



Nicolson, M. (2010) '*Death and Doctor Hornbook*' by Robert Burns: A view from medical history. *Medical Humanities*, 36 . pp. 23-26. ISSN 1468-215X

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/43097/>

Deposited on: 29 October 2010

***Death and Doctor Hornbook* by Robert Burns: A view from medical history**

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Key words – Robert Burns, Death and Doctor Hornbook, Eighteenth-century medicine, satire

Abstract

Robert Burns's poem, *Death and Doctor Hornbook*, 1785, tells of the drunken narrator's late night encounter with Death. The Grim Reaper is annoyed that 'Dr Hornbook', a local schoolteacher who has taken to selling medications and giving medical advice, is successfully thwarting his efforts to gather victims. The poet fears that the local gravedigger will be unemployed but Death reassures him that this will not be the case since Hornbook kills more than he cures. Previous commentators have regarded the poem as a simple satire on amateur doctoring. However, it is here argued that, if interpreted in the light of the exoteric and inclusive character of eighteenth-century medical knowledge and practice, the poem is revealed to have a much broader reference as well as being more subtle and morally ambiguous. It is a satire on eighteenth-century medicine as a whole.

***Death and Doctor Hornbook* by Robert Burns: A view from medical history**

Robert Burns's poem, *Death and Doctor Hornbook*, written in 1785 and first published in 1787, tells of an encounter with Death, who is personified in the traditional form of the Grim Reaper. (I have used the version of the poem given in Kinsley's Oxford English Texts edition, but have spelled out or added the words represented there by euphemistic dashes.)^[1] Told in well-constructed Standard Habbie stanzas, the narrative is skilfully sustained throughout its thirty-one verses. The vigorous vernacular and earthy wit of the poem makes it excellent material for recitation. It has also received considerable attention from scholars. Most volumes of Burns criticism make some mention of *Death and Dr Hornbook* as an outstanding example of his mastery of the comic, satirical genre.^[2,3]

Death and Doctor Hornbook tells the story of the narrator (who, for convenience, is here identified with the poet) walking home from the alehouse, somewhat intoxicated. He is frightened by an accidental meeting with Death but is quickly calmed by the Grim Reaper's assurance that he has not yet been chosen as a victim. The two disreputable companions sit down for a friendly chat. An epidemic pestilence has struck that part of the country but Death complains that his best endeavours are being so thwarted by the village 'doctor', the Hornbook of the title, that he is being laughed at by the local children. His scythe and dart, previously unerringly effective in ending human life, have been rendered useless:

But Doctor *Hornbook*, wi' his art

And cursed skill,

Has made them baith no worth a fart,
Damn'd haet they'll kill!

(The last two lines translate into Standard English as 'Has made them both not worth a fart/Damned nothing they will kill.')

The poet laments that Johnnie Ged, the gravedigger, will be put out of work, if Hornbook's success continues. But Death immediately puts his mind at rest. No need to take the plough to the kirkyard yet, for Hornbook's medical interventions kill as many as they cure. Indeed Hornbook's strike rate exceeds that of Death himself. Death is confident, however, that his latest plot against Hornbook will succeed and the Doctor will soon be 'dead as a herring'. And so the two characters agree to go their different ways.

The inspiration behind the poem was John Wilson, parish schoolmaster at Tarbolton in Ayrshire. Wilson supplemented his income by running a small grocery shop, from which he also sold simple medicaments and offered advice on 'common disorders ... gratis'.^[4] At a meeting of the St James Freemason's Lodge, Burns was irritated by Wilson ostentatiously airing his medical knowledge and so was inspired to compose the mocking portrayal of the dominie who aspired to amateur doctoring. Most commentators have accordingly read the poem as a straightforward, if accomplished, satire on Wilson's medical pretensions, and as an attack on quackery.^[5] However it is the contention of the present essay that, if read with an awareness of the context of eighteenth-century medical knowledge and practice, *Death and Dr Hornbook* reveals itself to be more subtle and much more morally ambiguous.

A key feature of the eighteenth-century medical context was that medical knowledge was integrated within educated culture.^[6] It was not yet the esoteric professional preserve that

it was to become in the nineteenth century. As Roy Porter has documented, the widely read English periodical, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, carried a large amount of medical content.^[7] It reviewed medical books and even printed the findings of royal autopsies. The letters pages regularly featured requests for medical advice, which were responded to as frequently by lay people as by qualified practitioners. Porter concluded, 'being familiar with medicine was not an individual and private matter, but integral to the public role of the well-informed and responsible layman'. While there was a growing commercial market for medicine among the upper and middle classes, many of whom were obsessed with their health, much doctoring was still done by family members for one another, or by persons of status within local communities for the poor.^[8] Thus, Wilson's practice of offering medical advice to the customers of his modest shop is not, in itself, either unusual or reprehensible. As an elementary schoolteacher, he is, by the standards of the time and place, a relatively well-educated man, able to interpret, as Burns notes, the standard work on lay therapy of the time, William Buchan's *Domestic Medicine*.^[9,10]

That medical knowledge was exoteric in the late eighteenth century is evinced by Burns' own ability accurately to parody it. Burns was widely read and took a very active interest in medical matters, as the physician, Dr John MacKenzie, recorded:

... when the conversation, which was on a medical subject, had taken the turn he [Burns] wished, he began to engage in it, displaying a dexterity of reasoning, and ingenuity of reflection, and a familiarity, with topics apparently beyond his reach, by which, his visitor, was no less gratified than astonished.^[11]

Burns had seen his father, during his fatal illness, treated by MacKenzie, and had received treatment himself from the same doctor in 1784.^[12] Burns almost certainly suffered from periods of depression and, like many an eighteenth-century literate invalid, took a very close interest in his own health, both physical and mental. He was confident in his self-diagnoses, on one occasion pronouncing that he suffered from a ‘constitutional hypochondriac taint’ and on another, that he had contracted a ‘most malignant Squinancy’ (i.e. quinsy, inflammation of the throat).^[13] There are several references to medicine and doctoring in Burns’s poems and other writings. For instance, on one occasion, he indignantly compared critics of his verse, ‘bloody dissectors’, to ‘Monroes’, an allusion to Alexander Monro Primus and Secundus, father and son professors of anatomy at Edinburgh University.^[14]

By describing Wilson’s acquaintance with:

Calces o’ fossils, earths, and trees;
True Sal-marinum o’ the seas:
The Farina of beans and peas,
He has ‘t in plenty;
Aqua-fontis, what you please,
He can content ye.

Burns is mocking not merely the schoolmaster’s stores but the multifarious contents of a not-untypical apothecary’s shop or indeed of an eighteenth-century physician’s prescribing repertoire.

It has been suggested that ‘aqua-fontis’, literally ‘fountain or spring water’, is a, presumably deliberate, corruption by Burns of ‘aqua fortis’, the ‘strong water’ of the

alchemists, now known as nitric acid, a substance certainly employed in eighteenth-century medicine. However it seems more likely that Burns is here, throughout this verse, mocking the half-learned affectation of attaching Latin labels to everyday materials. This supposition is made more likely if one notes that a very similar jibe was made by Robert Ferguson (1750-1774), a poet whose work Burns knew well and which he greatly admired.

In his poem *Caller Water* ('caller' being the Scots for 'fresh' or 'cool') Ferguson introduces the term 'aqua font', which he goes on to define as:

This is the name that doctors use
Their patients' noodles to confuse;
Wi simples clad in terms abstruse
They labour still,
In kittle words to gar you roose
Their want o' skill.^[15]

(The second last line translates as 'in difficult words to make you praise ...')

Ferguson, moreover, expresses a disdain for physic which extends beyond the empty and pompous Latinism with which it is presented:

But we'll hae nae sic clitter-clatter,
And briefly to expound the matter
It shall be ca'd good *Caller Water*
Than whilk, I trou,

Few drogs in doctors' shops are better

For me or you.

(‘clitter-clatter’ = idle chatter; ‘whilk’ = which; trou = trust, ‘drogs’ = drugs)

In *Death and Doctor Hornbook*, Burns further displays his own knowledge of medicine by alluding, crudely but effectively, to the well-established eighteenth-century practice of consulting and diagnosing by post:^[16, 17]

Ev'n them he canna get attended,
Altho' their face he ne'er had kend it,
Just shit in a kail-blade and send it
As soon's he smells 't,
Baith their disease, and what will mend it,
At once he tells 't.

(Even those he cannot attend in person/Although he has never known their face/ Just shit on a cabbage leaf and send it/As soon as he smells it/Both their disease and what will cure it/At once he tells it.)

Burns also makes an astute health-related comment when he has his narrator's companion complain of being mocked by children. This of course would be humiliating for anyone but particularly for Death. Rural communities in eighteenth-century Scotland experienced high infant mortality rates. The young were, indeed, the Grim Reaper's 'lawfu' prey'. Thus, if children had lost their fear of Death, especially in a time of epidemic, that would certainly be a profound embarrassment, a poor reflection on how he was going about his business.

It should be noted that there were, in the eighteenth century, no effective legal restrictions on the practice of medicine.^[18] Neither were there any essential educational prerequisites – the university qualified physician had no professional monopoly. Medicine was a free market, with the patient as paying patron having sole control over the hiring and firing of his or her attendant. Medical practitioners had to exert themselves, in a variety of ways, to attract and retain their clients.^[19] As Jewson has argued, one of the means by which physicians tried to enhance their employability in this unregulated market was to claim that they had invented novel, exotic, treatments, which were unavailable from their rivals.^[6] This marketing ploy is well-observed and cleverly satirised by Burns:

Forbye some new, uncommon weapons,
Urinus Spiritus of capons;
Or Mite-horn shavings, filings, scrapings,
Distill'd *per se*;
Sal-alkali o' Midge-tail clippings,
And mony mae.

(mony mae = many more)

In other words, the real object of Burns' invective is not Dr Hornbook, nor amateur doctoring nor even quackery, but medicine itself. While mocking Wilson, Burns is playing on the fact that the status of all medical practitioners is problematic, if not dubious, at this time. There are several layers of ambiguity here. How can the layperson tell who is a competent practitioner when there are no prerequisite qualifications to practice and anyone call himself a doctor? Perhaps all physicians are Hornbooks. How would we know? Even Death is fooled by the pretensions of Wilson. As Irvine Loudon

has put it, ‘when there was no system of formal education, registering and licensing, no sharp dividing line could exist between qualified and unqualified’.^[20] Nor was a university degree necessarily a guarantee of competence, since one could be obtained with no practical experience. An MD could even be bought. In the satirical poems and engravings of the period, the Fellows of the medical Royal Colleges were mocked and excoriated as viciously as the out-and-out quacks.^[21] Burns is adding his distinctive voice to these expressions of a deep anxiety.

Eighteenth-century attitudes to medicine were ambivalent – worryingly so for the eighteenth-century invalid. Medicine was seen as a necessary defence against illness but also feared both for its limited efficacy and for the unpleasantness and toxicity of many of its remedies.^[8] There was also a widespread awareness of the terrible ambiguities of medicine’s power over life and death. Doctors could kill people, inadvertently or perhaps, on occasion, even deliberately. There were riots in Paisley in the 1830s instigated by rumours that doctors were systematically poisoning the poor.^[22] Burns plays on these fears in a very sharp, deft manner:

A countra Laird had ta’en the batts,
Or some curmurring in his guts,
His only son for *Hornbook* sets,
And pays him well,
The lad, for twa guid gimmer-pets,
Was Laird himsel.

(A country Laird [landowner] had taken the colic/Or some grumbling in his guts/His only son for Hornbook sends/And pays him well/The lad, for [the cost of] two fine two-year-old ewes/Was Laird himself.)

It is also possible that Burns refers, subtly, to his own activities in the poem. Given his reputation, proudly cultivated but amply justified, as a fornicator and the procreator of illegitimate children,^[23] the following verse might be said to have some personal resonance:

A bonnie lass, ye kend her name,
Some ill-brewn drink had hov'd her wame,
She trusts hersel, to hide the shame,
In *Hornbook's* care;
Horn sent her aff to her lang hame,
To hide it there.

(A beautiful girl, you knew her name/Some badly brewed drink had swollen her belly [or womb]/She trusts herself, to hide the shame/To Hornbook's care/ Horn sent her off to her long home [her grave]/To hide it there.)

What is the significance of Death's pointed remark that his collocutor was personally acquainted with the 'bonny lass' who died while being treated by Hornbook for her enlarged abdomen? Does Burns hint at a special interest of his own in Hornbook's interventions? Certainly the fear of being publically disgraced for an extramarital pregnancy could drive a young woman to desperate acts.^[24] All in all, the poem is not a

straightforward black and white comparison of good medicine and bad, or indeed of virtue and evil.

Even in the eighteenth century, the medical profession enjoyed considerable status and respect in Scotland, partly due to the value that the Scots have traditionally placed on education and expertise. But any form of power tends to be regarded with suspicion by those who are subject to it. Moreover, there had long been a strand in Scots literature which expressed scepticism as to the pretensions of medical art and science. Robert Henryson, in the fifteenth century, poked fun at the self-serving obscurantism of physicians and apothecaries.^[25] William Dunbar fearfully noted the impotence of physicians when confronted by their own mortality.^[26] We have already remarked on Ferguson's opinion of the efficacy of the eighteenth-century pharmacopoeia. Burns's *Death and Dr Hornbook* should be seen in this tradition and as a further expression of these concerns. The poem is not merely or simply a satire on unqualified physicians as against competent ones but a satire on the reputation and status of medicine in eighteenth-century society more broadly.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr John Burnett, National Museums of Scotland, and Dr Michael Barfoot, Lothian Health Board Archives, for helpful and encouraging comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Competing interests None

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