



# ORAL TRADITION

## Festschrift for John Miles Foley

**This article is one of a series of short essays, collectively titled “Further Explorations,” published as part of a special issue of *Oral Tradition* in honor of John Miles Foley’s 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John’s tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).**

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## **Rethinking Individual Authorship: Robert Burns, Oral Tradition, and the Twenty-First Century**

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In light of recent critical upheaval over cultural icons Bob Dylan and Beyoncé, and their alleged artistic plagiarisms,<sup>1</sup> it behooves us to look at the ways in which precepts of oral tradition can inform our thinking about cultural production within contexts seemingly permeated by ever-present literacy. We can thereby gain a new outlook on such situations of artistic “borrowing” or “plagiarism.” To this end, I present the “traditional” Scottish songs of eighteenth-century poet Robert Burns and his oral-to-text productions included in *The Scots Musical Museum* (Johnson 1962a and 1962b) as a case study for rethinking the model of individual authorship or genius dominating our modern ideologies of creative production. This focus on the career and creative practices of an eighteenth-century cultural icon can in turn help illuminate what is sometimes seen as a twenty-first-century phenomenon of liberally sampling from other artists and genres in the creation of a new work (Noë 2011).

The transition from oral tradition to print publication in Scottish songs during the eighteenth century has proven to be an important and complex subject for scholars of oral traditions and Scottish studies alike, such as in the recent scholarship of Dianne Dugaw (2009) and L. I. Davies (2010). In particular, the trend of Scottish song collection throughout the eighteenth century with its intersection of oral tradition and print publication has recently been well examined, with the oral-literate dichotomy being shown as quite problematic,<sup>2</sup> and even the position of Robert Burns within the fields of oral tradition, literary criticism, and Scottish song is now beginning to be explored fruitfully.<sup>3</sup> However, a complete understanding of Burns’s adoption of oral traditional elements in his writings and its implications for understanding creative production more generally is far from complete.

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Dylan’s display of paintings at the Gagosian Gallery in Manhattan has recently come under scrutiny as critics claim that the paintings are merely representations of pre-existing photographs, not originally inspired works, despite Dylan’s own enigmatic claims that the paintings may very well be simply reproductions of the existing photographs (Perpetua 2011). Likewise, popular singer Beyoncé has lately received criticism regarding the choreography showcased in some of her recent music videos, which appears to contain notable similarities to the choreography of Belgian choreographer Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker (Trueman 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Newman 2007, McLane 2008, and McDowell 2010.

<sup>3</sup> As a representative sample of such work, see Strande-Sørensen 2003, Carruthers 2009, McCue 2009, and Lumsden 2009.

The notion of authorship as an individual practice is widely attributed to the Romantic ideology of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries,<sup>4</sup> and this “rather superficial sense that literary culture is invariably based around isolated individuals, around the solitary figure of the genius” (Bennett 2005:30) has meshed with Albert Lord’s assertion that “our real difficulty” in comprehending distributed authorship “arises from the fact that, unlike the oral poet, we are not accustomed to thinking in terms of fluidity” (1960:100). We must, therefore, rethink the notion of individual authorship. The Scottish song production of Robert Burns—as well as the song lyrics and paintings of Dylan or the choreography of Beyoncé—demonstrates that the concept of *ex nihilo* creative genius is for the most part an ideological fallacy. Simply put, authorship cannot exist in a cultural vacuum; authors produce works by “creating and re-creating the culture around them” (Lessig 2008:28). Thus, when we examine the ready acceptance of Burns’s Scottish song production “both in oral and published contexts” (McCue 2009:74), we should challenge widely accepted literary conceptions of authorship, focusing instead on the interactions between individual genius and an ambient oral tradition, and in the process better inform our understanding of the creative production process, whether in the Romantic era or today.

As a case study of oral tradition’s intersection with literature, Burns’s contributions to *The Scots Musical Museum* offer a rich array of examples, demonstrating the ways that authorship is inherently a dynamic and interactive process. Shortly after publishing *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786), Burns entered into collaboration with the Edinburgh-based music seller and engraver, James Johnson, to assist in Johnson’s efforts of compiling an exhaustive collection of Scottish folksongs, *The Scots Musical Museum*. In response to “. . . a just and general Complaint, that among all the Music Books of SCOTS SONGS that have been hitherto offered to the Public not one, nor even all of them put together, can be said to have merited the name of what may be called A COMPLETE COLLECTION . . .” (Johnson 1962a, i:iii), Johnson undertook to present “the true lovers of Caledonian Music and Song . . . the admirers of social Music” (*idem*) with a collection of Scottish songs in a portable and affordable publication. Johnson’s efforts to create a multi-volume publication containing every “Scots song extant” (1962a, iv:iii) were finally terminated in 1803, 600 songs, 16 years, and six volumes after Johnson’s initial publication. Burns regarded the efforts he and Johnson invested in compiling *The Scots Musical Museum* as leading to a publication “that to future ages . . . will be the text-book and standard of Scotch [*sic*] Song and Music” (Johnson 1962a, v:iii).

Burns’s contributions to *The Scots Musical Museum* demonstrate the ways in which he drew upon the “communicative economy” (Foley 1995:53) of Scottish folksongs, often fashioning elements or fragments of them into his own compositions. This is demonstrated in the refrain of one of Burns’s earliest original contributions to *The Scots Musical Museum*, “Green Grow the Rashes” (1787):

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<sup>4</sup> The pervasive idea of Robert Burns as a poetic genius can be traced to a host of writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including William Wordsworth in *A Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns* (1816), William Motherwell and James Hogg in their introductory remarks to *The Works of Robert Burns* (1840), and Edwin Muir in “Burns and Popular Poetry” as part of *Essays on Literature and Society* (1949). Likewise, many prominent poets offered an assessment of Burns as solitary artist, for instance, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in “Robert Burns” (1880) and Algernon Charles Swinburne in “Burns: an Ode” (1904). For further criticism of this matter, see Higgins 2005.

Green grow the Rashes, O;  
 Green grow the rashes, O;  
 The sweetest hours that e'er I spent  
 Are spent among the lasses, O.

Burns stated that he adopted the recurring refrain in the chorus above from a traditional oral version (Stenhouse 1853:82-83):

Green grow the rashes, O,  
 Green grow the rashes, O;  
 A feather-bed is nae sae soft,  
 As a bed among the rashes, O.

This revision of a time-established song is a telling example supporting Sheila Douglas's observation that "folksingers constantly recreate and remould songs, put new words to old tunes, or old words to new tunes. They tell the story as they feel they want to tell it, create the mood the song evokes in them, whittle down or add to, as they feel appropriate" (1996). Burns demonstrates this method of remolding tradition by constructing his own composition around the refrain of a traditional song, and thereby utilizing conventional structuring techniques—and perhaps also their inherent tradition-encoded meanings—for his own more personalized creations.

In addition to incorporating Scottish folksong fragments into his works, Burns also adapted elements of English poetry into the forms and register of Scottish folksong, such as his reworking of Robert Dodsley's 1749 poem "The Parting Kiss" (LTS 2011):

One kind kiss before we part,  
 Drop a tear and bid adieu;  
 Though we sever, my fond heart  
 Till we meet shall pant for you.

Burns's reshaping of these lines into the standards of Scottish tradition are as follows from the first stanza of his song "Ae Fond Kiss," written expressly for inclusion in *The Scots Musical Museum* (1962a:iv, 358):

Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;  
 Ae farewell and then for ever!  
 Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee,  
 Warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee.

In his revisions of English poetry, Burns met the expectations of his distinctly Scottish readership by drawing upon a written approximation and representation of the spoken dialect. In modifying the English register into the communicative economy of Scottish folksong, Burns transformed an English poem into a poem now aligned with Scottish tradition through its use of

Lowland Scots dialect.<sup>5</sup> Burns's songs thus demonstrate what John D. Niles has termed "intervention by an insider," suggesting the following (1993:133):

It sometimes happens that persons born into an oral culture become familiar with the technology of writing, gain something of an outsider's perspective on their traditions, and make a concerted effort to obtain or, perhaps, fashion written texts of what can still be called traditional songs.

Burns certainly both obtained traditional texts and fashioned his own written texts in the manner of Scottish tradition, with some of his personal creations sometimes being identified today primarily as traditional Scottish songs rather than as Burns's own, perhaps nowhere as noticeably as in the New Year's anthem, "Auld Lang Syne" (Johnson 1962a, v:426):

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
And never brought to mind?  
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
And auld lang syne!

Burns claimed that this work was his own modern rendering of "an old song, of the olden times, and which has never been in print, nor even in manuscript until I took it down from an old man" (Lindsay 1959:9). Burns's version of the song, however, bears a striking resemblance to the opening lines of James Watson's poem published in 1711, "Old Long Syne" (1991:230):

Should Old Acquaintance be forgot,  
and never thought upon;  
The flames of Love extinguished,  
and fully past and gone.

Burns's composition also bears resemblance to Allan Ramsay's poem of the same title, beginning "Should auld acquaintance be forgot / though they return with scars" (1724:97). However, rather than being accused of plagiarism, Burns is now often celebrated for his written additions to the Scottish oral tradition of which he was a part "by creating and re-creating [his] culture" (Lessig 2008:28); or, rather than being called solely a poet who created and re-created his culture, Mary Ellen Brown suggests (1984:46-47):

Burns might be called a savior of folksongs because in the words of many commentators, he "rescued" old wrecks of Scottish culture and saved them, often by editing and making hitherto

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that in this Scottish re-creation of an English poem, Burns maintains the trochaic tetrameter of Dodsley's, simply completing the final trochee of each line with the unstressed syllable. In maintaining this meter strongly identified with English poetry—including prominent works of Shakespeare and Blake—Burns eschews transposing his Scottish version into a poetic form deeply rooted in Scottish tradition, a form now commonly regarded as "Burns's meter" or the "Habbie Stanza" (Dunn 1997:60-61). However, it is difficult to identify whether Burns's execution of the lesser-used acatalectic form of the trochaic tetrameter rather than the catalectic form of Dodsley's stanza is a matter of taste or of tradition. For further discussion on Burns and poetic meter, see Dunn 1997 and Harvey 2007.



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