

JOHN GOODRIDGE

Out There in the Night: Rituals of Nurture and Exclusion in Clare's 'St Martins Eve'

In earlier centuries the term 'custom' was used to carry much of what is now carried by the word 'culture'. (E.P. Thompson)

Yet men will murder upon holy days... (Keats, 'The Eve of St. Agnes')¹

'St Martins Eve', which John Clare wrote *c.* 1823, is an account of customary celebration, an autumn poem in which 'Martin & swallow...no longer flye' (l. 12). It incorporates several narrative strands and some important folk materials, and a number of other interesting literary features, including echoes of Thomson, Gray and Keats. This essay will consider Clare's engagement with ritual in the poem, and some of the ways in which it draws together literary and folk modes.²

It is an occasional poem, and we may start with the occasion. Martinmas -- St Martin's Day -- is 11 November. It was, writes Brand with his usual Victorian mixture of prudery and nostalgia, 'a day of debauch', and he quotes churchwardens' accounts for bread, wine, ale, garlands of flowers, and singers on this day. Martinmas can be traced back to the classical Roman feast of Vinalia, the tasting of the new wine. Brewer defines 'Martin Drunk' as 'Very intoxicated indeed; a drunken man "sobered" by drinking more'. He confirms St Martin's Day as a day of 'great debauch', and tells us that St Martin is accordingly the 'Patron of drunkards, to save them from falling into danger'.³ This would be a useful saint for Clare, then, who was known to like a drink, and would sometimes put himself into danger as a result, having -- as Roger Sales impishly puts it -- 'a habit of becoming abusive and radical just before he slid under a table'.⁴ Safety and danger are central concerns of the poem.

Martinmas is also a day of reckoning. Brewer in his *Reader's Handbook* quotes the phrase 'Martinmas will come in Due Time', meaning that everyone will get their come-uppance, based on the fact that Martinmas was the day for slaughtering cattle and pigs for the winter, hence 'martlemass beef'. Christina Hole suggests a ritualistic as well as practical function for the killing of animals on this day, to bring luck, and she give several examples.⁵ But Brewer misses the other source of the phrase, which is that Martinmas was pay-day for the annual season which one had just worked, if one were a fixed-term labourer. It was the day annual tenancies and hirings began and ended, a time for end-of-term festivities, so to speak. As a time of beginnings and endings, it was perhaps also a time for taking stock and acknowledging change: it was in a general sense a day of reckoning. Locally, it was

also a day of weather prognostications, as recorded by Charles Dack in his *Weather and Folk Lore of Peterborough and District* (1911): 'The 11th November is generally called Martlemas Day and old people still watch for the direction of the wind at noon on this day as they believe it will continue in that quarter for the next three months'.⁶ This is important, since the poem is so much concerned with weather. Indeed all these meanings of Martinmas are potentially significant to a reading of the poem.

I have not found a specific reference to St Martin's *Eve*, the night before the feast (Christina Hole has one example of this being the killing time) but 'eve' and 'day' are broadly interchangeable for feast-days in that some celebrations take place on the eve, some on the day. By using the 'eve' Clare alerts us to the poem's principal literary debt, which is to Keats, especially 'The Eve of St. Agnes'.⁷ In 'St Martins Eve' Clare imitates the Spenserian metre of 'The Eve of St. Agnes', as well as its neo-Spenserian diction, in words like 'mickle' (l. 7), 'childern' (l. 19), 'eldern' (l. 32), and 'Chanticleer' (l. 215). One of his themes, a woman's attempts to divine a future beloved on a particular day, also occurs in the Keats poem (Clare, ll. 122-8; Keats, ll. 46-54), albeit in romantic rather than Clare's tragic mode. We have other Keatsian resonances: the wine that 'warms / In purple bubbles' (ll. 32-3) is a reminiscence of the 'blushful Hippocrene' of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' with its 'beaded bubbles winking at the brim, / And purple-stained mouth' (ll. 17-18). Lines 44-5, where 'As from the merry noise & laugh within / That seemed as summers sports had never absent been', have the spirit of Keats's September bees, whose summer optimism continues 'Until they think warm days will never cease, / For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells' ('To Autumn', ll. 10-11). The 'happy..happy' phrase Clare uses in line 145 ('Ah happy hearts how happy cant be told') is a familiar Keatsian construction (compare 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', l. 21; 'Ode to a Nightingale', ll. 5-6). Finally, rather more tentatively, there is the clock counting twelve to end the festivities (l. 208), recalling the story of Cinderella, but also perhaps the 'honey'd middle of the night' in 'The Eve of St Agnes' (l. 49), and of course the younger poet's desire to 'cease upon the midnight with no pain' in the 'Ode to a Nightingale' (l. 56).

Clare's rich, complex relationship with Keats's poetry is a topic that demands its own separate and substantial treatment. Clare seems to have absorbed fully Keats's inscription of a struggle between the forces of life and death, 'beauty' and 'truth', which is the great philosophical achievement of the 1819 odes: 'St Martins Eve' is also preoccupied with this elemental struggle. My conclusions about the poem might also suggest that whilst his response to Keats here is warmly appreciative, Clare's resort to folk ritual as a means of endurance suggests he has his own, quite un-Keatsian solutions to the dilemmas that Keats's poetry raises. One might even argue for a Wordsworthian rather than a Keatsian presiding influence on this poem, were it

not for the essential solitariness of Wordsworth's models of endurance (Clare's core values in the poem are unmistakably, if un-Romantically, communal).

Perhaps we have Keats's autumnal apples here, too: at any rate apples are the focus of the children's frustration and desire as the worsening weather offers apples to them, but keeps them imprisoned so that they cannot reach them (ll. 19-27). They *do* reach them eventually, though, and roasting apples are the succulent food to accompany the wine and beer, on this boozy, fruity occasion. Clare shares Keats's sense, in the last stanza of 'To Autumn', of encroaching winter; otherwise the poem is very different in tone from the laid-back, mellow richness of the Keatsian autumnal harvest. Neither does the poem have much of the chilly gothic of 'The Eve of St. Agnes', though it certainly shares its keen awareness of the wind and the cold. It has its own distinctive atmosphere. Outside is the ever-worsening weather, which goes from 'threatening rain' (l. 19), to the 'tempests din' and the 'blustering howl' (ll. 42, 53) of the wind, to the snow of the last line. This is a ritualised occasion, and it is the task of the merry-making to deal with this seasonal change from summer to winter. The revellers must drown out the howling wind by making an even louder noise. They are fighting a sort of battle against the weather that signals the approach of winter, bringing cold, darkness, decay and death, and they have to draw on every resource of merry-making they can think of, 'all sports their memory could devise' (l. 56), to fight this battle. The most obvious and striking contrast of the poem is thus between the forces of a hostile nature outdoors, and the human company indoors, protecting itself from the weather. The central energy in the poem comes from the ritualised activities which sustain this conflict and contrast.

The company, the human actors in the drama, apparently succeed in excluding the darkness and the howling winds of winter. Outside, these forces prevail. Yet there is a more subtle set of distinctions here, and a crueller, more ambivalent set of rituals than those which enact and celebrate the triumph of warmth and merriment over cold and dark. The 'all lone & melancholly crane' (l. 17) is left outside, lost and wailing. Inside, even more strikingly, is another 'melancholly' figure, 'once beguiled Kate' (l. 122), who 'made one slip in love and played the fool / And [is] since condemned to live without a mate' (ll. 120-1). She sits alone, shunned and shunning, and one is reminded that in J.G. Frazer's account of scapegoating in *The Golden Bough* it tends to be at the turning point of the yearly cycle that such rituals are enacted. This is Frazer on one such ritual:

In Siam it used to be the custom on one day of the year to single out a woman broken down by debauchery, and carry her on a litter through all the streets to the music of drums and hautboys. The mob insulted her and pelted her with

dirt; and after having carried her through the whole city, they threw her on a dunghill or a hedge of thorns outside the ramparts, forbidding her ever to enter the walls again. They believed that the woman thus drew upon herself all the malign influences of the air and of evil spirits.⁸

One might cite, closer to home, 'rough music' and 'rough ridings'; charivari-like activities described by E.P. Thomson as 'a ritualised expression of hostility' and which also have a scapegoating function.⁹ These events are usually focused on an individual whose sexual behaviour is disapproved of by the community, and the object of disapproval is serenaded with a cacophonous parody of music, either to chase them away and banish them, or to make them change their ways.

I want to suggest that in this poem Clare is tentatively describing a less dramatic but equally ritualistic set of scapegoating rituals. They are focused around Kate who is, as I read the poem, its uneasy, silent central figure. She waits, abides, and hopes that she will escape her plight, that the divination of placing a red onion under her pillow can somehow still correct the mistake that has destroyed her prospects. But despite the 'hopes' (l. 127) which (like 'nature' itself in lines 8-9) she resolutely clings to, Clare's presentation of her is as a doomed and tragic figure. Like Scott's 'Highland Widow' sitting alone and haunted beside the waterfall, the terrible thing has already happened to Kate, and her stillness, her silence, her almost self-imposed shunned status, are the stigmata of the scapegoat, doomed to bear the unvoiced pain and fear of the whole community. Clare clearly engages deeply with the figure of Kate. She is the only element of the poem carried over (in roughly the same words) from his earlier treatment of the festival, 'Martinmass Eve', which he was writing in 1820-1. In a letter to his publisher in which he describes that poem as 'unfinishd', he lists 'poor Kate in the dumps' as one of the three 'finest characters' he has 'witnessd'.¹⁰

Kate is not the only scapegoat, though she is the central one. I have already mentioned the wailing crane earlier in the poem, a symbolic lost soul, out there in the night, facing the elements alone like the lost swain in James Thomson's 'Winter'.¹¹ The revellers also enact what appears to be a series of scapegoating rituals, in the often brutal and humiliating sports and tricks they play, evidently with good humour, on each other. Clare spends nearly six verses (ll. 55-108) describing these in detail. One individual is offered a gift -- something nice to eat, presumably -- and instead when he closes his eyes he gets ashes flung into his mouth. Another person is tricked into walking backwards with his hands extended for a gift, but instead he has his finger bitten hard. He is described as acting 'deftly' and 'with cunning in his eyes' (l. 73) in seeking his reward, so perhaps this might suggest the sly and the avaricious

getting their come-uppance. But Hodge, whose very name is a cipher for pastoral innocence, cuts a more vulnerable and wretched figure. He is clearly ignorant of the widespread belief that giving or finding knives was unlucky, and so he gets his hand burnt with the hot knife, and is then humiliated and laughed at by one and all (ll. 82-99). The 'old dame', less violently, has to puff at the bellows in vain, for the 'wind' has been taken out of them by a crafty 'urchin', enacting the impotence of old age and the triumph of youth. These tricks are characterised by Clare as 'games of wonderment & fun', and there are others he describes elsewhere, for example the 'Fiery Parrot':

A candle lighted is placed on the mantle-piece or elsewhere, and on the far side of the house stands a tub full of water, with a sheet over the top, on each side of which, on the edge of the tub, sits a girl, while a young fellow is selected out to sit between them (generally the roughest and rudest clown in the company); who, transported with the idea of having so pleasant a seat, is generally very anxious and willing to perform it. In proceeding to his seat of fancied paradise, he is to walk backwards, looking earnestly at the candle burning before him; and thus he goes on till he gets between the young maidens, who, as he drops down, rise in an instant, while the loosed sheet gives way, and often lets him in over head and ears. Thus bent in the confines of the tub, he cannot stir till assistance releases him from his uncomfortable disappointment.¹²

I think we would call these fairly tough practical jokes, in which the participants (or victims) experience pain, danger, defeat, and humiliation. Evidently a part of the ritual process of excluding and defeating the feared 'otherness' of the cold, dark outside world involves a kind of 'acting out' of that unfeeling world's triumph over the vulnerable human body and its psyche. The wonderful stanza on shadow-puppets (ll. 109-17), which Clare grafted in from 'Martinmass Eve' quite late in the process of composition, shows the revellers celebrating the energies of representative animals, the rabbit and the boar. Here, another sort of *brutality* is integral to the revelry.

Scapegoating is a powerful, perhaps central element in this ritualistic activity, which is why I think Kate's story comes just after the 'games of wonderment and fun' and the shadow-puppets: her scapegoating seems to be what they are building up to. From her we move on to dancing, from which she alone is excluded (seemingly by her own 'melancholly'). With dancing comes music, and although, as I have suggested, the music is primarily part of an apotropaic ritual designed to drown out the threatening noise of winter, I think there is at least a *hint* of 'rough music' about it, too, with its home-made instruments of warming pan for drum, and comb and paper for

drone. 'Rough music' was usually carried out on such improvised instruments. E.P. Thompson has usefully summarised the British versions of *charivari*, 'rough ridings', and he comments interestingly on the noises and gestures which characterise such ritual humiliations:

'Rough music' is also a generic term, and even within the British islands, the ritual forms were so various that it is possible to view them as distinct species. Yet beneath all the elaborations of ritual certain basic human properties can be found: raucous, ear-shattering noise, un pitying laughter, and the mimicking of obscenities.¹³

It seems to me that these elements are present in the poem, albeit in the muted language Clare uses whenever he wants to smuggle anything dangerous past his self-appointed moral guardians. (The inclusion of the poem in the *Midsummer Cushion* manuscript confirms that he did indeed want it published, though his patrons, true to form, threw it out anyway.)

From rough-*ish* music the party turns to story-telling, and in particular, two stories: *Bluebeard*, the fate of whose victims makes one of the young women in the company weep, and *Tib a Tinker's Daughter*, whose eponymous heroine endures abuse and violence before finally triumphing through cunning. Her story evokes intense responses from the 'younkers' (l. 195) or youngsters of the company, who are clearly delighted at this (very appropriate for the occasion) tale of the triumph of youth and life over age and death. We are familiar with *Bluebeard* today, of course: Angela Carter adapted it in her classic story 'The Bloody Chamber', Margaret Atwood also used it for her story of 'Bluebeard's Egg', and it has been fruitfully re-analysed from feminist perspectives by Marina Warner and others.¹⁴ Clare's use of it here, and the distressed responses of the young women to it, uneasily remind us that there is a streak of male triumphalism running through this poem and its rituals, from Kate's humiliation, through Bluebeard's serial murder of women, to the strutting, cockerel-like males of the final stanza. The listeners' responses might also be read more positively, in that the creation of empathy is clearly a valued part of the storytelling ritual.

Interestingly, Clare assumes his readers know all about Bluebeard, and does not recount the story at all, concentrating on the audience's response to Bluebeard's cruelty. On the other hand he seems presciently to understand posterity's ignorance of the *Tib* story, which was well known then but is forgotten now. Since there is an important recent extended essay on Clare's chapbooks and fairytales, let me quote

what its author, David Blamires, says about these two stories as they occur in 'St Martins Eve':

The story of *Bluebeard*, as many have pointed out, contains only one magical element -- the key from which the bloodstains cannot be washed -- so it is perhaps not surprising that the events narrated in it may sometimes, as in this account, be taken for real. The subject-matter is in fact all of a piece with the tales of male deception, cruelty and murder, often reflecting actual events, that were so widespread in ballads and broadsheets before and during Clare's lifetime... After *Bluebeard* 'St Martin's Eve' proceeds straightaway to four stanzas in which Clare recounts the tale of *Tib, a Tinker's Daughter*, a true fairytale in form, but one that is barely known today... [The] prose form of the tale is very tersely narrated, having none of the memorable phrases or asides that make Clare's version so enjoyable. Again, Clare emphasises the audience's sense of identification with the story's veracity, as the reader stops, 'Declaring all too true to be a fib'. The distinction between fact and fiction is very much blurred for the audience and readers that Clare is describing.¹⁵

There are a number of useful points here, most notably the contextualising of the *Bluebeard* story within a widespread tradition of betrayal narratives, and the comment on the blurring of boundaries between the real and the fictional. The last point is worth developing a little. Clare is well aware of the enormous power of narrative, the ability of a fictional world to evoke emotional response and engagement as if the story were part of the immediate world of lived experience. One of the things, indeed, he does most frequently and impressively in his poetry is to tell stories. In this poem, it is the story of a memorable feast-day; within it he tells us the story of beguiled Kate--or rather he *doesn't*, since for reasons either of propriety or narrative subtlety he chooses not to recount the details of what has actually happened to her, giving us just enough information to enable us to imagine it for ourselves and grasp the tensions in the scene which she embodies: he tells and yet doesn't tell. Then, apparently describing further festive activities, the reading aloud of stories, he gives us two more tales, reminding us of one we know, and contriving to give a sketch of the other in case we don't know it. (Blamires finds his version a good deal more stimulating than its printed analogue.)

So now we have *three* stories woven into Clare's overarching narrative. The first two (I shall say something more about the third in my conclusion), the 'hidden' story of Kate, and the familiar story of *Bluebeard*, are stories of male betrayal in love, and as Blamires says, this is a common theme. I would go further and say that it is

probably the *commonest* theme of all in Clare's narrative poetry, and for a number of reasons.¹⁶ Clare's creation of powerful narrative personae such as the old woman who narrates the betrayal narrative of 'The Cross Roads', and his memory of learning stories in childhood from individuals such as the cow-keeper and wise-woman 'Granny Bains', suggest that this is a familiar, didactic theme for stories told by old women to the young and designed to warn them of the dangers they may face.¹⁷ Betrayal is in any case arguably Clare's greatest theme, if we look, for example, at the poems which respond to enclosure, such as 'The Mores'. (Clare implicitly and sometime explicitly makes connections between the landscape and the female body.) Betrayal narratives also remind their audience of the limits of one's control over one's own life for most people in the rural world at that time. I would venture to say that the rituals and stories of 'St Martins Eve' reflect some of the cultural ways in which lack of control over one's own destiny was confronted, dramatised, displaced or even defeated. The young listeners' intense engagement with Tib's triumph over abuse and adversity is very eloquent in this respect: it clearly touches their own lives.

Just before the story-telling section, Clare quotes perhaps his favourite eighteenth-century poet, Thomas Gray, from the 'Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College': 'Where ignorance is bliss tis folly to be wise'. This might be read as part of a subtle network of distancing strategies in the poem, designed to disarm critical condescension towards his presentation of village culture and ritual to a literary readership, by apparently supporting it. The revellers are presented as child-like innocents, who freely laugh at the crudest slapstick, and believe in the literal truth of the stories that are told. (But their particular suspension of disbelief in the case of *printed* stories might also suggest a sly dig at Clare's 'literate' polite readers.) Clearly the 'games of wonderment and fun', the activities of the poem, whether innocently perceived or not, represent at one level a cherished escape from cold reality, a realisation of the Keatsian desire to leave the world unseen, carried out with the rushing, uncaring hilarity of Gray's innocent schoolchildren. At another level they may be seen, I am suggesting, as manifestations of a more serious, ritualised, communal expression of resistance to a lack of control over one's life and destiny.

Story-telling, as a vital part of the leisure activities, has an important function in the ritual, recording finite lives, passing on information and experience, stimulating catharsis and empathy. Telling the theme of betrayal in love, enacting ritual humiliation and scapegoating, and drowning out with rough noise the forces that represent defeat and death, are all ways by which the hardship of the rural world, and the psychic desperation it creates, are dramatised and confronted. Interestingly and suggestively in this respect, the poem ends not with a defeat but with a double victory. First we have the victory of Tib, in the third narrative. Her 'sorrows & her pilgrimage'

(l. 199), slyly characterised by Clare as 'the plot of most new novels & old tales' (l. 200), are now, like the stormy weather outside, in the past, and the qualities of 'beauty' and 'luck' (plus a resourceful and clever plan, boldly executed) bring Tib into a summer of happiness, to the delight of the story's audience. And then, at midnight, the St Martin's Eve revellers themselves burst out from their confinement, full of *joie de vivre* and 'stout ale berry-brown', and inscribe their triumph in patterns of lantern-light over the new-fallen snow of a becalmed and now essentially benevolent landscape. Clare has shaped his narrative structure into a happy ending which celebrates human resilience, describing the communal (and to modern sensibilities fairly brutal) way in which a rural society and class, seemingly cheated of all independent activity, may psychically survive and restore itself through ritual, narrative and festive celebration.

Nottingham Trent University

This essay began life as a seminar paper given at a meeting of the John Clare Forum at Nottingham Trent University, 20 March 1997. I am grateful to Lynne Hapgood, Peter Cox and others present on that occasion for their helpful comments and suggestions. Thanks too to David Powell for providing information on the date of 'St Martins Eve', and to Paul Dawson for kindly supplying an advance copy of the text of the poem from the new Clarendon volume, and for many useful suggestions.

1. E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), p. 2; John Keats, 'The Eve of St. Agnes', line 119. All the Keats quotations in the essay are from *John Keats*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), Oxford Authors series.
2. I am using the text of the poem as given in *John Clare, Poems of the Middle Period, 1822-1837, Volume III: The Midsummer Cushion*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell, and P.M.S. Dawson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 269-78.
3. John Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities*, new revised edition (London: Chatto and Windus, 1877), pp. 216-19; E. Cobham Brewer, *The Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, enlarged edition [1894], facsimile edition (Leicester: Galley Press, undated), 'Martin Drunk'.
4. Roger Sales, 'John Clare and the Politics of Pastoral', *English Literature in History 1780-1830: Pastoral and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), p. 56

5. E. Cobham Brewer, *The Reader's Handbook*, revised and enlarged edition (London: Chatto and Windus, 1898), 'Martinmas'; Christina Hole, *Dictionary of British Folk Customs* (London: Paladin/Grafton Books, 1976), p. 190
6. Quoted in Clare, *Middle Period*, III, p. 604
7. Clare's editors make no mention Keats but note another potentially important source, in the poem 'Martilmasse Day', published in *Time's Telescope* in 1814, and quoted in William Hone's *Every-Day Book* (London, 1826). See *Middle Period*, III, p. 604.
8. J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough, a Study of Magic and Religion*, abridged edition (London: Macmillan, 1957), p. 747
9. E.P. Thompson, 'Rough Music', *Customs in Common*, pp. 467-538 (p. 469)
10. Clare to John Taylor, 7 Jan 1821 in *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 136-7.
11. 'Winter', ll. 276-321, in James Thomson, *The Seasons and The Castle of Indolence*, ed. James Sambrook, corrected edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), pp. 136-7. Bird-watchers will realise that Clare's 'crane' is a homely heron rather than the more exotic eastern bird we would nowadays call a crane.
12. Quoted from Clare by John Taylor in his Introduction to Clare's *The Village Minstrel, and Other Poems* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1821), I, xxii. See also 'The Village Minstrel', stanzas 50-1, p. 28.
13. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, pp. 468-9.
14. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (London: Gollancz, 1979); Margaret Atwood, *Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories* (London: Virago Press, 1988); Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: on Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), chapters 15-16.
15. David Blamires, 'Chapbooks, Fairytales and Children's Books in the Writings of John Clare: Part I', *John Clare Society Journal*, 15 (July 1996), 27-53 (36-8).

16. These points are developed further in my "'Telling Stories: Clare, Folk Culture, and Narrative Techniques', *The Wordsworth Circle*, forthcoming.
17. 'The Cross Roads or Haymakers Story' was published in *The Village Minstrel*, II, p. 84. For Granny Bains see Frederick Martin, *The Life of John Clare* [1865], second edition with an Introduction and Notes by Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield (London: Frank Cass, 1964), pp. 8-9.