’d her through the place,
An hurt her spleuchan;
For whilk we daurna show our face
Within the clachan.

An now we’re dern’d in dens and hollows,
And hunted, as was Wallace,
Wi constables – thae blackguard fallows –
An sodgers baith;
But Gude preserve us frae the gallows,
That shameful death!

Auld, grim, black-bearded Geordie’s sel’ –
O, shake him owre the mouth o Hell!
There let him hing, an roar an yell
Wi hideous din,
And if he offers to rebel,
Then heave him in!

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When Death comes in wi glimmerin blink,
An tips auld drucken Nanse the wink,
May Sautan gie her doup a clink
Within his yett,
An fill her up wi brimstone drink,
Red-reekin her.

Though Jock an ha’vrel Jean are merry,
Some devil seize them in a hurry,
An waft them in th’ infernal wherry
Straught through the lake,
An gie their hides a noble curry
Wi oil of aik!

As for the jurr – pair worthless body! –
She’s got mischief enough already;
Wi stanger hips and buttocks bluidy
She suffer’d sair;
But may she wintle in a woody,
If she whore mair!

Tony Grace for the Carnie Group of the Calgary Burns Club; June 2020

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