

Burns and the Rights of Woman

The idea for making this presentation came from the poem I presented at a recent Carnegie group meeting. The poem was the "Rights of Woman", which I chose for 2 reasons, the first

- We'd reached the end of the Burns' season and I'm sure we've heard a few Immortal Memories talking about Burns as a philanderer, fornicator and father of 'bastard weans', but did they look at all aspects of the man's life and works?

The second,

- Given all the latest news about how some men, primarily in positions of power, have been harassing and abusing women, where would we position Burns?

Where to start? First some background. In Burns' time of the 18th century we saw the beginnings of social change, from the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment with thoughts for improving the lot of the common man or to be more politically correct, the "common people", both individually and society as a whole, the changes also including the revolutionary actions in France and America. Perhaps Burns egalitarian thoughts were initiated by the writings of Adam Smith, the Scottish philosopher, who in 1759 wrote in his book 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments' that "he would place women in what was considered to be a crucial role within society, by including sentiment in the way people thought about all their actions." Burns never met Adam Smith unfortunately, but I'm sure in addition to his thoughts on women, he would have discussed Smith's favourable leanings towards both the French and American revolutions, "I would covet much to have his ideas respecting the present state of some quarters of the world that are or have been scenes of considerable revolutions since his book was written".

In this paper, I will touch on Burns thoughts of equality in general, but the main focus will be to try and understand what Burns thought of women and how this was manifested in his poems, songs and letters.

The one poem that immediately comes to mind is 'The Rights of Woman', written in 1792 for the London actress, Miss Louisa Fontenelle, when Burns saw her perform on stage in Dumfries. The first question should be 'was this some original thinking by Burns or was he influenced in any way by Olympe de Gouges, who in 1791 wrote her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen that drew attention to the need for gender equality'. The Woman's Declaration in turn, being modeled on the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which was written in 1789 during the French Revolution. It is also understood that the latter declaration was in turn heavily influenced by the political philosophy of the European

Enlightenment and principles of human rights, as was the U.S. Declaration of Independence, which preceded it in July of 1776.

Having embraced the concept of a 'woman's rights', in his poem for Miss Fontenelle, I wonder what his motivation was for sending her the poem. We could argue that 'yes, he fancied her,' but why not write a love poem, a la 'O Were I on Parnassus Hill' or 'My Love is Like a Red Red Rose'. There must have been something in her performances as an actress that motivated him to think maybe she could get his message across about 'women's rights' in a more meaningful way than by just having the poem written and presented in a book or paper. Think of the impact on the audience of a female actress standing on the stage and espousing his, Burns' egalitarian opinions.

Then I wonder if Burns had second thoughts about these rights when he starts off in the first verse of his poem, perhaps in a confusing way, by citing 'the rights of man', but then quickly changes by citing "the rights of woman" and what these rights should be.

- **'Protection'**: as in "the tender flower that lifts its head, elate,
Helpless, must fall before the blasts of Fate,
Sunk on the earth, defaced its lovely form,
- **'Decorum'**: as in "Each man of sense has it so full before him
He'd die before he'd wrong it-----'tis Decorum."

And how's this for a futuristic forecast, when it comes to Decorum, pointing out how men's boorish behaviour is very upsetting to women.

"A time when rough, rude man had naughty ways:
Would swagger, swear, get drunk, kick up a riot,
Nay even thus invade a lady's quiet."

Finally, the third right

- **'Admiration'**: as in "our last, our best, our dearest,
That Right to fluttering Female hearts the nearest,
Which even the Rights of Kings, in low prostration,
Most humbly own-----'tis dear, dear Admiration!

So we see in the poem, that Burns communicates the idea that the predominantly male ruling class, would benefit from turning their attention to the female sex to generate some humanity

when it came to solving problems, as opposed to the male fixation with violence and the taking up of arms.

While Europe's eye is fixed on mighty things,
The fate of Empires, and the fall of Kings;
While quacks of State must each produce his plan,
And even children lisp the Rights of Man;
Amid this mighty fuss, just let me mention,
The Rights of Woman merit some attention.

First, in the Sexes' intermixed connexion,
One sacred Right of Woman is, Protection.
The tender flower that lifts its head, elate,
Helpless, must fall before the blasts of Fate,
Sunk on the earth, defaced its lovely form,
Unless your Shelter ward th' impending storm.

Our second Right-----but needless here is caution,
To keep that Right inviolate's the fashion.
Each man of sense has it so full before him
He'd die before he'd wrong it-----'tis Decorum.
There was, indeed, in far less polished days,
A time when rough, rude man had naughty ways:
Would swagger, swear, get drunk, kick up a riot,
Nay even thus invade a lady's quiet.--
Now, thank our Stars! these Gothic times are fled,
Now well-bred men (and you are all well-bred)
Most justly think (and we are much the gainers)
Such conduct neither spirit, wit, nor manners.

For Right the third, our last, our best, our dearest,
That Right to fluttering Female hearts the nearest,
Which even the Rights of Kings, in low prostration,
Most humbly own-----'tis dear, dear Admiration!
In that blest sphere alone we live and move;
There taste that life of life-----immortal love.
Smiles, glances, sighs, tears, fits, flirtations, airs;
'Gainst such an host what flinty savage dares.
When awful Beauty joins with all her charms,
Who is so rash as rise in rebel arms?

But truce with kings, and truce with Constitutions,
With bloody armaments, and Revolutions;
Let MAJESTY your first attention summon,
Ah, ça ira ! THE MAJESTY OF WOMAN!!!

But back to Burns' other equal rights' ideas, as he concludes the poem in the last verse, not only by portraying 'the majesty of woman,' but invoking the spirit of the French Revolution with words from a French revolutionary song, 'Ah! ca ira!', (It'll be Fine). What was Burns risking by writing and making such a statement, bearing in mind that the poem was written while he was a Crown worker, employed as an Exciseman and therefore running personal risk by implying his support of the French revolution? All the more risky as well, considering that the Sedition Laws were passed in 1792 making it a treasonable offence to promote radical political systems.

But even before he wrote the 'Rights of Woman' in 1792, Burns was also examining the inequalities that existed around him and one area in particular, that of 'slavery'. In 1792 Burns wrote a song, 'The Slave's Lament', about a slave taken from Senegal to endure inhumane treatment in a Virginia tobacco plantation. I think we can assume he knew plenty about slavery, its benefits and its evils, as this was the time when people began to petition against slavery. Of course, you could also argue that Burns was just writing about the 'flavour of the month'. After all what caused him to change his mind about slavery when, in 1786, he contemplated taking up the role of a book keeper in a slave plantation in Jamaica? A "book keeper" in those circumstances actually functioning as overseer of the slaves.

But I digress, back to Burns and the women in his life and what he thought of the female sex and how they should be treated. Just think of how many love poems and songs, (probably around 180 according to the BBC Burns web site) he wrote, the case could be made that they are even more famous and well known than many of his other works. Examples of his love poems and songs include: "My Love is Like a Red Red Rose", "Ae Fond Kiss", "Clarinda, Mistress of my Soul", "Handsome Nell", "I Love my Jean", "Mary Morison", and "My Peggy's Face", all written for the special women in his life at that particular moment, but perhaps the one where he most praises the value of women is in "Green Grow the Rashes O"

For you sae douce, ye sneer at this;
Ye're nought but senseless asses, O:
The wisest Man the warl' saw,
He dearly lov'd the lasses, O.

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.

But enough of how Burns 'loved the women' what about the other side of the coin? Were there any indications that Burns wasn't quite the total admirer of women we've just talked about, but maybe just a man of his time in the way that women were treated in those days.

In looking at some of his other works, aside from the love poems, i.e. his letters, we can see indications that there are statements that can be interpreted, in today's environment, as not so favourable towards women. Could it even be that Burns be cast as an 18th century equivalent of Harvey Weinstein? This topic has become much more high profile lately, not only because of

Weinstein and the '#metoo' Movement, but because of an article written by former Makar Liz Lochhead, who explains why she compared Robert Burns to Harvey Weinstein, but, on the other hand, still regards him as a poetic genius. Liz Lochhead's basis for stating that Burns was a 'sex pest' like Weinstein, is based on the letters he wrote to his young friend, Robert Ainslie. In one letter in particular, written just after he had left Edinburgh and Nancy Mclehole, Burns brags about jumping on a "destitute and friendless" Armour and giving her a "thundering scalade (assault) that electrified the very marrow of her bones on a horse manure-strewn floor" and this when she was pregnant with his twins and just before they were married.

Lochhead then goes on to state "Are Burns's letters as important as his poems? No. A great read though!" and "he was a great, great, love poet. Now whether he was a great lover, we only have his word for it, not the word of the recipients". Lochhead's comments triggered mostly outrage in Scotland. How could she dare suggest this about Scotland's greatest poet? But Lochhead herself remains an appreciator of Burns. "When did the personal shortcomings of an artist ever invalidate their work?" she asks, he's not a role model, he's a great poet." This latter statement is quite ironic given some comments by one of Scotland's greatest writers, Robert Louis Stevenson, who in 1879, referred to Burns as a 'Don Juan' due to his treatment of Jean Armour (this quote from page 294 of Crawford's book "The Bard")

But then again why should we single out Burns? Some of the most acclaimed male poets have done or said many odious things. Among Burns' peers, we would need to look no further than William Wordsworth (who abandoned his pregnant French mistress), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (who abandoned his family), or a little later on, Lord Byron (the most infamous bed-hopper in Europe).

Now one area that I haven't touched on in the theme of Burns and Women pertains to his 'bawdy works' as in the volume of songs contained in 'Merry Muses of Caledonia'. As Pauline Anne Mackay writes in her book 'Robert Burns: Bawdy Language,' "Burns never meant for 'The Merry Muses' to be published. The songs were for the private use of Burns and his friends, particularly those composing the membership of Edinburgh's Crochallan Fencibles." So let's remember them for what they were, songs written and collected to be sung in the convivial atmosphere of a local hostelry and amongst friends. Burns never gave permission for these songs to be printed, but after his death a book appeared on the scene leading to much controversy over the content.

Pauline Gray, a Glasgow University researcher, has examined Burns's most explicit works for his attitudes towards sexuality and the body. Her conclusion, "the poet celebrated rather than objectified women." Burns knew only too well that the bawdy elements of these works and their references to women's private parts and what could be done to them would prove offensive to so-called 'polite' eighteenth-century society,' and therefore for that matter be unpublishable. He did, however, very much enjoy disseminating and singing the bawdy songs among his like-minded contemporaries, much like many of us enjoyed singing 'Rugby' songs in our youth.

Therefore in conclusion what do we think, was Burns possibly a bit of a 'sex pest', or was he a 'self-confessed "fornicator,' a man ahead of his time, who promoted gender equality long before feminism existed? He became Scotland's national bard, renowned throughout the world, who

wrote memorable poems and songs about a multitude of topics, including the rights of the common people, slavery, nationalism and politics. His works, as Professor Gerard Carruthers observes, have an enduring resonance. “The songs like many of the poems, sing of love, grief, a world of beauty and cruelty. In our century where the pace of change and our moral and political compasses seem ever-changing, these texts represent a kind of timelessness.”

At our annual Burns’ celebrations our highlight speech is not called an ‘Immortal Memory of Robert Burns’ for nothing.