

The Edinburgh Companion to
Robert Burns

Edited by Gerard Carruthers

Edinburgh University Press

CHAPTER TWO

Burns and Women

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There's ae wee faut they whiles lay to me,
I like the lasses – Gude forgie me! (K 57, 'Epistle to John Lapraik', ll. 97–8)

Burns's 'confession' in the epigraph above perhaps 'explains' why his life was filled with women (Wilhelmina Alexander (1756–1843), Elizabeth Paton (d. 1817), Alison Begbie, Jean Armour (1767–1834), Frances Anna Wallace Dunlop (1730–1815), Agnes McLehose (1758–1841), Anna Park, Maria Riddell (1772–1808), to name only a few), and his art replete with lasses (those of 'Tarbolton'; the carnivalesque celebrants of 'The Holy Fair'; the 'lasses feat' of 'Halloween', not to mention 'Mary Morison', the 'Highland Lassie', and numerous other 'bonnie lasses' who are the subjects and dedicatees, both known and unknown, of Burns's songs and lyrics). In 'To William Simson' (K 59) 'Lasses gie [his] heart a screed' (l. 26) but poetry is a catharsis for any pain they cause: 'I kittle up my rustic reed; / It gies me ease' (ll. 29–30). The apparent inextricability of the poet's life and art from each other has generated a mythical Burns whose relationships with women comprise a fable of heroic, heterosexual masculinity; uber-machismo has been a celebrated part of 'the Caledonian Bard's' literary and literal procreation: 'Where women were concerned, it was always too easy for him to drop the thin cloak of acquired culture and revert to his peasant hood';¹ 'The love of women was necessary to him but equally necessary his absolute domination as the male';² 'Burns could have been in love with a woman and in love with every woman'.³ There is, to be sure, evidence, in Donny O' Rourke's words, of Burns at 'his shitty chauvinist worst'.⁴ But the cherished myth of 'the priapic drunk'⁵ belongs to a larger culture – of Burns Clubs, Burns Nights, and Burnsian lionisation – which has sometimes marginalised women, though a woman, Maria Riddell, wrote the first life of Burns.⁶ Well might Ian McIntyre caution that 'Burnsians have had to brace themselves against the impact of feminism'.⁷ Yet in terms of approaches to, and readings of, Burns's poetry, there is surprisingly little proof of such 'impact'.

This essay seeks to disentangle the subject of 'Burns and women' from its mythical web, exploring what such 'mythologisation' reveals about culturally

pervasive ideas of femininity. The letters of Agnes McLehose, the famous 'Clarinda', permit some visibility or agency to be restored to one of Burns's most controversial female acquaintances. More broadly, the question of women in Burns's poetry entails exploration of ideas about desire, sexuality, and morality, and about how society and culture both foster and inhibit identity. The chapter is arranged thematically, discussing some familiar work (for example, 'The Cotter's Saturday Night') as well as lesser known material (for example, *The Merry Muses*). Burns's poetic representation of women is complex because they are both real and imagined: 'Highland Mary', for example, was one Mary Campbell (?1766–86) who posthumously survives in both hagiographical and salacious histories about Burns. She, like other women, has her own 'lived' particularity in Burns's work but is also his 'literary' invention and a composite of the period's aesthetic, social and sexual ideals of femininity. Burns's literary self-presentation is also artful: his confession, 'I like the lasses', shows a wry collision between the supposedly revelatory mode of the 'Epistle' form and an awareness of his own public fashioning. His poem on a 'love-begotten daughter' (K 60) illustrates this perfectly: it both enacts the choric voice of disapproval ('Tho' now they ca' me, Fornicator' (l. 7)) and is a tender, fatherly benediction for his child born out 'o' Wedlock's bed' (l. 34). Burns's attitudes to women and sex are assumed to be transparent but, like all representations of sexuality in the eighteenth century, they are still historically and culturally shaped. It is too easy to be glib about Burns and his attitudes towards female and male sexuality, or to assume that Burns is either a defender or defamer of women. Burns's poetry does not deal in such simplistic polarities. His lyrics present him as the admirer, lover, confidant, satirist, trickster and abject subject of women but this does not suggest a lack of psychological coherence on Burns's part, or that an 'either/or', feminist or antifeminist, approach is best. Sensitivity to the cultural movements out of which Burns wrote, the literary influences which shaped his art, and the social and intellectual roles of women in the period fosters fairer and more nuanced understandings.

Lastly, any account of Burns and women should note that Burns's (naturally) female muse takes multifarious form: in the second verse-epistle to Lapraik (K 58) she is persistent and cajoling, a 'tapetless, ramfeezl'd hizzie' (l. 13); in 'The Vision' (K 62), she is 'Coila', mother to her rustic bard. Wearing '[g]reen, slender, leaf-clad Holly-boughs' (l. 49) and showing a glimpse of flesh (ll. 62–6), her dress is emblazoned with a familiar landscape topography and images of 'Heroes' such as Wallace. This is a characteristically eclectic yoking of Scottish martial heroism, medieval visionary tropes and conventional ideas of the maternal feminine. In 'reading' the cloak of his poetic godmother, Burns reads both his nation and vocation. But there were other muses too. Both Burns's mother and wife were gifted song performers. His first song, written

when he was fifteen, was for Nelly Kilpatrick who inspired Burns by singing 'a song [. . .] composed by a small country laird's son [about] one of his father's maids'.⁸ So many threads in Burns's creative life wind back to women.

Myths of Femininity: 'Highland Mary', Mary, Queen of Scots and 'Clarinda'

Virtually all of the women who impinged on Burns's life have garnered their own mythology: Wilhelmina Alexander ignored Burns's courtship, died unmarried, but treasured a poem that he wrote for her ('The Lass o' Ballochmyle'); Frances Dunlop was consoled in bereavement for her husband by the 'Kilmarmock' edition;⁹ whilst Jean Armour is forever Burns's long-suffering, dutiful, unbeautiful wife. The Burnsian narrative constructed by biographers and critics has imposed particular roles on these and other women. De Lancey Ferguson, for example, defines three categories of Burns's women: 'The foremost group consists of women who profoundly stirred him, and on whom for a time at least he concentrated his intellect and his affections as well as his desires [. . .] Next come the women who engaged his passing fancy, and for whom he felt some tenderness, but who did not influence him deeply or long . . . below these was a third group . . . who were mistresses and nothing more.'¹⁰ There are shards of truth here but it renders these women little more than alternate muses and mistresses.

The example of 'Highland Mary' best exemplifies how the Burnsian cult has spawned its own feminine myths. Margaret Campbell was born at Auchamore in Argyllshire on 18 March 1766, and worked as a dairymaid in Greenock before dying at the age of twenty-three; Burns probably planned to elope with her, and she 'survives' in a handful of popular lyrics. In Burns's nineteenth-century reception history, Campbell is reincarnated as a pure and innocent virgin. Victorian artists such as Thomas Faed imagine 'Highland Mary' in a pre-Raphaelite fusion of earthiness and purity, frozen in the eternal posture of the farewell to which Burns alludes in his songs. Campbell posthumously inspired her own cult of Mariology: in a rather odd inversion of the religious sensibilities associated with Burnsian culture, a contributor to the *Burns Chronicle* in 1921 writes 'At Mary's Shrine': 'When olden faiths depart / Thy love, a constant power, prevails / And stays the troubled heart',¹¹ as if to conflate the Virgin Mary and Highland Mary in their salvific powers. Burns's Victorian romantic biographers created an appetite for Marian relics (such as the bibles supposedly exchanged between Campbell and Burns) but also fuelled reaction against the 'Mariolaters'. In the winter of 1920 the exhumation of Campbell's grave in Greenock yielded a child's coffin. The implication that she died in childbirth sealed earlier efforts to suggest that she was not the hagiographers' virginal maiden. Ironically, it was Catherine

Carswell's biography that offered such a 'conversion' from the innocent 'child' into a woman 'heav[y] with the weight of Robert's child'.¹² Burns sups wine with his Edinburgh patron while mother and child are interred in earth; her death, and his apparent estrangement from Armour, sets his creativity free. Perhaps Carswell wanted her Campbell to be other than a virginal icon but she only perpetuates the obsession with her sexuality.

Burns, however, made his own Marian icon for posterity, sculpting a poetry of deliberate pathos round Campbell. One song (K 389) is devoted to the creation – or consecration – of her delicate, deathly beauty: 'Now green's the sod, and cauld's the clay, / That wraps my Highland Mary!' (ll. 23–4). Burns's awareness of the power of cultural images, and female icons especially, is also seen in his fascination for another Mary – Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. By Burns's period, the Stuart queen had undergone many cultural and political metamorphoses through the forces of Jacobitism, sentimentalism, antiquarianism and Romantic nationalism. Burns's 'Lament for Mary Queen of Scots' (K 316) blends elegiac pastoral and ballad language with political point. The poem imagines Mary's rhetorical encounter with Elizabeth, the English queen who ordered her execution, permitting her to chastise the latter as 'thou false woman' (l. 33). There is retribution too: '[g]rim vengeance' (l. 35) wields a sword of justice to inflict a gaping wound in Elizabeth: 'weeping blood' (l. 37) is proof of the feminine compassion 'never known' (l. 38) to her, as if the stigmata of her guilt. Burns's Marian poem is full of romantic pathos but is also politically charged; when he sent William Tytler (1711–93) the lyric, he wrote: 'Burn the above verses when you read them, as any little sense that is in them is rather heretical' (L I, p. 112).

In the case of 'Clarinda', there is more historical information to attest that she, or rather Agnes McLehose, was more than the 'eminently poetic reality'¹³ of 'Highland Mary'. Declared by Burns in 'Clarinda' (K 217) as 'fair Sun of all her sex' (l. 13), McLehose is the subject of 'Ae Fond Kiss'. The episode of 'Sylvander and Clarinda', the self-styled 'Arcadian names'¹⁴ which Burns and McLehose devised for their correspondence, has been seen as the paradigm of Burns's supposed liaisons with socially upper-class women, a rhetorically overblown 'delicious passion' (and adulterous for she was married to James McLehose, a nefarious lawyer). Their correspondence was first published in 1843, after McLehose's death, by her grandson. Carswell portrays McLehose as 'bird-like [. . .] feathery crest, pretty bosom pushed to pigeon height by her stays'.¹⁵ Carswell's novelistic portrait exemplifies a McLehose who is alternately arch seductress and anxious Calvinist, seeking 'to bring her Ploughman Poet to Jesus'.¹⁶ Frustrated biographers have long strived to discover, in their terms, 'A Glimpse of Clarinda' or 'The Real Clarinda'.¹⁷

Yet the 'truth' of the relationship cannot be gleaned from such 'epistolary dressing up'.¹⁸ Fictionality is woven into the fabric of these letters.

'Friendship' is the desired nomenclature but a contested term; as 'Clarinda' reflects: 'Love and Friendship are names in everyone's mouth; but few, extremely few, understand their meaning' (p. 11). The letters question what 'authenticity' is, invoking and parodying Neoplatonic discourse and fashionable texts such as Goethe's *Werther*. Their verbal and emotional intricacies recall the erotic epistolary fiction so popular in the period (a genre in which women could possess both writerly and sexual agency). The hyperbole and playfulness of Burns's 'Sylvander' letters have frequently been observed but McLehose's exchanges are also wry, ironic and artful. Narrating herself, or her alternate 'Clarinda' self, she explores ideas about perception and spectatorship. Sylvander constructs her (as 'an Eloisa, a Sappho') but she also enacts a series of roles. She declares 'had I been a man, I should have been you' (p. 11) – flattery, of course, but a speculative gender shape-shifting prompting a defence of her own imaginative and emotional capacities. Also claiming to be born in 1759 ('Madam Nature has some merit by her work that year') she declares they share 'the same mould': 'I am not vain enough to think myself equal in abilities; but I am formed with a liveliness of fancy, and a strength of passion little inferior.' (pp. 11–12). Sylvander might portray her as his muse but he is hers too: 'I believe you (being a genius) have inspired me; for I never wrote so well before.' (p. 13). In a letter of 3 January 1788, **Clarinda rescinds her efforts ('I can't but laugh at my presumption') but in 'rhyming humour' encloses some quatrains (p. 13) which parody the Habbe Simson stanza** whilst satirising 'the first fruits of my muse' in the voice of eighteenth-century criticism: 'It has no poetic merit; but it bespeaks a sweet feminine mind' (p. 55).

McLehose's letters both fear and covet transparency: 'I wish you to know me, as "I really am"' (p. 55). She writes that 'I want no controversy – I hate it' (p. 57), though it defined their affair, even in its afterlife. McLehose should be remembered, not as the married woman who may or may not have slept with Burns, **but as an epistolary writer of crisp elegance and ludic grace who crafted an erotic and intellectual dialogue with him.**

Beauty, Sensibility and 'Women of Feeling'

Burns's love poetry is tender, bawdy, beautiful and comic by turns. As those lyrics associated with 'Highland Mary', 'Clarinda' and other women suggest, they often possess their own private history or stories of desire. Though it seems an unlikely comparison, **his love poetry resembles Renaissance erotic verse in being both an abstract expression of desire and a social 'token' of exchange.** Echoes of earlier amatory traditions are found elsewhere in Burns's lyrical eroticism. Female beauty is a persistent subject. Songs such as 'On Cessnock Banks a Lassie Dwells' (K 11) evoke the conventionalised blazon

of medieval and Renaissance poetry, the device by which the desired woman is conjured up through the rhetorical anatomising of her beauty: 'her teeth are like the nightly snow (l. 33) and 'Her lips are like yon cherries ripe' (l. 37). Burns subverts this litany by finally celebrating her 'mind' (l. 51) as the superlative beauty, evoking the witty volte-face of those Renaissance love lyrics that play with Neoplatonism.

Burns's love lyrics also forge associations between desire, women and nature as in 'The Posie' (K 372):

The primrose I will pu', the firstling o' the year;
And I will pu' the pink, the emblem o' my Dear,
For she is the pink o' womankind, and blooms without a peer;
And a' to be a posie to my ain dear May – (ll. 5–8)

The language of nature here is metonymic (the flower is his beloved but also her virginity). The lyric's coupling of nature with women reflects enduring metaphorical associations between nature and the feminine – beauty but also nurturing fecundity. Often reflecting folk song and medieval pastoral, Burns's love lyrics place women, and courtship, in and against nature. This endorses Burns's role as the poet of 'the rustic reed' but also mirrors contemporary cultural portrayals of nature's restorative simplicity and harmony where, as the fiction of Rousseau and Goethe shows, women play an organic role in fostering such 'natural' innocence. This Romantic 'redemption' of woman and nature – which classical and medieval misogyny viewed negatively – is knowingly alluded to by Burns. In 'Song, On Miss W. A.' (K 89), the following verse

But Woman, Nature's darling child,
There all her charms she does compile,
And all her other works are foil'd
By th' bony Lass o' Ballochmyle. (ll. 21–4)

expresses love but wittily gestures to the shift in Enlightenment and Romantic philosophy whereby the identification between woman and nature no longer represents the irrational materiality of the feminine but, in Kant's words, 'the more refined sentiments that belong to the domain of culture [...] she [nature] gave the female sex mastery over men'.¹⁹

Not only is Enlightenment moral philosophy refracted through Burns's lyric portraits of women but also the cult of sensibility. This was a popular literary and cultural movement which extolled, in Burns's own words, 'the feeling heart': the emotionally exquisite sensibilities of literary protagonists opened up experience in new moral and conceptual ways. 'Men of feeling'

popularly dominated fiction but women of feeling, equally melancholic and suffering, populate Burns's poetry. 'Ca the Yowes' (K 185), in which a girl sings to her 'Shepherd-lad' of a love 'Till clay-cauld Death sall blin' my e'e' (l. 27), crystallises how song 'speaks feelingly to the heart'.²⁰ Placing these Burnsian female voices – lamenting lovers and bereaved women – in the culture of sensibility makes them more than exercises in conventional feminine pathos. That Burns should 'ventriloquise' the female voice is also interesting. What has been termed 'cross-gendered writing' is a phenomenon of long-standing precedent: Burns's abandoned female speakers – the woman of 'I Look to the North' or 'Willie's Bride' whose new husband fights in a war orchestrated by 'men o' State' – can trace a lineage back to Ovid's *Heroides*. Such ventriloquism is sometimes seen as a negative act of appropriation. Though Burns might be said to 'possess' the female voice (and 'female experience' by proxy), such lyrics still articulate women's experience of social and sexual marginality. Many, such as 'The Bonnie Lad that's Far Awa', present the voice of the pregnant young woman spurned by society: 'My father pat me frae his door, / My friends they hae disown'd me a' (ll. 9–10). McQuirk argues that such lyrics typify a 'complacent attitude toward unwanted or unwed pregnancy [. . .] more to do with the wishes of Burns than with the psychology of women'²¹ but it might also be claimed that such 'dispossessed women' give powerful voice to moral and social hypocrisies. Other female-voiced lyrics ironically expose how marriage gives women market value: in 'My Tochers the Jewel', the female speaker rejects an acquisitive lover so that her true value can be appreciated. In another, 'What Can a Young Lassie Do wi' an Auld Man' (K 347) the girl laments how her mother sold her 'Jenny, for "siller and lan"! (l. 4); married to an old lover, her aunt advises her to 'heartbreak' (l. 15) him until he dies in order to get his 'brass' (l. 16). Though this speaker conjures up the rapacious women of medieval fabliau, the persistent complaints of 'ill-married' women in Burns suggest they are more than conceit or jest but bind sympathy and sensibility with political force.

Where, however, sentiment dominates in the portrayal of women – in the roles of daughter, mother, (potential) wife – is in 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' (K 72). This 'simple Scottish lay' (l. 5) resembles an allegorical vignette, the poetic equivalent of the popular eighteenth-century rural painting: Jenny personifies the dutiful daughter (stanza 4); maternal and paternal roles are fixed ('The Mother wi' her needle and shears [. . .] / Father mixes a', wi' admonition due', ll. 43; 45), sanctioned by an authoritatively patriarchal religion (stanza 14). Courted by a 'neebor lad', Jenny and her virginity occupy five stanzas. Fearful that 'Jenny's unsuspecting youth' might be 'betray[ed]' (l. 85), the narrator censoriously intervenes to eulogise female chastity and the tragic archetype of 'the ruin'd Maid' (stanza 10). The supper ceremony intervenes, foreclosing the threat of the daughter's lapse from her prescribed

role, and restoring order to the microcosmic scene of 'old Scotia's grandeur' (l. 163). This seems the poetic equivalent of the popular conduct books for women written by John Gregory or James Fordyce. Yet the Jenny-vignette may also ironically invoke fashionable literary notions of femininity and, in particular, the sentimental novel. If the Clarinda–Sylvander correspondence resembles Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, then fear of the 'wild, worthless Rake' (l. 63, couched in English rather than Scots) hyperbolically evokes the distresses of Richardson's Clarissa. Literary satire, rather than reactionary ideology, might be the poem's chief impulse after all.

The Merry Muses: Cultures of Desire

The Merry Muses, the notorious collection of songs and lyrics published after the poet's death,²² occupies an uneasy, marginal place in the Burns canon. Seen either as virtuosic proof of Burns's sexual appetites (as in the infamous 'Nine Inch will Please a Lady') or as a text whose flagrant carnality needs censoring, it has mostly been avoided by critics.²³ Response to the work's portrayal of women might be equally polarised. The Besses and Megs whose bodies and desires are laid bare might be celebrated as voluptuaries challenging eighteenth-century ideologies of chaste womanhood or condemned as the sexually base creatures of a misogynistic imagination. In fact, both responses, each with a grain of plausibility, suggest again the importance of cultural context. The *Muses'* women might be seen as less aberrant if understood within the broader contexts of eighteenth-century libertinism and a popular, often radical, culture of pornography.

'Libertinism' in Burns's period usually refers to an élite, usually aristocratic, male coterie whose sexual practices and cultural sensibility might be characterised as decadent and excessive, ironic and contemptuous of contemporary mores. The lyric 'I am a Fornicator' exemplifies Burns's libertine pose – except that it, and the collection as a whole, transgresses libertinism's conventional social class. Named protagonists ('Muirland Meg') and a local rural topography of sexual encounters give the *Muses'* erotica a peculiarly 'homely' quality; its bucolic, folk pastoral, with allusions to 'country cunts' and affinities with bawdy broadside ballad traditions, is perhaps Burns's knowing subversion of aristocratic libertinism. Yet what it shares with libertine culture is being the product of an exclusively male coterie. Its full title is *A Collection of Favourite Scots Songs, Ancient and Modern; Selected for Use of the Crochallan Fencibles*, an Edinburgh 'drinking club whose title parodied the idea of a civil militia' and 'celebrated not simply conviviality but also maleness and masculinity'.²⁴ This homosocial context may have fostered a culture in which women were the sexual objects of cultural exchange and commodification. Yet the *Muses'* portrayal of female sexuality arguably complicates this assumption.

Although the word, 'pornography', does not appear in English until 1857, it is a helpful term (along with the categories of 'erotica' and 'obscenity') by which to characterise the *Muses*' mode and intent in presenting the 'explicit depiction of sexual organs and sexual practices with the aim of arousing sexual pleasure'.²⁵ In terms of narration and voice, the lyrics borrow the staple dramatic devices of pornography (the 'instructional' dialogue between women, and cautionary exchanges between men). The collection partly depends on shock value, consisting of deliberately comic affronts to decency and it anatomises (indeed fetishises) both female and male genitalia (for example, the paired lyrics 'There's nae Hair on' t / There's Hair on't'; 'Put Butter in my Donald's Broose') in a way which evokes the visual print culture of eighteenth-century erotica. Inflected with comic grotesquery, such lyrics present a carnivalesque democracy of the appetite.

Approaching the *Muses* from the perspective of early modern pornographical traditions is also interesting because of their recognised anti-establishment nature, especially in the Enlightenment period: 'a vehicle for using the shock of sex to criticise religious and political authorities', pornography was 'linked to free thinking and heresy, to science and natural philosophy, and to attacks on absolutist political authority'.²⁶ Its anti-authoritarianism might especially have interested Burns. This does not mean that the collection is not about sex, and sexuality, but it thereby mirrors Burns's general political sensibilities and imbues his representation of explicitly desiring women and men with a political contemporaneity and satirical wit. 'Comin over the hills . . .' takes pleasure in maligning the moral and spiritual authority of David and Solomon, and 'The Patriarch' mocks the fleshliness of the Old Testament biblical narrative of Rachel; other lyrics mock the tyranny of legality ('The Law Act Sederunt') whilst 'Errock Brae', where a Cameronian soldier's sexual prowess is praised more than a bishop's or a priest's ('But the solemn league and covenant / He laid below my arse . . .'), manages to be both a religious and political joke. 'I'll Tell You a Tale o' a Wife' presents the female counterpart of Holy Willie, instructing how sexual hypocrisy might be practised – 'the fauts o your cunt' – with a clear conscience.

So too more broadly might the *Muses*' depictions of female sexuality counter prescriptive ideologies of proper female conduct in granting woman the autonomy of sexual pleasure and power ('When on my back I work like steel / An bar the door wi my left heel / The mair you fuck the less I feel . . .' ('The Reels o Bogie'), or 'Cuddy the Cooper' where a woman pays for gratification). However, there is often an aggression and violence to the sexual encounters which euphemistic discourse fails to disguise: 'Donald in a sudden wrath / he ran his Hieland dirk into her . . .' ('Comin ower the Hills o Coupar'). This is certainly part of the collection's viscerality (for example, 'Again he wan atweesh my thies, / An, splash! Gaed oot his gravy': 'Denty

Davie'). Its somewhat mechanistic philosophy may approach reductive degradation (for example, 'Ye'se Get a Hole to Hie it in'; though the most bizarre lyric is probably 'Jenny Macraw': 'She cut off her cunt an she hang't on a thorn'). Women offer up their bodies but are also offered up for violation: 'but cowp her owere among the creels, / An bar the door wi baith your heels / the mair she bangs the less she sueels / An hey for houghmagandie': 'Gie the Lass her Fairin'). Such graphically voyeuristic violence is found with lyrics interestingly related to the conventional female lament which eulogises the loss of virginity: 'How can I keep my maidenhead . . .' becomes a poem about vaginal pain ('The stretching o' t, the strivin o't' . . .); another pointedly depicts the social and moral hypocrisy of women who sneer at a young girl made pregnant by a 'sodger lown' ('Wha'll Mow Me Now?'). *The Merry Muses is therefore an uneven compendium of violent male desires as well as social sympathy for women*, a collection which purveys the material reality of sex along with its hyperbolic, comic distortions; the product of a homosocial and Enlightenment culture which may objectify women, both culturally and sexually, but portrays sexual desire, both female and male, as wholly natural, morally unjudged, and as part of the formative, creative passions which shape human identity.

Enlightenment Women

Burns's correspondence with Agnes McLehose showed how 'an epistolary relationship' fostered an exchange of ideas as well as attitudes popularised by the cult of sensibility. It also points to the broader and important role which women played in Burns's intellectual and creative life. Carol McGuirk writes perceptively that

Women were the only admirers whose notice Burns could comfortably accept.

It is well known that Burns liked women generally, but such literary friends as Maria Riddell became especially important in his later years, when his residence at Dumfries removed him from the 'patrons' who had begun his vogue at Edinburgh'.²⁷

Such friendships were not without complications (as those with Riddell and Frances Dunlop attest)²⁸ but the epistolary network of female correspondents surrounding Burns points to a coterie of intellectual, literary women in whom Burns found sympathy and affinity, contradicting the assumption that Burns's 'muses' were always sexual in inspiration. Amongst the creative women with whom Burns corresponded were the poets Janet Little (1759–1813) and Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743–1825). A congruence between the cultures of Enlightenment and sensibility may have nurtured such communication,

as 'the man of feeling' rendered himself open to the 'civilising' and 'delicate' influences of women.²⁹ How, then, might Burns's poetry be considered in relation to Enlightenment attitudes towards women – when the figure of the learned woman was frequently derided – and its nascent feminist debates?³⁰

The exemplary poem in this instance is 'The Rights of Women', written for Louisa Fontenelle (1773–99), an actress of numerous 'beauties' (*L II*, p.160) who had performed in London and Edinburgh; and whose very title seems an unquestionable allusion to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1795), which had demanded social, political and economic equality for women. Seldom, however, is it considered equal in political power to Burns's song 'For A' That. . .', a lyric indebted to Thomas Paine's 'Rights of Man'; against that song, Crawford considers it 'artificial, contorted and unconvincing'.³¹ Certainly, the poem dilutes the revolutionary spirit of Wollstonecraft's feminist vision. Presenting the 'rights of man' as an accepted orthodoxy which 'even children lisp', the narrator is the self-appointed spokesman for 'The Rights of Woman' (*K 390*). Such rights include protection (woman is a 'tender flower', l. 9). Revealingly, '[t]o keep that Right inviolate's the fashion' (l. 14, my emphasis): what must a 'man of sense' (l. 15) do but defend women now that 'these Gothic times are fled' (l. 21)? The poem concludes on a seemingly parodic note with the 'revolutionary' call: 'Ah, ça ira! The majesty of woman!!!' (l. 38). Carruthers observes how this poem demonstrates the impossibility of seamlessly categorising Burns, whether as sentimental poet, 'licentious libertarian', political revolutionary or political cynic.³² It is also worth noting that the poem's effort to galvanise men's chivalric protection and admiration of women goes right against the grain of Wollstonecraft's repudiation of philosophers' 'old-world attitudes to women [. . .]' "If women be ever allowed to walk without leading-strings, why must they be cajoled into virtue by artful flattery and sexual compliments?"³³

There are, however, other instances in which Burns displays more tolerance, or sympathy, for changing Enlightenment thought about women. 'Green Grow the Rashes, O' (*K 45*) is celebrated for its portrayal of love's complete occlusion of the world, and may not seem the place for a proto-feminist defence. Yet the stanza,

Auld Nature swears, the lovely Dears
Her noblest work she classes, O:
Her prentice han' she try'd on man,
An' then she made the lasses, O. (*ll. 17–20*)

presents an argument used in defence of female equality, if not superiority, which has an intellectual and theological lineage winding back to the medieval period; Eve was made last (after Adam) and therefore God had time

to make her more perfect.³⁴ Another well-known lyric, 'To a Louse', makes its female protagonist the subject of philosophical reflection. In church the narrator contemplates the creature's vigorous ascent of the finely clothed Jenny who knowingly 'displays' herself but unknowingly becomes subject to a broader, imperious social gaze. Is this an anti-feminist piece in which the young woman's beauty symbolises female artifice and vanity more monstrous than the rapacious louse? Or does it evoke sympathy for Jenny, naïve and impercipient, as she is watched by the *douce* congregation? Such 'sympathy', as Carruthers has argued, is also of the Enlightenment kind, developing Adam Smith's theory of moral identification: 'we are to imagine ourselves in place of another but looking back at our original self . . . We would be stripped of our pride . . . even to the extent of losing self-love.'³⁵ Rather than being a poem about female vanity, then, it has greater poignancy as a meditation on the brittleness of the public image or 'selfhood' which the individual constructs against the world. Jenny is more an emblem of the fragile human ego than of the deceitful womanly artifice feared by misogyny.

Tam o' Shanter: Fear of the Feminine?

'Tam o' Shanter' (*K 321*), that ribald, comic, devilish tale beloved by Burns Night celebrants, is a vernacular visit to the Underworld – but an infernal realm that is largely feminine in its forms and powers. Burns's anti-hero embarks on a journey, fuelled by drunken rashness, which unleashes a vision of Satanic carnivalesque horror but also promises deliverance from the 'wrath' of his wife, Kate, in Nannie: 'ae winsome wench and wawlie' [ample] (l. 164) whose 'cutty sark' raises not just Tam's desire but an entire 'hellish region' of uncanny merrymakers who set off in pursuit of the trespasser. This is a traditional tale in many senses. Rich in traditional folkloric material, it is also most often celebrated and critiqued for its traditional constructions of gender: the drunken, lascivious husband ('sweet' with the landlady); the put-upon, resentful wife; the fleshly young temptress; even Kirkton Jean's role as prophetess. Well might A. L. Kennedy suggest that it is a 'wishful middle-aged male fantasy . . .'.³⁶ A cautionary tale of the perils of wine and women, it has been judged 'a poem which plays a game involving a female challenge to the male, but makes it clear that [. . .] it's the male who wins. That male is a boozing, fraternal male of the sort that Burns knew and liked from his masculine clubs.'³⁷ As Christopher Whyte has shown, the poem's language is obviously gendered: in terms of authorial self-characterisation and narratorial address, this is a man speaking to other men (with the exception of the rueful apostrophe to 'Ah gentle dames!', it addresses 'ilk man and mother's son').³⁸ And yet 'this tale o' truth' is far from clear, though its 'truths' about women and men have been taken for granted – such as 'This truth fand honest Tam'

that wives resent the temporary escape of husbands to the convivial brotherhood of the tavern; or that woman, whether in her incarnations as wife or temptress, is punitive: Kate's 'wisdom' suppresses Tam's instinctive spirit and Nannie seeks revenge for his sexual appetite. Emasculation is the consequence for both instances of female suppression. What literally drives Tam to flee on 'noble Maggie', and is the poem's principal symbolic drive, seems to be fear of the feminine: women, both human and supernatural, remind Tam and his male readers of their 'own carnal contingency'.³⁹

This, however, is not a new story. Tam's narrative is replete with allusions to other 'queer stories': to the biblical tale of Susannah and the Elders, and the mythical fate of Actaeon, torn apart by his own hounds after Diana changed him into a stag; both illustrate the perils of male voyeurism. The prefatory allusion to Gavin Douglas's *Eneados* invokes a medieval context, perhaps especially the worlds of medieval dream vision poetry where sensory and strange elements often have allegorical meaning (the word 'reason' is repeated in the poem, casting it as a fable of reason versus desire). Tam's story also evokes traditional tales of the abduction and punishment of mortals by resentful otherworldly beings where frequently, though not exclusively, the 'victim' is male. Nannie is therefore a particularly robust version of the traditional fay (though her 'sark' seems less than otherworldly since got by her 'grannie' for 'twa pund?'). Her beauty is juxtaposed with the ugliness of her troupe of hags or witches, a vision of simultaneous desirability and repulsion. Significantly, the narrator acknowledges that her beauty defeats his poetic powers, yoking the feminine to ideas of excess and unrepresentability. It is unsurprising but still interesting that Tam should see witches. Since the late medieval period, the figure of the witch has embodied specific cultural fears about women. This particular demonisation of the feminine, as is well known, led to the violent persecutions of innocent women (especially prevalent in Scotland in the early modern period). This may seem far flung from the poem's comically demonic revelry presided over by Auld Nick himself. Yet perhaps the poem suggests that the real forces of demonisation are neither feminine nor occult but 'man-made': Tam also notices 'upon the haly table [. . .] A garter, which a babe had strangled; / A knife, a father's throat had mangled, / Whom his ain son o' life bereft' (cf. ll. 130-9), having ridden through a landscape engraved with their memory ('And near the thorn, aboon the well, / Whare Mungo's mither hang'd herself', ll. 95-6). If the real horror is ordinary humanity, then fears about witches, and the demonic feminine, are folly; after all, Tam rides blithely into a night so haunted 'a child might understand' (l. 77).

For this reason, it is difficult to accept entirely the premise that 'it's the male who wins'. 'Drink' and 'cutty-sarks' warn men of the fate of 'Tam o' Shanter's mare' who ends up tail-less; a symbolic castration if ever there was

one (except that Maggie is, self-evidently, a female horse). Burns's poem, then, opens up a Pandora's box of gendered readings. Moralistic readings are subverted by the fact that its overt 'morals' (e.g. ll. 59-67) are in English and arguably parodic. The 'cut off' tail conceivably cautions against 'cutting off' the tale by meanings too circumscribed or narrow – of which one, perhaps, is that it is a joke got only by men.

This essay has suggested that the complexity of Burns's representation of women shows how distorted and simplifying the myth of the 'priapic drunk' has been. 'Burns's women' are a fusion of archetype and psychological complexity; they are imagined out of contemporary cultural contexts such as the Enlightenment and Romanticism, and are entangled in fashionable and controversial movements such as the cult of sensibility and the vogue for pornographic literature. We cannot 'know' women, such as Mary Campbell or Agnes McLehose, beyond what Burns's poetry and their own words, where they survive, tell us; but alertness both to the mythologies which shroud them, and their textual voices, helps to accord them the visibility and seriousness which they deserve. In that way, too, critical approaches to women and gender in Burns might be renewed. Perhaps one of the least desirable consequences of Burnsian culture and criticism is that Burns is perpetually appropriated. Often such forms of 'ownership' have excluded women, deliberately or not, as his readers and interpreters. An interesting illustration of this exists in the form of a work published in 1886 called *Robert Burns: An Inquiry into Certain Aspects of his Life and Character and the Moral Influence of his Poetry*. Its Victorian writer is deeply in sympathy with Burns, both emotionally and socially; but, as if to acknowledge its transgressive subject matter, and her transgression in writing about it, she identifies herself only as 'a Scotchwoman'.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 187–8, 303, 326.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 343.
15. Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs*, TC Mercat Press: Edinburgh, [1960] 1978) p. 174.
16. Hans Hecht, *Archiv* cxxx (1913), pp. 65–72.
17. Donald Low (ed.), *Robert Burns*, p. 82.
18. See Pauline Gray, 'Prudes, Pirates and Bills of Suspension: The Correspondence of Burns and Clarinda', in *Burns Chronicle* (autumn 2007), pp. 10–11.
19. Quotations are from the facsimile version of *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* introduced by G. Ross Roy (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press for the Thomas Cooper Library, 1999).
20. See Smith's annotation to *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* ed. James Barke and Sydney Goodsir Smith (Edinburgh: The Auk Society, 1959), p. 112.
21. Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002), p. 75.

Chapter 2 – Dunnigan

1. J. De Lancey Ferguson, *Pride and Passion. Robert Burns 1759–1796* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 144.
2. Catherine Carswell, *The Life of Robert Burns*, intro. Tom Crawford (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1990 [1930]), p. 312.
3. A. L. Kennedy, 'Love Composition; the Solitary Vice', in Robert Crawford (ed.), *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 28.
4. *Ae Fond Kiss. The Love Letters of Robert Burns and Clarinda*, ed. Donny O'Rourke (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2000), p. xxvi. Subsequent page references within the text are to this edition.
5. A. L. Kennedy, 'Love Composition', p. 39.
6. It was first published in the *Dumfries Weekly Journal* in 1796.
7. Ian McIntyre, *Dirt & Deity: A Life of Robert Burns* (London: Harper Collins, 1995).
8. Cited in Carol McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), p. 103.
9. Their correspondence was first fully published in 1898 by William Wallace as *Robert Burns and Mrs Dunlop*.
10. J. De Lancey Ferguson, *Pride and Passion*, pp. 148–9.
11. Gavin Sprott, *Robert Burns: Pride and Passion* (Edinburgh: Mercat, 1996), pp. 152–5.
12. C. Carswell, *The Life*, p. 170.

13. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parsley (London: Picador, 1988 [1949]), p. 213.
14. D. O'Rourke (ed.), *Ae Fond Kiss*, p. 7. All subsequent references are to this edition.
15. C. Carswell, *The Life*, p. 243.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 248.
17. Chapter headings taken from *Burns' Clarinda: Select Papers concerning the Poet's Renowned Correspondent Compiled from Various Sources* by John D. Ross (John Grant, 1897).
18. D. O'Rourke (ed.), *Ae Fond Kiss*, p. ix.
19. Cited in Michèle Crampe-Casnabet, 'A Sampling of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy', in Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (eds), *A History of Women in the West*, 5 vols (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992–4), vol. 3, *Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes*, ed. Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge, p. 328. See further Mary Catherine Moran, 'Between the Savage and the Civil: Dr John Gregory's Natural History of Femininity', in Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (eds), *Women, Gender, and Enlightenment, 1650–1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 8–30.
20. Letter to Frances Dunlop, cited in C. McGuirk *Robert Burns*, p. 128.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
22. Quotations are drawn from G. Ross Roy's facsimile edition (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).
23. But see Gerard Carruthers, *Robert Burns* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2006), pp. 65–7. Pauline Gray is currently working on *The Merry Muses* as part of her doctoral dissertation at the University of Glasgow.
24. Gerard Carruthers, *Robert Burns*, p. 65; Robert Crawford, 'Robert Fergusson's Robert Burns', in Robert Crawford (ed.), *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, p. 13.
25. Lynn Hunt, 'Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800', in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The Invention of Pornography. Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1996), p. 10.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 10 and 11.
27. C. McGuirk, *Robert Burns*, pp. 77–8.
28. For example, Mrs Dunlop expressed anxiety about Burns's revolutionary sympathies.
29. See further G. J. Barker Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility. Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); George E. Haggerty, *Men in Love. Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
30. On this subject in general, see further Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (eds).
31. Robert Crawford, 'Robert Fergusson's Robert Burns', p. 14.
32. Gerard Carruthers, *Robert Burns*, p. 75.

33. Barbara Taylor, 'Feminists versus Gallants: Manners and Morals in Enlightenment Britain', in *Representations* 87 (2004), pp. 126, 127.
34. See, for example, Pamela Norris, *The Story of Eve* (London: Picador, 1998).
35. Gerard Carruthers, *Robert Burns*, p. 68.
36. A. L. Kennedy, 'Love Composition', p. 3; see also Sarah M. Dunnigan and Gerard Carruthers, 'Two Tales of Tam o' Shanter', *Southfields* 6 (2) (2000), pp. 36–43.
37. Robert Crawford, 'Robert Fergusson's Robert Burns', p. 19.
38. Christopher Whyte, 'Defamiliarising "Tam o' Shanter"', *Scottish Literary Journal* 20 (1993), pp. 5–18.
39. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 180.

Chapter 3 – Simpson

1. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I, 1, in Jonathan Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, vol. 2, p. 2152).
2. R. D. S. Jack, 'Burns as Sassenach Poet', in Kenneth Simpson (ed.), *Burns Now* (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994), [pp. 150–166] p. 158.
3. *The Life and Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Robert Chambers, revd. William Wallace, 4 vols (Edinburgh and London: W and R Chambers, 1896), vol. 1, p. 48.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–9.
5. Cited James Mackay, *Burns: A Biography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1992), p. 76.
6. Henry Mackenzie, *Lounger* 97 (9 Dec. 1786); reprinted in Donald Low (ed.), *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), [pp. 67–71], p. 70.
7. R. D. S. Jack, 'Burns as Sassenach Poet', p. 156.
8. Cited in F. H. Colson (ed.), *Institutio Oratoria* (Cambridge, MA: University of Harvard Press, 1924), p. xxviii.
9. See further John D. O'Banion, 'Narration and Argumentation: Quintilian on *Narratio* as the Heart of Rhetorical Thinking', *Rhetorica* 5 (4) (1987), pp. 325–51.
10. Burns had read Pope's translation of Homer and Dryden's Virgil (see *L I*, pp. 278–9).
11. Unpublished paper, 'A Humanist Poetics: Sixteenth-Century Scots Poetry', delivered to the Glasgow-Strathclyde School of Scottish Studies. I am indebted to Theo van Heijnsbergen for this introduction to the tradition of 'sle' poetry, and for sight of his paper.
12. Ian S. Ross, "Proloug" and "Buke" in the *Eneados* of Gavin Douglas', in Dietrich Strauss and Horst W. Drescher (eds), *Scottish Language and Literature, Medieval and Renaissance: Fourth International Conference, 1984 – Proceedings*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1986), p. 393.

13. Cf. *Eneados*, Prologue 1, l. 41: 'Alsweill. Na, na, impossibill war, per de!'; also Prologue 7, l. 156: 'Full laith to leif our wark swa in the myre'.
14. Gerard Carruthers, "'Tongues Turn'd Inside Out": The Reception of "Tam o' Shanter"' *Studies in Scottish Literature* 35 (6) (2007), [pp. 455–63], p. 461.
15. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), vol 3, p. 1362.
16. Robert L. Kindrick, *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993), p. 23.
17. Unpublished paper, 'A Humanist Poetics: Sixteenth-Century Scots Poetry'.

Chapter 4 – Leask

1. 'Robert Burns and British Poetry', The Chatterton Lecture on Poetry, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 121 (British Academy, 2003), p. 191.
2. See Andrew Lindsay's intelligent *Illustrious Exile: A Novel*, that fictionalises Burns's aborted Caribbean career, in the process giving him the benefit of the doubt (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2006).
3. In a letter of 27 August 1789, Burns uses the term in an entirely apolitical and metaphorical manner to describe indolence, when 'the soul with all her powers is laden with weary fetters of ever-increasing weight; a Slavery which involves the mind in dreary darkness and almost a total eclipse of every ray of God's image' (*L I*, p. 436). Here it is 'God's image' rather than 'Nature's Law' that is violated by slavery, even if the metaphorical referent is rather facetious.
4. Thomas Crawford, 'Political and Protest Songs in Eighteenth-Century Scotland I: Jacobite and Anti-Jacobite', *Scottish Studies* 14 (1970), p. 21. Like the song's unrepentant Jacobite turning the tables on the 'rebel Whig', at line 2 Burns' 'honest man' refuses to 'hang his head' before the 'birkie, ca'd a lord'. He is urged to disdain the corrupt Hanoverian patronage system and its social hierarchy: in a line later in the song 'When Geordie mun fling by the Crown, / His Hat and Wig, and a' that', the king's trappings of authority are deftly reworked by Burns as the lord's 'ribband, star, and a' that'.
5. Murray Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics and Poetry in Eighteenth-Century Great Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 217.
6. I borrow the term from Markman Ellis, who thus employs it in *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 55.
7. For the difficulties involved in dating composition, see Thomas Crawford, *Boswell, Burns and the French Revolution* (Edinburgh: Saltire Society, 1990), pp. 61–3. For the song's complicated publishing history, in addition to Kinsley, see also the editors' commentary in *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, ed. W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson, Centenary Edition, 4 vols (London: