

Consider first this small extract from the original [Death and Dr Hornbook](#) by Robert Burns, written in 1785 (Source: BBC)

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

Re-interpretation and translation by Derek Morrison (2017)

*Now death is circling overhead
Physician cannot reach his bed
Although patient he has never seen
Sends specimen for expert screen
He smells the foetid mass and smiles
No death gateway here; only piles.*

But embedded in the bowels of Burns' satirical poem – which on the surface is about a doctor cheating death by employing, apparently, an 18th century version of telemedicine – lies a more serious matter. The polemic in the commentary section highlights this [select Continue Reading].

[Death and Dr Hornbook](#) by Robert Burns was written in 1785 and published in 1787. The work is interesting from a couple of standpoints. Arguably, it is the first time the word “shite” appears in the poetic lexicon although others had assumed that it was the Burn's 1795 poem [Grim Grizzel](#) that had led the way. Other sources, e.g. [Robert Burns Plus](#), suggest that “shit” was the preferred form although from memory of my own younger years in the Scottish borders the former was more likely to be heard.

Equally as interesting is how some archives of Burns' works subtly edit the verse leaving out what in modern times has become a relatively mild profanity, e.g.

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(Source: [Burns Country](#))

The BBC appears just as guilty of such editing. Even although the BBC archive version of [Death and Dr Hornbook](#) allows the original single reference to “shite” they appear much more coy in their textual presentation of [Grim Grizzel](#) which gives the ‘trigger warning’ “Contains strong language” at the top of the poem and then proceeds to edit it out, e.g.

*The cattle sh- o'er hill and dale
 As cattle will incline,
 And sair it grieved Grim Grizzel's heart
 Sae muckle muck to tine.*

Such edits, particularly when undertaken by recognised sources of record, when replicated, are effectively changing history and create unnecessary obstacles to future scholarly endeavour. Ironically, I found [another version on the BBC Radio Scotland site](#) that includes a recital presented in all its mild vulgar glory, but again the text version has been sanitised. I assume to protect the young and the chronically over-sensitive. Although it has Old English and so Proto-Germanic origins “shite” entered its vulgar ‘cage’ in the 17th century and so seldom appeared in print with censorship or over-reaction of one form or another applied – even until the 1970s (Source: [Online Etymology Dictionary](#)). It's a pity to see that even in 2017 inaccurate representations of mildly vulgar original works are being distorted by the contortions necessary not to give offence. There will always be someone offended and in fruitless efforts to escape any criticism and censure we simply end up creating even greater offences – like censorship.

That classic of English literature *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* seems to have survived such subtle censorship, perhaps because it was written in post-Norman Conquest Middle English form (circa 1150 to 1500) it now hides its glorious vulgarities from the casual reader, e.g.

3795

*My mooder yaf it me, so God me save;
Ful fyn it is, and therto wel ygrave.
This wol I yeve thee, if thou me kisse.”
This Nicholas was risen for to pisse,
And thoughte he wolde amenden al the jape;*

3800

*He sholde kisse his ers er that he scape.
And up the wyndowe dide he hastily,
And out his ers he putteth pryvely
Over the buttoke, to the haunche-bon;
And therwith spak this clerk, this Absolon,*

3805

*“Spek, sweete bryd, I noot nat where thou art.”
This Nicholas anon leet fle a fart
As greet as it had been a thonder-dent,
That with the strook he was almoost yblent;
And he was redy with his iren hoot,*

3810

*And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot.
Of gooth the skyn an hande-brede aboute,
The hootte kultour brende so his toute,
And for the smert he wende for to dye.
As he were wood, for wo he gan to crye,
“Help! Water! Water! Help, for Goddes herte!”*

(Source: [eChaucer, University of Maine](#))

One [Modern English translation](#) makes Chaucer’s vulgar humour intent more explicit:

*This Nicholas just then let fly a fart
As loud as it had been a thunder-clap,
And well-nigh blinded Absalom, poor chap;
But he was ready with his iron hot
And Nicholas right in the arse he got.*

*Off went the skin a hand's-breadth broad, about,
 The coulter burned his bottom so, throughout,
 That for the pain he thought that he should die.
 And like one mad he started in to cry,
 "Help! Water! Water! For God's dear heart!"*

But back to *Death and Dr Hornbook*. What is it actually about? It's a typical Burns' trope where the Devil, witches or Death is the lead character either observed or in conversation with another actor who may, or may not, be an inebriated Burns himself, e.g. see [Tam o' Shanter](#). One interpretation of *Death and Dr Hornbook* is that at one level it is a tale of how a good doctor's claimed repertoire constantly frustrates and usurps the role of the Grim Reaper with the former's expertise apparently so great that he is capable of diagnosis and prescription at a distance; a miracle in the context of the time. Burns could not have imagined how the combination of medical science and modern communication technologies has indeed made such miracles possible in the 21st century; realised via what we currently know as telemedicine. But yet, the poem was intended as a savage satire on hubris, composed after Burns witnessed how a local schoolmaster and grocer-shop owner, John Wilson, cleverly marketed the quasi-medical remedies he sold in his shop. The schoolmaster projected and implied vast medical knowledge to impress his audience (and prospective customers). Burns gave the name Hornbook to his invented physician (who was based on Wilson) because horn was used at the time as a protective cover for the slates children would write on and sometimes for books, e.g. alphabet, numbers, Lords Prayer. John Wilson's later career does not appear to have suffered unduly from Burns' satirical attentions and may actually have been enhanced somewhat.