

# Sex and Social Commentary: Robert Burns's Merry Musing

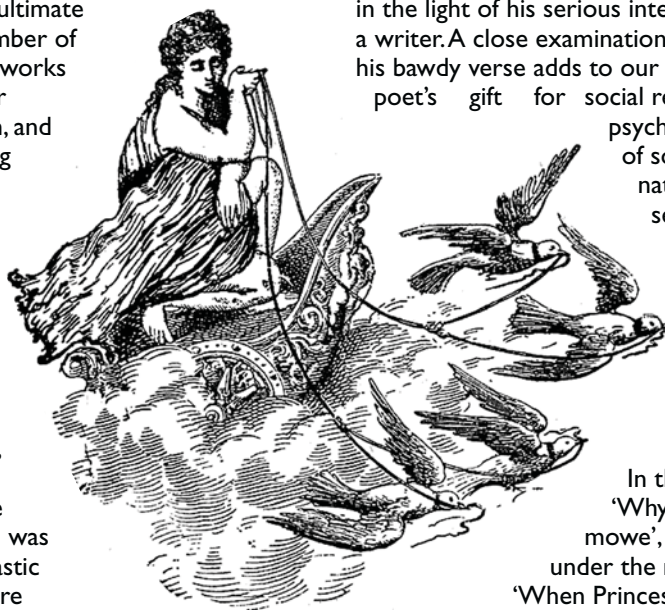
By Pauline Anne Gray

Robert Burns's untimely death at the age of just 36, and the complicated process of collating his hitherto disorganised poetry and letters for the publication of his posthumous life and works, was beleaguered by the same controversy courted by the poet throughout his short, but eventful life. One of the most contentious aspects of this process was the careful editing and ultimate censorship of a number of Burns's letters and works considered unfit for public consumption, and potentially damaging to the poet's reputation. Documents and letters that were considered likely to provoke controversy surrounding the poet's religious and political beliefs, not to mention his fascination with the opposite sex which was often both enthusiastic and uninhibited, were either destroyed or suppressed. Included amongst these documents was a collection of bawdy songs, some of which Burns wrote himself and others that he collected for recitation at the Crochallan Fencibles; an Edinburgh drinking club to which he was introduced in 1787. Reserved, sanctimonious attitudes towards sex, gender and religion common in Burns's time rendered the bawdy aspect of his work taboo and so the collection, commonly known as *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, was censored.

Thankfully, largely owing to the literary underground of the 18th and 19th-centuries, a significant number of Burns's bawdy productions have survived; a testament to their undeniable, if somewhat peculiar worth as literary and cultural documents. However, it was not until the 1960s, following the success of the famous *Lady Chatterley's Lover* case and the consequent reassessment of literary eroticism's place in modern culture, that Burns's bawdy productions

were officially published in the public domain. For this reason, Burns's bawdy verse has been relatively little explored by literary critics. Whilst it is true to say that even today the abundant sexual content and bawdiness of many of Robert Burns's satires and songs has the potential to cause offence, it is time for notions of the 'profane' qualities in his work to be reassessed in the light of his serious intellectual agenda as a writer. A close examination of a selection of his bawdy verse adds to our awareness of the poet's gift for social realism, his deep

psychological perception of society and human nature, and his use of sexuality as a means of cultural and social comment; to consider everything from the human condition to politics and religion.



In the political song 'Why shouldna poor folk mowe', I often published under the more polite title 'When Princes and Prelates',

Burns subverts the social hierarchy by pointing out that the so-called lower classes command a most powerful political weapon: what he considers to be their expert ability to reproduce. In this particular song, the power and significance of sexuality and human reproduction is symbolised by the success of the French revolution. And so, the common masses surmount the European ruling class, who are portrayed as sexually and ultimately politically impotent:

By sea and by shore! The Emperor swore,  
In Paris he'd kick up a row;  
But Paris sae ready just laugh at the laddie  
And bade him gae tak him a mowe.—

(ll. 13-16)

Chorus —

And why shouldna poor folk mowe,  
mowe, mowe,  
And why shouldna poor folk mowe:



The great folk hae siller, and houses,  
and lands,  
    Poor bodies hae naething but mowe.

Here the attacking European monarch is defeated and condescendingly advised to return home to copulate. The alliterative reference to the Emperor as 'laddie' obviously undermines his authority, but more than that, it posits the notion frequently expressed by Burns, and ever-present in folk culture, that common man is significantly more accomplished at sex than the upper class. For Burns, sex and reproduction are central to humanity, and so true authority lies with common man, united and made powerful by their sexuality. The abundant, rhythmic repetition in the chorus, 'mowe, mowe, mowe', emulates the bodily actions associated with copulation, bringing physicality to the fore. This is maintained by reference to the common folk as 'poor bodies'. However this expression is not intended to provoke pity. Rather, this is a defiant song that advocates the triumph of sex over social class, and so common man is depicted as comparatively content when considered alongside the troubled monarchs of Europe and their unsuccessful battles with republican France:

When princes & prelates & het-headed zealots,  
    All Europe hae set in a lowe,  
    The poor man lies down, nor envies a crown,  
    And comforts himsel' wi' a mowe.

(ll. 1-4)

The turbulent, aggressive European political climate is emphasised by the usage of 'lowe', Scots for 'flame'. This sinister metaphor is followed by the significantly more serene notion of the common folk as a positive, constructive community, who derive comfort and satisfaction from sexual intercourse, a natural activity. And so we acknowledge the idea frequently posited by Burns throughout his work that pleasurable sex is a natural phenomenon to which every man has the right, and which ought to be embraced.

Whilst it is not uncommon for people acquainted with Burns's life, correspondence, and bawdy verse to derive that the poet advocates an unbridled enjoyment of sex, it is apparent from 'Why shouldna poor folk mowe' that his principles regarding the subject are not entirely without morality:

Auld Kate laid her claws on poor Stanislaus,  
    And Poland has bent like a bow:  
Mat the deil in her ass ram a huge prick o' brass!  
    And damn her in hell with a mowe!

(ll. 17-20)

Burns here expresses his disapproval of what he considers to be unnatural sex. The above reference is to Catherine II of Russia (1729-1796) and her attainment of Poland. Catherine is the one monarch in the course of the song who utilises her sexuality to her advantage by using her lover, Stanislaus Poniatowski, as a pawn in her political games. Catherine of Russia, having placed Stanislaus on the Polish throne in 1763, then played an active part in the partition of Poland in 1772 and 1793. Burns's disapproval of her underhand politics is once again expressed in sexual language. In this case, the sexual act is not a natural, positive action based on love or human impulse, but may be perceived as manipulation aimed at the attainment of power and material possession. The alliterative, phallic language used to describe the political defeat of Poland implies the political castration of her lover and an entire country by 'Auld Kate' who is driven by power, more so than sexual desire. Burns's punishment for what he believes to be a contrived, dishonest and therefore unnatural abuse of sex is extremely sexually violent, and alludes to what was, in the 18th-century, often considered to be an unnatural sex act – sodomy.

It is interesting to note the morality that Burns applies to matters of human sexuality. Well known for his promiscuity and extra-marital affairs, he fathered at least 12 children to at least five women. And yet, in poems such as 'The Fornicator', which we will come to shortly, he is defiant in the face of public censure. Burns shows no remorse or disapproval of sex borne of passion and tenderness towards the opposite gender, conjugal or otherwise. It is the abuse of what he considers to be life's greatest privilege that the poet opposes. In support of this we might turn to Burns's correspondence



where we encounter his opinions pertaining to what he considers another unnatural manifestation of sexuality – prostitution. In a letter written to his younger brother William on 10 February 1790, Burns states: 'I give you great credit for you [sic] sobriety with respect to that universal vice, Bad Women.' 2 He goes on to say that:

Whoring is a most ruinous expensive species of dissipation; is spending a poor fellow's money with which he ought clothe & support himself nothing? Whoring has ninety nine chances in a hundred to bring on a man the most nauseous & excruciating diseases to which Human nature is liable; [...] All this is independent of the criminality of it. 3

And so, we might consider it interesting that Burns adopts such a strong, somewhat haughty moral stance, given his own repeated rejection of social and religious restrictions pertaining to sexuality, and his detestation of the self-righteous and hypocritical nature of those who claim to uphold such restrictions.

From his writing, Burns's disdain for hypocrisy is clear, and particularly for that which he considers to be rife amongst the pious and self-righteous members of his community. It is, however, the duplicity of such people that the poet attacks in his writing, rather than their professed faith. Burns believes in equality of men – both religious and political – and so he reacts against the assumed superiority of 'the elect'. In a letter to Alexander Cunningham, Burns insists that 'of all Nonsense, Religious Nonsense is the most nonsensical'. 4 It is important to note that Burns clearly distinguishes between 'Religion' and what he calls 'Religious Nonsense', and then proceeds to attack the latter:

They are orderly; they may be just; nay, I have known them merciful: but still your children of Sanctity move among their fellow-creatures with a nostril snuffing putrescence, & a foot spurning filth, in short, with that conceited dignity which your titled Douglasses, Hamiltons,



Gordons, or any other of your Scots Lordlings of seven centuries standing, display [am (deleted)] when they accidentally mix among the many-aproned Sons of Mechanical life. – 5

This excerpt forces us to recognise the relationship between Burns's Religious and political predilection. The 'children of Sanctity' are likened to conceited members of the upper class, and as such are portrayed in an unattractive manner. The plosive phrase 'nostril snuffing putrescence' and the alliteration of 'foot spurning filth' communicate aggression, yet Burns cleverly manipulates these phrases, creating an almost humorous caricature of the self-righteous. In doing so, Burns uses irony to convey the opinion that it is the supposed 'children of Sanctity' who are somewhat undesirable, as opposed to the 'many-aproned Sons of Mechanical life' who may be considered to represent honest, hard-working, but also natural men; men who accept that they are subject to the automatic, involuntary forces that nature has put in place, but who are wrongly considered by the sanctimonious to be less moral, or of a lower class.

The self-righteous, on the other hand, are considered by Burns as unnatural, in that their religious fanaticism has caused them to suppress their human instincts (at least outwardly) and consequently effected narrow-mindedness and an 'illiberalized' heart. However, it is their inability to entirely escape human nature that ultimately renders them hypocritical. Burns communicates this notion by reference to the loss of his own childlike naivety, which culminates in the exclamation: 'How ignorant are Plough-boys! – Nay! I have since discovered that a godly woman may be a – !' It is safe to say that, at this point, Burns' tongue is firmly in his cheek. However, it is significant that Burns's protest against hypocrisy concludes with what he considers

to be the ultimate truth: no matter how self-righteous one is, one can't escape human nature. Even a 'godly woman' is subject to carnal appetites, and not least sexuality, which Burns considers to be the most powerful natural instinct. And so,



Burns uses sexual subject matter to emphasise social truths: the inability of the self-righteous to deny their natural sexuality, and the hypocrisy sprung from religious fanaticism.

The 18th-century Scottish Kirk's disapproval of sexual desire is evident from the sermons zealously preached by Presbyterian ministers to the general public. It was not uncommon for sermons to then be published and circulated in print. Consequently, Burns would almost definitely have borne witness to one or another form of the Kirk's two-pronged assault on sin, and particularly on what were considered 'the sins of the flesh'. The following excerpt from a sermon by Reverend David Imrie and published in 1748, The necessity of the almighty power and grace of God to cure the infection of sin, is an example of the fear-mongering both preached and published by some ministers, to deter their congregation from acting upon the 'sensual passions':

And particularly, there is nothing that more weakens and enervates the soul, and renders it incapable of every thing that is great and good, than the vitious and irregular indulgence of the sensual passions. Where a vitious habit of this kind begins to prevail devotion is extinguished, and an indolence of spirit, and indisposition towards every thing that is noble and manly, seizes upon the soul and thoroughly possesses it. 7

The Rev. David Imrie enthusiastically broadcasts the sadistic notion that 'sensual passions' are unhealthy, violent, soul destroying and ultimately evil. This view was not uncommon in the Presbyteries of Burns's day, and so strict sanctions were put in place to 'regulate' the moral, and for that matter the sexual, behaviour of the community.

The Scottish Kirk's attempt to regulate the sexual behaviour of the community took the form of ritual public humiliation for those whose behaviour was considered to be sexually deviant. Fornicators and adulterers were therefore often sentenced to a spell upon the cutty stool, also commonly referred to as the stool of repentance. The cutty stool was usually a wooden structure that stood directly in front of the pulpit. Offenders were dressed in sackcloth and made to stand at the entrance of the church whilst the worshippers arrived. They were then led to the cutty stool before the sermon, where they would stand bare-legged and hatless, and be rebuked by the minister, sometimes for as many as 30 consecutive Sundays. Indeed, the fear

amongst the community at the prospect of such shame and humiliation can scarcely be imagined, and it is widely believed that the threat of the cutty stool prompted numerous young, pregnant females to take their own lives or that of their child. Ultimately the Kirk, in their attempt to prevent sin, drove young girls to even greater crime.

It is widely believed that Robert Burns first came under the censure of the Kirk in 1784-1785 owing to his affair with a servant girl Elizabeth Paton. This affair resulted in the birth of the poet's first child, Elizabeth or rather 'dear bought bess'. The session books of Tarbolton Kirk for the period of Burns's attendance there are unfortunately no longer extant, and consequently there is no formal record of the young couple having been publicly rebuked on this occasion, yet Burns alludes to the Kirk's disapproval in two poems inspired by the incident. In 'The Fornicator'<sup>8</sup> we acknowledge Burns's inability, or rather his unwillingness, to take seriously the punishment imposed by the Kirk for fornication, which Burns describes as 'the blissful joy of lovers':

Before the congregation wide  
I pass'd the muster fairly,  
My handsome Betsey by my side,  
We gat our ditty rarely;  
My downcast eye by chance did spy,  
What made my mouth to water,  
Those limbs sae clean, where I between  
Commenced Fornicator.  
(ll. 9-16)

Wi' ruefu' face and signs o' grace  
I paid the buttock hire;  
The night was dark, and thro the park  
I cou'dna but convoy her;  
A parting kiss, what could I less,  
My vows began to scatter;  
Sweet Betsey fell - fal lal de ral!  
I am a Fornicator.  
(ll. 17-24)

Here we see the triumph of sexuality over religious orthodoxy. Burns and his lover stand side by side on the cutty stool. Instead of attentively receiving his rebuke, Burns is rather distracted by the 'bare-legs' of his 'handsome Betsey', an image that becomes at once highly sexualised by the poet's reference to the parting of his lover's legs and his own watering mouth; symbolic of his sexual arousal. This is not the only time that we see Burns as distracted by the female form whilst in church. It is interesting to note that Burns's failure to fully participate



in Sunday worship, in favour of daydreaming about women, is also apparent in poems such as 'To a Louse' and 'Epigram to Miss Ainslie in Church'. The poet does not seem ashamed to be standing on the cutty stool – at this point in time it seems of little consequence to him. Rather, he is preoccupied with thoughts of what caused him to be there in the first place – sex. The next stanza sees the poet pay the monetary fine which he caustically terms 'buttock-hire', and so the Kirk's compulsory fine for the act of fornication is ironically subverted, becoming money (or rather tax) for sex. Burns pays the fine with feigned 'rueful face and signs of grace' only for the couple to reoffend as soon as they leave church, reiterating the fact that this song is not remorseful in the least, it is a defiant and unashamed assertion of Burns's frequently posited belief that sex conquers all. And so, Burns's assertion that he is indeed a 'Fornicator' becomes a defiant affirmation of his sexuality as opposed to a label of debauchery and impiety.

Burns adopts a more serious tone to address the same incident in 'A Poets Welcome to his Love-Begotten Daughter; the first instance that entitled him to the venerable appellation of Father'<sup>9</sup>. This particular title reinforces the notion that the poet's daughter is indeed the product of love, with all of its positive connotations. However, it is important to note that the manuscript of this particular poem preserved in the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia provides evidence that Burns alternatively named this piece 'A Poets Welcome to his Bastard Wean'. That is not to say that this obviously more crude title is a literal reflection of Burns's thoughts pertaining to the birth of his daughter. Rather, it conveys the same earthy defiance identified in the preceding discussion of 'The Fornicator', with Burns's positive attitude towards the arrival of his daughter exuding from the poem itself:

Welcome, my bonie, sweet, wee dochter!  
 Tho' ye come here a wee unsought for,  
 And tho' your comin I hae fought for  
 Baith kirk and queir;

Yet, by my faith, ye're no unwrought for –  
 That I shall swear!  
 (ll. 13-18)

The defiance with which Burns rejects the Kirk's zealous disapproval of his begetting an illegitimate child is clearly and effectively conveyed. Whilst admitting that his child could have arrived under more advantageous circumstances, Burns establishes that 'by his faith'



her being born, her existence, is of greater importance than the puritanical notions of the established Kirk and the society in which he lives. The phrase 'ye're no unwrought for', reiterates the poet's sincere determination in defending the birth of his daughter against the disapproval

of the Kirk, whilst simultaneously introducing an element of warm humour by alluding to the physical exertion involved in the act of procreation, and so Burns, ironically and humorously, conveys his perceived drudgery in dealing with the Kirk session.

The song 'Yestreen I Had A Pint O Wine' is commonly believed to have been inspired by yet another of Burns's fruitful affairs, this time with Helen Park. Very little hard detail is known about this woman including the date of her birth or the date and means of her death. She is thought to have been the niece of the owner of the Globe Tavern in Dumfries, a regular haunt of the poet, and it is here that she is assumed to have met and begun her affair with Burns, who was by this time married to Jean Armour. Helen fell pregnant and gave birth to Burns's daughter Elizabeth (1791-1873), commonly known as Betty, a matter of days before his wife Jean gave birth to his son William Nicol Burns.

In spite of the obviously complicated circumstances surrounding the affair, the notion of the depth of the poets' feelings and intimacy with 'Anna' is poignantly developed in the following stanza where his need for, and rejoice in their physical and emotional union is conveyed by religious metaphors:

The hungry Jew, in wilderness,  
 Rejoicing o'er his manna,  
 Was naething to my hinny bliss,  
 Upon the lips of Anna.  
 (ll. 5-8)

Here we observe the idea of physical and emotional dependence. The 'hungry Jew' was provided with manna to act as physical and spiritual sustenance, and likewise, the poet's



intimacy with Anna and his resulting pleasure is necessary to sustain him both physically and spiritually. In more general terms this might be considered representative of one view consistently posited by Burns throughout his work; that pleasurable sex is a gift from God that is both natural and essential to life.

The idea of mutual enjoyment and sex as one of the most important and essential aspects of human life may also be acknowledged in stanzas three and four where we observe what appears to be the poet's increasing intimacy with, and need for his lover: 'Gie me within my straining grasp/The melting form of Anna' (III, 11-12), not to mention another metaphorical assertion of the importance that he places upon their intimacy:

Then I'll despise Imperial charms,  
An Empress or Sultana;  
While dying raptures in her arms,  
I give and take with Anna.  
(ll. 13-16)

Stanzas three and four see the poet undermine the political authority and importance of monarchy, in favour of the essential and life-giving union of man and woman, reinforcing the sentiments expressed in 'Poor bodies do naething but mowe'. The notion of sexual enjoyment is conveyed by the ambiguous, yet very erotic imagery present in the lines: 'While dying raptures in her arms/I give and take with Anna', which act as an extremely poignant, tender, and emotional depiction of the act of sexual intercourse as well as reinforcing the ideas of equality and mutual enjoyment that seem to be a recurring and important part of Burns's attitude towards heterosexual relationships both physical and otherwise.

Most interesting is the postscript to this song that appears in *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (1799). This was recorded in a hand other than that of Burns, yet it remains entirely possible, even likely, that it is the work of Burns himself. Indeed the following stanza does appear to be a strong representation of Burns's attitudes, something that is evident not only from his work, but from the way in which he lived his life:

The kirk and state may join and tell;  
To do sic things I manna:  
The kirk and state may gae to h-ll,  
An' I shall gae to Anna.

And so here is a pointedly defiant rejection of any interference and attempted jurisdiction over

human relationships and sexual activity by both religious and political orders.

It is clear from the material discussed and from the way in which Burns lived his life that the poet does not recognise the social and religious restrictions imposed upon the community as regards physical passion. Burns embraces sexuality as a natural, life-giving, pleasurable force necessary for the success of civilization. For him, sex is the ultimate expression of humanity; the undeniable unifying principle that binds and levels man, regardless of social class or creed. It is his openness to this reality, and his refusal to deny or suppress what he considers an essential component of human life that sets him apart from the predominant religious orthodoxy of his community, and renders the verse discussed controversial to 'polite' society. However, from the above it is clear that Burns's skilful use of sexuality as a means of cultural and social comment renders the poet's bawdy verse great poetry.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Carruthers, G. Ed., *Burns: Poems*, (Everyman; London, 2006), pp. 124-125.
- 2 G. Ross Roy and J. DeLancey Ferguson Eds., *The Letters of Robert Burns*, Vol. II, (Oxford, 1985), p.14.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid. p.146.
- 5 Ibid. p.147.
- 6 *Letters II*, Letter 506, p.147.
- 7 David Imrie, A.M. Minister of the Gospel at Dalton, *The necessity of the almighty power and grace of God to cure the infection of sin: Illustrated in A Sermon, preached before The Synod of Dumfries, At Dumfries, Oct. 11. 1748*, (Edinburgh, 1748), pp.6-7.
- 8 *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, facsimile edition produced by G.Ross Roy, (University of South Carolina Press; Columbia, 1999), pp.3-4.
- 9 Carol McQuirk Ed., *Robert Burns: Selected Poems*, (Penguin Books; London, 1993).
- 10 *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, facsimile edition produced by G.Ross Roy, (University of South Carolina Press; Columbia, 1999), pp.9-10.
- 11 In the Bible, Book of Exodus, Ch.16, manna was the food supplied by God to the Israelites starving in the wilderness.

