

## Bridges and Border Stories: Interpreting Implicit Boundaries in “Tam o’Shanter” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”

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### Abstract

Henry A. Pochman has detailed how Washington Irving’s short story, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” was influenced by German legends. This paper details further aspects of Irving’s surreptitious borrowing from European sources, in particular from Cervantes’s *Don Quijote de La Mancha* and Robert Burns’s “Tam o’Shanter.” Details of characterization link Ichabod Crane to Don Quixote. Similarly, corresponding details of depiction and geographical orientations within “Tam o’Shanter” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” point to the influence of Burns’s poem particularly upon the scene in which the Headless Horseman chases Ichabod Crane over a bridge. Irving does not, however, borrow unreflectively. Some key cultural perspectives prevalent in “Tam o’Shanter,” particularly attitudes toward religion, alcoholic drink, and sexual attraction, have been deemphasized or replaced in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” so as to better match the story’s American setting and, in some cases, to instantiate ideological nuance into the otherwise innocuous narrative. Irving’s extensive use of subtly adapted European references contributes greatly to his skillful attempt to place early American literature within the tradition of the pastoral “countryside” of European literary tradition,

Key words: bridge, metaphor, Washington Irving, Robert Burns, Miguel de Cervantes, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”, “Tam o’Shanter”, Ichabod Crane, Don Quixote

### I. European Literature and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”

Two of Washington Irving’s best known stories, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle,” stand out from the varied essays that depict English life in *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* Irving’s curious editorial decision to scatter these apparently American folk-tales amidst his other more pedestrian essays situated in the “old country” necessitates readers of

*The Sketch-Book* to jump back and forth between continents from chapter to chapter. So long as the tales set on American soil are not read as stand-alone short stories, these rapid changes of scenery make cross-cultural comparison almost inevitable.

"Sleepy Hollow" contains ample everyday references to transplanted English customs and cuisine (e.g. "tea-table"; *Sketch-Book* 296). Such an outcome was all but inevitable. After all, until Irving's time the new United States had been populated predominantly by English or British settlers (cf. Huntington 42-44) so even had Irving desired to eliminate general English cultural influence from the story he would have had to forego using the English language itself. Nevertheless, the full extent of the story's considerable European influence is revealed in its persistent reference to non-English cultural traditions. It might even be said that, although "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is set in New York and depicts American protagonists, it is difficult to interpret it straightforwardly as an American story. "Sleepy Hollow" begins with a quotation from *Castle of Indolence* by the Scottish poet James Thomson (*Sketch-Book* 291). In fact, the epigraphs from European literary sources that precede almost every chapter confirm Irving's intention that *The Sketch-Book* be read, if not with European cultural heritage as explicitly relevant background knowledge, at least with a passing acknowledgment of the presence of such a larger context.

The story does, of course, depict events that transpire within a small village in what is now rural New York State, out of the American mainstream. Nevertheless, the enclave is seen to be occupied mostly by the Dutch. Indeed, the words Dutch and Dutchman together are used no fewer than 14 times in the course of the story. Irving often alludes to "Dutch navigators" as if European explorers were still plying the waters of the Hudson, which he consistently terms the "Tappan Zee." Additionally, Irving's foreign allusions include the assertion that Sleepy Hollow had been "bewitched by a high German doctor" (*Sketch-Book* 292) and passing references to Tartars, Don Cossacks (301), Achilles (302), and Mercury (304). In contrast, purely American references such as the assertion that a Native American chieftain "held his powwows" in Sleepy Hollow (*Sketch-Book* 292) are present but relatively sparse.

Due to this paucity of obviously American references and Irving's apparent desire for the story to be read with Europe as its larger narrative context, the scholar may begin to wonder whether the story contains any truly American cultural influence at all. This question has been asked by numerous scholars who have gone on to uncover multiple specific references to probable European sources for various aspects of Irving's story. Indeed, the job of identifying

specifically American aspects of Irving's story is complicated, however, by the fact that so many European sources have already been attributed to "Sleepy Hollow" that one would not be surprised if a few more were to turn up. In that making arguments from ignorance would appear to be a dangerous course of action in Irving's particular case, the author's originality may need to be uncovered through careful comparative study that keeps his multiple likely sources firmly in mind. Before reviewing the European sources that other scholars have already brought to light, it will be necessary to note one particular influence that (to my knowledge) has yet to be concretely explained.

Irving goes into great detail in describing Ichabod Crane, the story's hapless protagonist. According to the narrator, he is "tall, but exceedingly lank, with narrow shoulders, long arms and legs, hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves, feet that might have served for shovels, and his whole frame most loosely held together" (*Sketch-Book* 293). "[O]ne might have mistaken him for the genius of famine descending upon the earth, or some scarecrow eloped from a cornfield" (*Sketch-Book* 294). According to the narrator, the schoolmaster is an "idle, gentleman-like personage, of vastly superior taste and accomplishments to rough country swains, and, indeed, inferior in learning only to the parson" (*Sketch-Book* 296). He was "a perfect master of Cotton Mather's History of New England Witchcraft, in which [...] "he most firmly and potently believed" (*Sketch-Book* 296). Knickerbocker's narration gives a clear picture of Ichabod and, for those who have read *Don Quixote de La Mancha*, this picture may seem familiar.

According to Cervantes, Don Quixote was "verging on 50, of tough constitution, lean-bodied, thin-faced, a great early riser and a lover of hunting" (Cervantes 31), who "gave himself up to the reading of books of knight errantry" (Cervantes 31). Especially partial to the works of Feliciano de Silva, he "so buried himself in his books that he spent the nights reading from twilight till daybreak and the days from dawn till dark" (Cervantes 32). While Irving's Ichabod Crane is considerably younger than Don Quixote and certainly not a lover of hunting, there are some striking similarities: both are lean, lanky, and overly well-read in fanciful literature likely to fire one's imagination.

The horses depicted in the two stories also bear certain intriguing resemblances. Crane's mount, Gunpowder, is described as "a broken down plough-horse" that had "outlived almost everything but his viciousness. He was gaunt and shagged, with a ewe neck and a head like a hammer; his rusty mane and tail were tangled and knotted with burrs; one eye had lost its pupil, and was glaring and spectral; but the other had the gleam of the devil in it" (*Sketch-Book*

305). By way of comparison, Don Quixote's steed, Rosinante, is described as being "long and lank," "hollow and lean," with a "sharp backbone, and "wasted in consumption" (Cervantes 77). Again, the match is not perfect but the sad state of Ichabod's mount and its reflection on its rider will be reminiscent of Rosinante's condition for those who have acquaintance with Don Quixote.

To note still further correlation, Irving has filled his narrative with the terminology of chivalric literary tradition: "damsel" (*Sketch-Book* 296, 299), knight-errant of yore (300, 303, 305), "giants," "enchanters," "fiery dragons" (300), castles (301, 307), "the lady of his heart" (301), references to "gallantry" (302, 305), "single-combat" (303), "cavalier" (305), steed (305, 307), not to mention the telling phrase "border chivalry" (309) which will be noted again later in this paper with reference to Irving's visit to Scott at Abbotsford. Unlike Cervantes, however, there is little direct reference to actual medieval chivalric literature, only general terms and ideas that evoke the genre. For this reason, Irving's story seems less concerned with recalling Arthurian or Carolingian legends than with creating a chivalric atmosphere sufficient to bring Ichabod's rather self-satisfied view of the chivalry found in his own character into sharp contradistinction with his at times petty and cowardly conduct. It should be evident that Irving's allusion is not meant to recall actual chivalric literature per se but simply to instill a facetious narrative tone after the fashion of Don Quixote.

Booth has noted how the "intruding narrator" in Don Quixote parodies previous fiction in mentioning "the laying down of swords, flutes, horns, and other romantic objects" and in so doing makes himself "a dramatized character to whom we react as we react to other characters" (Booth 212). The excessively lofty voice of Cervantes's narrator is perfectly matched by Irving's use of the persona of Diedrich Knickerbocker to relate "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Booth notes that Cervantes's narration "serves to heighten the effect of the knight's adventures" (Booth 212). This is no less true for "Sleepy Hollow." While subtle and marked differences abound, the depiction of Ichabod and his horse, the general references to chivalric traditions, the lofty voice of the narrator, and the resulting satiric tone all point clearly to the influence of Don Quixote on "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow."

If Cervantes used Don Quixote to cleverly parody the genre of medieval chivalric literature, then "Sleepy Hollow" may be considered a parody of a parody. Whereas Don Quixote may be remembered as a tragicomic but nevertheless legitimately chivalric figure, Ichabod Crane is described in knightly terms only to highlight the craven pragmatism in his character that ful-

ly comes to light by the story's end. While Don Quixote exhibits foolish courage and takes his blows for it, Crane attempts to win his damsel by way of urbane scheming and, failing this, (apparently) licks his wounds and beats a hasty retreat. In contrast to the touching idealism of Don Quixote that lives on even after his death, the pragmatic Ichabod ingloriously changes locations and takes up politics. As indicated by the "morals" of the story (both spelled out and curiously confounded in Irving's subtle postscript), America is safe ground neither for unswerving idealism nor chivalric pretention.

Irving consistently alludes to Don Quixote and in so doing heightens reader interest in Ichabod Crane as a character but his European literary allusions do not stop at details of characterization. Indeed, European sources inform much of the story's plot. It has been noted that "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" adapts parts of Otmar's "Wild Huntsman of Hacklenburg" (Pochman 1930a: 499), the fifth tale in the *Legenden von Rübezahl* in *Volksmärchen* by J.A. Musaeus (Pochman 1930a: 500), and also (possibly) Bürger's *Der Wilde Jäger* (Leary 306).

Concerning Irving's chronic allusive proclivity, there have been both positive and negative assessments. For example, in *Rip Van Winkle*, Irving took an old country legend from the *Volkssagen* by Otmar, specifically the German tale of Peter Klaus, "a German goatherd who fell asleep for years," (Hoffman 426) and grafted it onto the New York region, thereby giving the illusion of cultural depth to an area that had, in Irving's time, only been recently populated. Concerning such strategic borrowing, Pochman makes the rather generous point that Shakespeare did no less in using plots, characters, and cultural backdrops of other literary traditions when writing his plays (Pochman 495). The less forgiving Hoffman remarks, "[w]hen we see the extent to which Irving depended on other men's books, often translating without acknowledgment, we can understand why recent critics are reluctant to grant him credit for originality in interpreting American themes" (Hoffman 426). In fact, in the case of *Sleepy Hollow*, both in details of depiction and in the plot of the story itself, Irving's literary strategy involved extensive (and mostly surreptitious) borrowing from old-world sources. Realizing the full extent of Irving's European allusions, it should not be surprising then that he has succeeded in "Europeanizing" the American literary landscape.

George Steiner has asserted that "Western art is, more often than not, about preceding art; literature about literature" (Steiner 485). If this is indeed the case, then one might say that American literature before Irving was about nothing in particular. After all, the American literary pantheon was decidedly unpopulated and the reputations of the only widely known au-

thors (including Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine) were more political than artistic. With such a bleak record, it should not be surprising that English critics thought the term American literature an oxymoron. Irving, however, refusing to cede European influences to the Europeans simply because they happened to occupy Europe, emphasized old world heritage in his writing and in so doing began to construct a hybrid American cultural base upon which American authors would later build and innovate. That he borrowed much is undeniable. That American literature would have been the worse without him should also be an assertion beyond dispute.

## II. Similarities Between the Chase Scenes in "Tam o'Shanter" and Sleepy Hollow

For many readers, the most memorable scene in the story is the pursuit of Ichabod Crane by the Headless Horseman. In its entry on "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," *The Encyclopedia of New York State* specifically refers to this scene when it mentions the likely influence of Scottish popular poet Robert Burns's "Tam o'Shanter" on the story (*Eisenstadt et al*). In fact, Irving had ample opportunity to become acquainted with this poem while in Scotland visiting Sir Walter Scott, if indeed he had not encountered it before then.

Irving visited Edinburgh in 1817, just a few years before the publication of *The Sketch Book*. While there is no specific mention of *Tam o'Shanter* or Burns in his collected correspondence, the records do note that he surveyed castles, bridges, walls and other scenery while in Scotland (*Life and Letters* 376-377). Irving states:

I don't wonder that anyone residing in Edinburgh should write poetically; I rambled about the bridges and on Calton height yesterday, in a perfect intoxication of the mind. I did not visit a single public building; but merely gazed and reveled on the romantic scenery around me. (*Life and Letters* 378-379)

Visiting Sir Walter Scott in Abbotsford, as well, Irving traveled to various literary settings, including that of Scott's *Rob Roy*, and generally "visited some of the most remarkable and beautiful scenes in Scotland" (*Life and Letters* 384-385). At one point, Irving spent an evening with Scott, who told "border stories" and "characteristic anecdotes" (*Life and Letters* 385). While "Tam o'Shanter" cannot be considered a "border story," strictly speaking, it shares with them an element of danger in that the protagonists are depicted as being vulnerable with the enemy close

at hand. Although there is no evidence that Irving visited Alloway or other parts of Robert Burns's native territory, it seems unlikely that Irving would have departed Scotland without having encountered the poem by Scotland's unofficial national poet.

There are numerous correlations between the tales that all but confirm Burns as yet another of Irving's European influences. For example, in "Sleepy Hollow," Greensburgh is "properly known by the name of Tarry Town" (*Sketch-Book* 292) because men tended to "linger about the village tavern on market days." The narrator Knickerbocker adds that Ichabod Crane "tarried" in Sleepy Hollow (*Sketch-Book* 293). Similarly, the events depicted in Burns's tale occur precisely because its protagonist, Tam, tarries in a tavern on "market-day" (Burns 131).

As Tam drinks (and flirts with Kirkton Jean) and as Ichabod feasts (and bides his time so as to be alone with Katrina Van Tassel), time flies and they find themselves far from home at nightfall. In "Tam o'Shanter" the "dreary hour" is described as "night's black arch the key-stane" (Burns 133), which indicates midnight. Irving depicts Ichabod as leaving at "the very witching hour of night" (*Sketch-Book* 312), which likely indicates some time between midnight and around 3 a.m. Along the way, Tam croons "o'er some auld Scots sonnet" (Burns 133) while Ichabod, who usually sings hymns, whistles for comfort (313). The road home in "Tam o'Shanter" is over "mosses, waters, slaps, and styles" (Burns 131) (i.e. marshes, rivers, fence-breaches and stiles; c.f. Milford) while old Brouwer (whose harrowing escape from the Headless Horseman prefigures Ichabod's own midnight ride through the Hollow) gallops "over bush and brake, over hill and swamp" (*Sketch-Book* 311). Even Irving's succinct but poetic fourfold description of the terrain echoes Burns.

Both stories mention horror tales that the lonely riders were aware of while on their trek. One passage in "Tam o'Shanter" (Burns 133) mentions how Tam moves through an ill-starred area in which a "chapman" (gypsy) had smothered in the snow, past birch trees and a stone where "drunken Charlie broke his neck-bone," near the place where hunters found a murdered child and where Mungo's mother hung herself. "Sleepy Hollow," which has already made ample mention of witches, ghosts, goblins, and Cotton Mather (with a full nine separate references for Mather) now depicts Ichabod as traversing a similarly haunted stretch of road (310) in which is found the tree where Major André was captured (he was later to be hanged as a spy), the place where a woman perished in the snow (echoing Burns's "chapman"), and where the Headless Horseman was often seen patrolling. Both of these passages serve to heighten tension in preparation for the appearance of (apparently) supernatural entities before

the respective chase scenes.

Although the specifics of the chase scenes in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Tam o'Shanter" vary, there are some decided similarities, one of these being the way in which the movement of apparently supernatural beings is thought to be restricted to local natural settings. According to the interior logic of each story, neither the Headless Horseman nor the witch Nannie should be able to cross the rivers that appear at the end of each chase scene. As to why this should be the case, concrete explanations are offered neither by Irving nor Burns.

Apparently Burns assumes the reader to understand the reason, whether intuitively or through access to some local or more broadly understood folk knowledge. The idea that supernatural entities must somehow be bound to particular regions, their haunts, is evident in various Scottish legends. For example, in one of the legends concerning "Thomas the Rhymer" (Mackenzie 147-160), a supernatural poet named Thomas appears at a wooden bridge to take two musicians to his enchanted castle, Tom-na-hurich, where they perform for the guests at a banquet. After finishing, they leave the castle only to find that 100 years have passed and the wooden bridge has been rebuilt as a stone bridge while they were gone. In fact, this legend, reminiscent of Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," also subtly incorporates the crossing and re-crossing of the wooden bridge and its stone replacement to indicate the entrance into and exit from the supernatural realm. To the extent that the bridge serves as a supernatural boundary in this particular legend, it harmonizes perfectly with Burns's depiction and hints at a widespread folk-knowledge that interprets rivers to be supernatural boundaries.

Because rivers are readily apparent impediments to travel, throughout human history they have served as de facto borders between regions. Unlike roads or fences, they are not constructed by humans but have presumably been put in place by God or the gods. This idea that rivers themselves are the products of supernatural will and that they consequently have deities overseeing them represents a commonly held belief in multiple cultures with written records dating as far back as Xenophon's *Anabasis* from ancient Greece (c. 401 BC). In *Anabasis*, 10,000 Greek mercenary troops follow Cyrus the Younger to topple his brother, Artaxerxes II, king of the Persian Empire. Along the way, they approach a river that is normally high and difficult to ford but when they encounter it, the water level is low and they cross over easily. The leaders of the expedition see this as a fortuitous event indicating that the gods are with them. To quote Xenophon: "It seemed, accordingly, that here was a divine intervention, and that the river had plainly retired before Cyrus because he was destined to be king" (Xenophon



91).

In cases where rivers have been bridged, then, the bridge may be interpreted as a human construction that has been built contrary to divine will. Consequently, floods that wash such bridges away are seen as the river god's retribution for constructing the bridge. Nevertheless, bridges are commonly available for many people to cross and thereby facilitate travel to neighboring regions beyond the natural boundary of the river.

Local deities, on the other hand, perhaps due to the very fact that they are perceived as "local" deities, seem not to have the ability to travel to other regions. As a result, rivers, in that they roughly correspond to regional borders, have been interpreted as supernaturally instantiated absolute boundaries that supernatural entities cannot cross, even when a bridge is present, as is the case in both stories.

In Burns's depiction, the keystone of the bridge is emphasized and indeed functions as a more precise physical demarcation of just such a supernatural boundary, with serious ramifications for Tam's horse. Burns's depiction of the chase scene in "Tam o'Shanter" ends with Tam barely escaping the clutches of witch Nannie as he crosses the bridge just ahead of her. Tam's horse, Meg (or Maggie), however, is not so lucky and loses her tail which had yet to pass beyond the keystone thereby allowing Nannie to grasp it a split-second before the horse had completely crossed over the supernatural boundary.

A keystone is the particular block in a stone bridge which links and is pinned between the ascending half-arches as they rise to meet at the center-point of the bridge. As stone bridges do not have the flexible strength of solid steel, they must rely on fixed and carefully balanced gravitational force channeled along rows of individual stones for stability. The keystone is at the pinnacle and, because it is the last stone to be set in place during construction thereby securing the structural integrity of the arch, may be considered the most important stone among many. From a human psychological viewpoint, insofar as the halfway-point in the river would seem to be the best place in which to search for an infinitesimally small supernatural faultline dividing region from region, the keystone of the bridge, being located exactly at the pinnacle and center of the arch, will naturally be interpreted as the physical manifestation of such a boundary.

Depictions of bridges as physical crossing points over supernatural boundaries are not limited to Scottish legends. One noteworthy example is found among the folk traditions of Japan. According to legend, unsuspecting travelers meet female deities called *Hashihime* near

bridges that border regions occupied by rival regional deities (Yanagita 1968, 1970). According to one version among many in this group of broadly dispersed yet fundamentally homogeneous *Hashihime* folk tales, the traveler is given a letter to pass on to a woman waiting at the next bridge along the road. After arriving at the next bridge and handing over the letter, however, the traveler is often killed by the rival deity for his contemptible association with the previous deity who made the request to pass the letter along. In these *Hashihime* legends, the rivers mentioned are rivers that serve as borders between neighboring regions and thereby circumscribe the area of influence for each deity mentioned. As such, rivers serve as physically visible demarcations for invisible supernatural states and conditions.

A similar conception of rivers is evident in the story, "The Elves" (Tieck 1812), of the German *kunstmärchen* (literary fairy tale) tradition. In the story's context, elves live hidden from human sight just across a bridge over a river. On one occasion an innocent child is brought over the bridge into elvish territory and problems ensue from this unprecedented crossing. While in this particular story the river is a supernatural boundary only in the sense that the elves have purposefully used it to prevent contact with humans, it still represents a supernatural boundary that divides natural and supernatural realms.

Many shamanistic traditions include rites that refer to bridges as places of supernatural "dangerous passage" (cf. Eliade 482-484). As in the case of the child that was able to cross the river into a supernatural domain in "The Elves," the successful crossing of these supernatural bridges is often implicitly linked to the innocence or purity of the person attempting to cross. For example, in the Altaic shaman tradition:

[T]he shaman first reaches a plain and finds a sea crossed by a bridge the breadth of a hair; he sets foot on it and, to give a striking image of his crossing a dangerous bridge, he totters and almost falls. At the bottom of the sea he sees the bones of countless shamans who have fallen into it, for a sinner could not cross the bridge. (Eliade 202)

The idea that "sinners" cannot cross these supernatural bridges (and conversely that only the "good" and "innocent" can) is common to a number of religious traditions including Christian and Islamic, even finding its way into medieval romances (Eliade 484). According to the Telumni Yokuts Native American tradition, a bridge separates the land of the living from the area where ghost dances occur and a bird guards the middle of the bridge to try to frighten any

mortals that might dare attempt to cross into the realm of the dead (Eliade 311).

The abundance of folklore that interprets bridges as supernatural boundaries is indication of a relatively recurrent human tendency to depict the boundaries between natural and supernatural realms in terms of readily perceptible yet mundane topographical features. While none of these traditions (with the exception of "Thomas the Rhymer") is likely to have influenced the bridge-related superstitions evident in "Tam o'Shanter," they harmonize well with it. This broad cross-cultural pattern of folk belief has been skillfully referenced by Burns in his depiction of the bridge crossing in "Tam o'Shanter."

Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference in the orientation of "Tam o'Shanter" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." In Burns's story, Tam is fleeing not from a supernatural realm but from supernatural beings in the human realm. Because the short-skirted witch Nannie is no mere human (although she had once been a normal human girl according to the story; cf. Burns 135), her haunting is apparently restricted to a certain fixed territory. Because such laws do not apply to the mortal Tam, nor to Maggie, his horse, they are free to cross the boundary into safe territory while Nannie is not. A case could even be made that Tam (and Maggie) were able to cross the bridge out of the evil revelers's territory precisely because they were both "innocents" (at least in Burns's ethical paradigm). It might be argued that, in Burns's cosmology, there is some higher supernatural power that restricts the free movement of evil spiritual forces. Whether such a force would be called "God" or not is a question open to debate; after all, the local Christian church, Kirk Alloway, is depicted not as a safe haven for the innocent Tam, but as a place of supernatural confluence where evil forces in the region gather to hold their diabolical fiesta.

Probably in direct reference to the church bridge mentioned in "Tam o'Shanter," "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" depicts Brom Bones's race with the Headless Horseman ending with a flash of fire and the Horseman's disappearance "just as they came to the church bridge" (*Sketch-Book* 311). Later in the story, Ichabod Crane turns after crossing the very same church bridge "to see if his pursuer should vanish, according to the rule, in a flash of fire and brimstone" (*Sketch-Book* 316). The "rule" mentioned here may simply be an internal reference to the story told by Brom Bones but there is also an intimation of some broader, more commonly known "rule." With reference to this passage, Manning remarks that "traditionally supernatural beings cannot cross water" (*Sketch-Book* 353) and mentions "Tam o'Shanter" as a reference to back up this observation. Judging from the many other similarities between the two works,

however, it seems likely that this correlation between the two stories owes as much to direct influence as to simple common cultural understanding.

In retrospect, while the two stories both involve equestrian chases at midnight, churches, bridges, and narrow escapes from seemingly supernatural assailants, the directionality of these chases is, at least in one sense, opposite: Ichabod Crane hopes to flee in the direction of the church and across the bridge to safety, while Tam gallops steadily away from the demon-infested churchyard of Kirk Alloway and achieves safety only as he crosses a bridge some distance away. This subtle difference in the otherwise similar chase scenes reveals not only cultural differences but dissimilarity of underlying philosophy. While neither story is overtly ideological, the presence of the bridge at such crucial junctures in each respective work indicates the subtextual presence of an implied discontinuity that may be ascertained through analysis of details of depiction.

### III. Anti-ecclesiastical Sentiment in "Tam o'Shanter"

Although brought up in the church, the nature of Robert Burns's Christian beliefs were often suspect. While claiming that religion had throughout his life been his "dearest enjoyment" (Roy et al), his willingness to take sides against the "strict observances" (Daiches 15) demanded by the church and his general tendency to depict the Devil as a "mischievous practical joker" (Daiches 22) reflect the nature of Burns's religious belief: a less than orthodox "humanitarian deism" (Daiches 14). In fact, many of his poetic works are critical of the church, "Holy Willie's Prayer" being one of the better-known examples.

"Tam o'Shanter" is another work that displays a marked anti-ecclesiastical bent, albeit less explicitly than in some of his earlier poetry. The reader of "Tam o'Shanter," perhaps concentrating on the skillfully told story itself, might not notice the fact that the arcane gathering Tam encounters is situated in a church-yard. From a traditional Christian viewpoint, one would expect such a gathering of witches and demons to be depicted as occurring as far away from the church-yard as possible.

Burns's less than serious depiction of the evil in the Kirk Alloway churchyard subtly hints at his ultimate skepticism concerning the existence of actual witches or devils. In fact, the Devil in the scene is little more than a background character with the main threat to Tam coming from the witch, Nannie. In fact, just as in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" an explanation of events that entirely leaves out the supernatural is possible. Perhaps the chase involving

these supernatural beings was simply the product of Tam's overstimulated imagination after a long bout of drinking and a late night journey home along stormy paths. (Meg's lost tail would be key counterevidence against such an explanation.)

It is noteworthy that the ghouls in the story seem to emanate from the church itself. From an atheistic viewpoint, if evil spirits and the devil are simply a hoax and exist nowhere except within the minds of those who believe in them, there is a certain logic to this: the church, which imparts the faith that warns against being ensnared by these evil entities may itself be seen as the fountainhead of the very evil it condemns.

It seems likely that Burns would have agreed with such a view, at least in private. While "Tam o'Shanter" never overtly questions the existence of God, Burns treats the devil ("auld Nick") as a farcical figure and thereby diminishes his status (Burns 134). If the devil may be trifled with in such a way, there would seem to be little necessity for maintaining a Christian worldview. In fact, Burns's casual treatment of the devil is paired with a subtle condescension towards those who see life in absolute terms of good and evil. This is nowhere more evident than in the depiction of Tam's wife, Kate, who is portrayed not as a concerned wife with legitimate anxiety for her husband's well-being but a petty tyrant waiting to pick a fight upon Tam's return.

In fact, there is a neat parallel between the horror Tam faces on the stormy road and the storm that awaits him at home. In a sense, the storm outside and his encounter with the witches functions as an outward metaphorical extension of the anger his wife will feel towards him for drinking late at the market. In this sense, the story is unified in its negative depiction of those who would impinge upon Tam's innocent pleasures. It is no accident that Nannie and the other witches are associated with the church grounds: Burns's main point seems to be that the real devils in society are those narrow-minded, hard-hearted scolds who populate the pulpits and pews.

Consequently, the moral of "Tam o'Shanter" may be understood on two distinct levels. At the surface level, Burns seems to suggest that one must be careful when drinking, but this message is provided with a wink and a nod. In fact, the implicit moral of the story is exactly the opposite: the problem is not demon rum itself but the ways in which religious superstition and the institution of marriage each have the unfortunate potential to impair the pure and innocent enjoyment of strong drink. If one is to drink as one likes then religion and marriage should be partaken of only in moderation, if at all. Put differently, the ethical claims of "res-

pectable" Christian society are not to be taken too seriously.

Did Burns really intend to write such anti-ecclesiastical nuance into "Tam o'Shanter"? In fact, many authors use subterfuge to make surreptitious ideological or philosophical observations through fine-grained hints embedded in the texture of depiction. Booth confirms the prevalence of this trend:

Knowing [the danger of obtrusive commentary], novelists very early developed methods for disguising their portents as part of the represented object. Long before dogmas about showing rather than telling became fashionable, authors often concealed their commentary by dramatizing it as scenery or symbol. (Booth196)

Having said this, Booth cautions not to go overboard in trying to identify the main "theme" or "moral" of a given work because, in doing so, the critic may risk losing "the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole" (Booth 73). Keeping this advice in mind, then, what conclusions can be drawn? Burns's tale as a whole may include a number of intriguing themes worth examination and so to say that Tam o'Shanter is nothing more than a critique of organized religion would surely be an overstatement. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how, with reference to the church as depicted, a case could be made for anything but an anti-ecclesiastical subtext. Booth's admonition against analytical oversimplification commends itself in a general sense but when dealing with a specific and highly prominent aspect of a narrative, sometimes implications may be obvious. Burns's story then, at least when examined for references to organized religion, can only be understood as a cleverly disguised criticism of the Christian church and a cheerful expression of disdain for religion-inspired admonitions against excessive drinking.

On the contrary, when Washington Irving depicts the church in a positive light, specifically as a place that Ichabod must flee *to* as opposed to flee *from*, is he making the opposite statement, a statement of (relative) support for the church? On the surface, the answer would seem to be yes, but other interpretations are also possible. Just what caused Irving to rearrange the topography of the chase scene in such a way as to reverse its underlying significance?

#### IV. Irving's Accomodations to American Culture in "Sleepy Hollow"

Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European novel 1800-1900* asserts that, at least in some cases, the

nature of a particular place may be seen as a component of the events described in the literary work: "each space determines, or at least encourages, its own kind of story" (Moretti 70). Moretti specifically makes this comment with respect to the old world. European literature both represents and reflects the geographical and cultural areas depicted in it. The ideas behind the literature are not simply free-floating, decontextualized notions that would be equally viable whether situated in Birmingham or Berlin. In that authors choose which aspects of the setting to depict (and which not to depict), the primary function of space in narrative, beyond simply providing some arbitrary context for action and events, is to materially confirm the flow of affective aspects in the plot. In the case of Irving's short story, geographical and cultural authenticity are achieved both by the inclusion of purely American aspects of characterization (for example, the depiction of Brom Bones) but more importantly by leaving out or adapting certain incongruous aspects of borrowed European materials.

Irving at one point called "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" "a random thing, suggested by recollections or scenes and stories about Tarrytown," "a mere whimsical band to connect descriptions of scenery, customs, manners," etc. (*Life and Letters* 448). According to Pierre Irving's account, the story's basic ideas stemmed from "a waggish fiction of Brom Bones" that had come up in a conversation Irving once had with his brother-in-law, Van Wart (*Life and Letters* 448-449). It is very easy to imagine that such local American lore played some sort of role in Irving's creation of "Sleepy Hollow"; still, due to the extent to which evidence of Irving's literary borrowing has already come to light, the concrete correlations with "Tam o'Shanter" cannot be brushed aside with vague references to unverifiable personal conversations. The presence of the bridge in relation to the location of the church in the chase scene of Irving's tale, just as in "Tam o'Shanter," hints at an underlying ideological disconnect. Irving has shied away from Burns's organization of the chase scene route with its implications that the church is somehow a location at which evil forces gather. To ignore such a change as simply an inconsequential rearrangement of stage props is to underestimate Irving both as an author and as a perceptive reader of "old world" literature.

Generally speaking, Irving depicts the church not as a nefarious reactionary institution to be resisted but as a civilizing influence on an otherwise unsophisticated American culture. Whether he recognizes the value in the spiritual enterprises of the church or not remains in doubt, but at minimum for Irving, the very existence of the church, insofar as it is a European association, serves to elevate Sleepy Hollow from a vacuous backwater in the American wilder-

ness to quaint pastoral status.

The rustic quality of Sleepy Hollow and its environs is most evident with respect to local attitudes toward indulgence, especially concerning alcohol. Burns's outright challenge to local Christian mores, while potentially disturbing to the orthodox, would have been met with guarded appreciation by the urbane, educated elite of Edinburgh, whose opinions Burns greatly valued (Daiches 21). On the other hand, Irving was writing for a very different set of readers. The educated elites of the Puritan-influenced American east coast of Irving's day did not look with particular favor on the pleasures associated with alcohol consumption. Irving, in keeping with the mood of the teetotalers among his American readership, does not go into detail concerning the drinking sprees that are likely to occur in Tarrytown (and indeed, does not even dare admit that he has any personal experience of these) (*Sketch-Book* 291).

In America, Tam's innocent pleasure would have been seen as a guilty one and so Irving must find some other more appropriate indulgence for Ichabod to wallow in. Whereas Tam is gently chided for his inability to resist "bousing at the nappy" (Burns 131) (drinking ale), Ichabod is cheerfully skewered over his weakness for food. The narrator notes that Ichabod's "spirits rose with eating as some men's do with drink" (*Sketch-Book* 308), recalling Burns's descriptions of the pleasure of Tam's drinking bout: "Kings may be blest but Tam was glorious, O'er a' the ills o' life victorious!" (Burns 132). In both stories, the protagonists find themselves in dangerous situations as a result of their own "tarrying" and indulgence in (more or less) suspect pleasures.

European novels have often displayed dichotomized settings, dividing plots between acts that feature the young, sophisticated, decadent city life on one hand and the outmoded if stable pastoral simplicity of the countryside on the other (Moretti 20, 65). Irving uses this formula to place America squarely within the tradition of European "countryside." Unable to compete with European sophistication, he plays up the new country's old-fashioned rusticity, and as he does so Europeans grudgingly acquire a literary frame of reference through which to view America. The area that had until then been viewed as a cultural dead-zone is, thanks to Irving's persistent allusion, upgraded to European "provincial" status.

As with the case of the location of the church along the chase route in the story, the main interest here lies not in the influence "Tam o'Shanter" had upon Irving's story but the extent of adaptation. Unable to mimic Burns's bawdy storytelling lest he offend the delicate sensibilities of his American readership, Irving uses his lofty narrator to shyly mention a young



woman's sexual appeal in the most innocent of ways. The object of Ichabod Crane's affection in "Sleepy Hollow," Katrina Van Tassel, is a charming music student of his with "a provokingly short petticoat, to display the prettiest foot and ankle in the country round" (*Sketch Book* 298).

Noting the stark contrast between Tam's hyperventilating at Maggie's "cutty sark" (short skirt) and Ichabod's melancholy pining over Katrina's "short petticoat" displaying pretty "foot and ankle," the 21st century reader finds it difficult not to smile condescendingly at the naive, countrified propriety of Knickerbocker. The restrained American readers of Irving's time, however, were free to interpret Irving's excessively modest expression of Katrina's sexual power as quaint if concrete evidence of superior American moral fiber. With respect to sex, new world inhabitants prove themselves to be decidedly "old-fashioned." In the end, among Irving's contemporaries, modest readers may have read the story as a moral tale poking fun at the faults of the indulgent, elitist Ichabod, while more urbane readers probably read the story as satire, poking fun at the almost obscene modesty of the puritanical Americans. Of course, due to the shrewd artifice of Irving's lofty narrative style, the story can be taken in either way depending upon reader perspective. It should be noted, however, that Irving's deft control of his narrative was probably due more to intercultural necessity than a desire for stylistic innovation.

Having asserted that Irving has adapted his European materials to suit a dual readership, are we also safe in assuming that "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is nothing more than the well-told and entertaining but ultimately pointless exercise in Gothic storytelling that it appears to be on the surface? Just as it is risky to underestimate Irving's stylistic control in light of his extensive borrowing, so it is equally dangerous to assume a lack of ideological content due to the fact that Irving's style is often so painfully diplomatic. Smith has observed "that American supernatural horror stories often function either implicitly or explicitly as political and social commentaries" (Smith). With such a tendency firmly in mind, the possibility arises that Irving, like Burns before him, did indeed have some ideological axe to grind. Just as analysis of Tam's harrowing ride reveals the extent of Burns's antipathy toward the Christian church, further analysis of Ichabod's course of flight may shed some light on Irving's own ideological orientation.

A clue to interpretation lies in the story's greater context, namely the collection as a whole, *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* Throughout *The Sketch-Book*, Irving's narrator mentions the treasures of European civilization as being "reverend" (72) and the objects of a

"pilgrim's devotion" (229) but nowhere is Irving's "religious" respect for European civilization more evident than in his essay, "The Mutability of Literature."

Irving remarks of certain books in Westminster Abbey: "By being stored away in this ancient library, you are like the treasured remains of those saints and monarchs, which lie enshrined in the adjoining chapels" (*Sketch-Book* 114). He further remarks that the "mutability of language is a wise precaution of Providence" (*Sketch-Book* 117) and talks of Shakespeare and others in the pantheon of literature as "heaven-illuminated bards" (*Sketch-Book* 120). For Irving, European civilization itself, and especially literature, is defined by its pure artistic works that have rightly become objects of worship and so are now (at least figuratively) "enshrined."

In that this essay directly precedes "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," readers will bring Irving's religion-tinged reflections on literary tradition with them into their reading of the story. For this reason, while the church mentioned in Sleepy Hollow may obviously be associated with early 19th century Christianity in particular and also with religion more generally, taking the entirety of *The Sketch-Book* into consideration, Irving's church seems to serve as one domain of a metaphor in which non-religious ideas including intellectual sophistication, cultural respectability, and literary greatness are profusely referenced and then finally given solid physical form as Sleepy Hollow's church, a key landmark in the story's topographical setting.

If this is indeed the case, if Irving has infused all of his previous religious reflections concerning high European culture found throughout *The Sketch-Book* into the single image of the church in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," then a new interpretation of the plot follows directly. Ichabod is a learned literary man that must somehow dodge the Headless Horseman (unreflective and antagonistic European critics) to arrive at the church-yard (of literary respectability). The name, Ichabod, is said to refer to a Biblical figure whose name means the "glory has departed." Is Irving implying that the glory has departed from legend-filled Europe (Sleepy Hollow), a fabled, sleepy continent that is now populated entirely by headless literary critics that seek to waylay American authors on their road to literary fame. This subtle interpretation of the story would carry little weight were it not such an exact characterization of Irving's own frustration at a "literary climate that seemed bent on ignoring, neglecting, or otherwise slighting the literary products of America" (Manning ix) during the time he was writing *The Sketch-Book*.

At the end of the tale, the narrator notes that the road to the church has been moved so as to approach from the mill rather than through Sleepy Hollow. What could be the purpose

of such an observation? In the context of the story it would seem to make little difference if the road was later moved or not. The only good reason for including such a gratuitous observation would be to further hint at some subtext that has been consciously written into the story.

The inclusion of this strange detail may be explained as follows: while outwardly sophisticated and urbane, Europe has become an intellectual backwater, a Sleepy Hollow, outside of the current of events and destined to ruminate forever on its long history and abundant legends. In mentioning that the road to the church has been moved so it will pass the mill (an emblem of technological innovation in Irving's time) instead of going through Sleepy Hollow, Irving boldly predicts that America's future literary success will follow the path of its commercial successes and that, increasingly, American literature will be able to avoid the haunting of "headless" European critics. Manning has noted how Irving's rhetorical strategy is to praise the rich antiquity of Europe's past while emphasizing the relative freshness of America in Irving's time and the high likelihood of success with respect to future ambitions (Manning xx-xxi). The otherwise arbitrary reference to the mill at the story's end seems to be further metaphorically instantiated confirmation of this assessment.

The directionality of the chase scenes in the two stories reveals more than simply a difference in cultural attitudes toward the church. Careful analysis shows the diametrically opposed cultural viewpoints exemplified by Burns's Scotland and Irving's New York State. Burns's story reflects a desire to break free from the co-opting and condescension of orthodox Christian identity, while for Irving and his readers, religious belief represents an acknowledgment of European literary and cultural influence but also a desire to be seen as legitimate heirs to old world traditions.

## V. "Mouldering Stones": Concerning Irving's Backhanded Praise of Europe

Throughout *The Sketch-Book*, Irving's narrator, Geoffrey Crayon, is never shy about pontificating on the grandeur he perceives in Europe's past:

But Europe held forth the charms of storied and poetical association. There were to be seen the masterpieces of art, the refinements of highly-cultivated society, the quaint peculiarities of ancient and local custom. My native country was full of youthful promise; Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age. Her very ruins told the history of times gone by, and every mouldering stone was a chronicle. (*Sketch-Book* 12)

In Manning's view, it was inevitable that an American author like Irving would finally depict the old world strictly in nostalgic terms of "antiquity" and "decay" (Manning xx-xxi). Similarly, McLamore asserts that, more than simply appropriating literary content, Irving attempts to "claim the heritage Hazlitt deems anachronistic" (McLamore 32). Irving's attempts to associate his stories with Europe's past then do not simply 'skim the cream' (Hazlitt 262) from European literature. In that things "anachronistic" can be seen either as venerable and time-tested or as contemptible and out-of-date, somewhere at the edges of Crayon's obsequious praise for Europe's great history, the reader can sense the slightest hint of contempt. This is nowhere more apparent than in Irving's curiously double-edged expression, "every mouldering stone."

In *The Sketch-Book*, at first glance Irving appears to be strictly avoiding ideological assertions; his choice of narrator, Geoffrey Crayon is, after all, a paragon of tact. This apparent lack of ideological viewpoint, however, was more apparent than real. While Irving's stylistic choices with regard to narrative result in a shameless display of enthusiasm for all things European, the subtle metaphorical subtext evident in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is mildly critical if not impertinent.

It might be said that *The Sketch-Book* has been popular on two continents precisely because it has functioned equally well on two discrete levels. Americans, longing for both acceptance by and respect from Europeans, found in it both generous praise and a less than full-voiced critique of European culture; Europeans, on the other hand, were likely to find comfort in the rustic naiveté evident in Irving's caricature of the American worldview. As Americans were not yet influential, such lack of sophistication could be seen as the natural state of things when viewed through the lens of European cultural superiority. Ultimately, Irving was successful in his portrayal of America as an extension of "pastoral" European countryside because both groups, at the time, had something to gain from seeing the transatlantic relationship in terms of this traditional European city-countryside dichotomy and accepting the hierarchical implications that accompany it. Whether the logic of this social hierarchy is as persuasive in the 21st century as it was in the 19th, however, is a question that will probably be answered differently depending upon which side of the Atlantic the issue is viewed from.

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