This article examines the hitherto under-explored influence of James Beattie’s poem, The Minstrel, on Robert Burns’s Tam o’ Shanter.

James Beattie has been recognised as an important figure in the evolution of romantic poetry but less has been said about his influence on Robert Burns. This may be due to the dominance in literary genealogy of Beattie’s signature poem The Minstrel, a significant, if not the significant, protoromantic poem, with a fundamental importance for Wordsworth and others. However, Beattie was far from being a one-poem poet. Roger Robinson ascribes as many as eighty-five works to him, written in a variety of themes and genres and Burns gives us evidence that he had read Beattie’s published poetry and some of his philosophical works.

Beattie and Burns lived in the same country at the same time and yet they wrote their poetry in different languages. Beattie was a purist or, at least, a pragmatist. He wrote most of his poetry in English and believed that the Scottish language was now obsolete and irrelevant, if not positively damaging, to Scotsmen trying to make a living in post-Union Britain. His views on spoken dialect were more ambiguous but by 1793 he was writing to George Thomson:

A fine old Scotch air, with Broad Scotch words sung to it, seems to me such an incongruity, as a beautiful woman, with dirty hands and face, imitating the walk and stride of a plowman.

Beattie could be acerbic and the choice of ploughman in his imagery may not have been entirely accidental; Burns by contrast can be said to occupy a linguistic middle ground and his use of language source was distinctly hybrid and permeable.

As far as is known, the two men never met and never corresponded. Beattie makes no mention of Burns. Burns, however, expressed admiration for Beattie, naming him among his poetical idols Pope, Churchill, Shenstone, Gray, Thomson, Littleton, Collins and Steele. But there is something discordant in this; all of the luminaries were dead, except for Beattie, who, it has to be remembered, was around for the whole of Burns’s life. Did Burns experience an emotional need to position Beattie as a poet of the past? If, as Robert Crawford suggests, Burns’s life darkened sporadically into depressive episodes, the disparity between his lack of success in life and Beattie’s celebrity and financial security may well have led him to distance Beattie in this way. He may even have felt some threat from Beattie’s potential to produce new material.

The two poets occupied roughly the same time and space, had no personal contact and yet they shared similar and almost synchronous views on the nature of poetry. But Beattie had got there first. Carol McGuirk sees “fascinating parallels” between The Minstrel and Burns’s own career as a bard. She compares the poetical philosophies of the two men:

Beattie’s injunction to other minstrels was that they should broaden and substantiate their instincts in their...

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Gale Document Number: GALE|A456344952
As nouns the difference between bard and minstrel is that bard is a professional poet and singer, as among the ancient Celts, whose occupation was to compose and sing verses in honor of the heroic achievements of princes and brave men or bard can be a piece of defensive (or, sometimes, ornamental) armor for a horse's neck, breast, and flanks; a barb (often in the plural) while minstrel is... Bard is a synonym of minstrel. As nouns the difference between bard and minstrel is that bard is a professional poet and singer, as among the ancient Celts, whose occupation was to compose and sing verses in honor of the heroic achievements of princes and brave men or bard can be a piece of defensive (or, sometimes, ornamental) armor for a horse's neck, breast, and flanks; a barb (often in the plural) while minstrel is... Bard is a synonym of minstrel. As nouns the difference between bard and minstrel is that bard is a professional poet and singer, as among the ancient Celts, whose occupation was to compose and sing verses in honor of the heroic achievements of princes and brave men or bard can be a piece of defensive (or, sometimes, ornamental) armor for a horse's neck, breast, and flanks; a barb (often in the plural) while minstrel is... Bard is a synonym of minstrel. As nouns the difference between bard and minstrel. The Bard and the Minstrel otherwise know as BAM! Comedy, Music, Debauchery! See more of BaM - Bard and the Minstrel on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of BaM - Bard and the Minstrel on Facebook. Log In. Forgot account? Academic journal article Scottish Literary Review. The Bard and the Minstrel. By Robertson, Ian C. Read preview. Academic journal article Scottish Literary Review. The Bard and the Minstrel. By Robertson, Ian C. Read preview. Article excerpt. Abstract. This article examines the hitherto under-explored influence of James Beattie's poem, The Minstrel on Robert Burns's Tam o' Shanter. Credited cast: Cajardo Lindsey. The Minstrel. See full cast ». View production, box office, & company info. A black man performing in blackface in 1918 decides to recite Shakespeare's Othello instead of the minstrel routine he's been relegated to do. Genres: Short | Drama.