“A Weinsteinian sex pest”?

In defence of poet Robert Burns: “Ye know, and dare maintain, the Royalty of Man”

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The reactionary character of the #MeToo sexual misconduct campaign reveals itself very sharply when we see its precepts applied retroactively to historical artists and artworks. Far from this campaign being a progressive vehicle for the victims of sexual assault, its censorious, puritanical policing of art history and morality emerges openly. Representations of sexuality and physicality are under attack in what Austrian film director Michael Haneke has described as a “crusade against any form of eroticism.”

The widespread condemnations of Manchester Art Gallery’s recent removal from view of pre-Raphaelite John William Waterhouse’s 1896 painting *Hylas and the Nymphs* led to some frantic back-pedalling by the gallery, which claimed that the removal was to “prompt conversations” about displaying and interpreting artworks, before being forced to rehang the much-loved picture a week later.

The ahistorical middle-class moralizing of the campaign perhaps reached a new low, however, with an attack on Scots poet Robert Burns (1759-1796). The casual way in which the attack began is itself revealing. Poet Liz Lochhead, a former Scots Makar, or national laureate, was preparing for a Burns Night talk on “Burns and Women.” Referring to a 1788 letter to his friend Robert Ainslie, in which Burns boasts of sex with his heavily pregnant lover Jean Armour “until she rejoiced,” Lochhead described the poet as a “sex pest” whose “disgraceful sexual boast… seemed very like a rape of his heavily pregnant girlfriend. It’s very, very Weinsteinian.”

Giving credence to this drivel, the *Guardian*, the bulletin board of the most privileged proponents of identity politics, ran Lochhead’s piece under the headline, “Robert Burns: was the beloved poet a ‘Weinsteinian sex pest’?

The comparison is invidious, historically inaccurate, and insupportable. It has attracted much controversy, with experts at Glasgow University’s Centre for Robert Burns Studies prominent in criticising it. Professor Gerard Carruthers, co-director of the Centre, noted that there is “no good evidence” that Burns was a rapist or sex pest. Carruthers was critical of the lack of historical perspective: “We’re now refracting everything through our 21st century presentism, essentially judging history by the ephemeral journalistic stories of today. Please can we show respect both to history and to the real victims of appalling, verifiable sexual assaults?”

The Centre’s Dr Pauline Mackay, who has published widely on Burns’s bawdy material in its wider European contemporary context, also dismissed the remark, saying “There is no comparison between Burns and Weinstein.”

Mackay’s historical work undermines the casual comparison. She notes that Burns, like many of his contemporaries and admired predecessors, was writing and circulating bawdy material “for the enjoyment of his male companions” at gentlemen’s clubs. Burns was careful to keep his bawdry “within a select circle of male acquaintances and patrons.” It was not published until three years after his death.

The support for Lochhead’s comparison has demonstrated how the #MeToo witch-hunt has moved from any notion of investigation and due process to vilification on the basis of unproven or uninvestigated allegations. Professor Robert Crawford, a biographer of Burns, interprets the 1788 letter along the same lines as Lochhead, suggesting that “what he [Burns] presents in his recent lovemaking to the heavily pregnant Jean as exclamations of pleasure *may well have been* cries of pain.” [emphasis added].

How does Crawford know what they “may well have been”? He also thinks Lochhead “is surely right in saying Burns had his Weinstein moments.” His evidence is not convincing, however: he compares Burns’s praise of his “pintle” in the letter with the poem *Nine Inch Will Please A Lady*, a poem Mackay describes simply as one of Burns’s “vulgar yet humorous” commentaries on heterosexual relationships.

Crawford acknowledges that Burns’s bawdy comments are “calculated rhetorical performances by an 18th century buck showing off for the supposed benefit of his male cronies.” The rhetorical performances may say various things about gender relations in Burns’s society but not by any stretch of the imagination that their author was a rapist.

Lochhead is prepared to concede the rhetoric and the possibility that the sexual encounter was not rape, but only in order to attack Burns again: “The really sad thing to me is that Burns might even have been letting his pen run away with him and describing what might actually have been, at the time, for all we know, actually the mutual pleasure of both. A loving homecoming he was willing to trash just to impress that younger man he was showing off to so blatantly and so disgracefully. Pathetic really …”

Damned if he did, damned if he didn’t. This is all preposterous and stupid.

As Mackay notes, Burns’s bawdry offers “a fascinating record of 18th-century society and sexual mores.” She sees him not just sometimes enjoying smut for its own sake but also viewing bawdry “as a scathing and effective tool to scrutinise 18th-century religious, domestic and political culture.”

This gets us closer to the real subversive greatness in Burns’s poetry, which Lochhead does not seem to have intended her glib comparison to overshadow. Not so long ago—before the #MeToo crowd was so present on the scene—Lochhead tempered criticism of his sexual behaviour with a genuine defence of his verse. She commented in 2009 about criticisms of his behaviour, “It’s not relevant to his poetry, it’s not the point. We don’t look to him for a way to live our lives… Of course I wouldn’t look to him as a feminist role model, but he’s not a role model, he’s a great poet.”

Burns is one of the finest of the late 18th century poets, a product of the Enlightenment and a pioneer of Romanticism, and one who should be read

more widely than ever.

The son of an Ayrshire tenant farmer, he first "committed the sin… of Rhyme" in 1774, while working on the family farm. His life was marked by the stresses of maintaining himself and family financially, balanced against a determined freedom and rigour of thought. Confronting a "Polemical divinity" he began "to puzzle Calvinism with so much heat and indiscretion that I raised a hue and cry of heresy against me which has not ceased to this hour." His poetry is marked by keen satires on contemporary society: Paul Lafargue recalled Karl Marx listening "with great pleasure to his daughters reciting or singing [Burns's] satires or ballads."

His love life was certainly complicated. In 1785, Elizabeth, his daughter by his mother's servant Betty Paton, was born, shortly before he met Jean Armour. His relationships proliferated. Armour was pregnant with his twins in 1786, while Burns was also still devoted to Mary Campbell. Later he would have a relationship with Agnes McLehose, but turned to her maid Jenny Clow for a more physical relationship. Early in 1786, Burns signed "some sort of Wedlock" with Armour, but her father repudiated him and sent Jean away. They were married in 1788, and the Ainslie letter deals with his return to her from McLehose.

Struggling to make ends meet and trying to forget Jean in "dissipation and riot," Burns agreed to take a post on a slave plantation in Jamaica. Lack of money and the "feelings of a father" when Jean gave birth led him to postpone and then abandon his emigration. It was at this point that he was encouraged first to publish his poems to finance the trip. This led to him being courted by the Edinburgh literary scene and groomed as a contributor to anthologies of Scottish song and verse like James Johnston's *Scots Musical Museum*.

Burns's association with slavery is problematic for those who do not view him historically, but his poetry attests to an aspiration for freedom globally. The final lines of *For a' that and a' that* are justly celebrated:

For a' that, and a' that,
Its comin yet for a' that,
That Man to Man the warld o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that.

Burns also wrote movingly of *The Slave's Lament*:

The burden I must bear, while the cruel scourge I fear,
In the lands of Virginia-ginia O;
And I think on friends most dear with the bitter, bitter tear,
And Alas! I am weary, weary O!

Burns's political outlook has much in common with that of Thomas Paine. (Like Paine, Burns also served in the excise). Where Paine was articulating the theoretical and practical programmes of the revolutionary bourgeoisie in France and America, Burns was trying to balance poetic expressions of support against his financial backing from conservative sections of the Scottish establishment. His poems sound a radical note of support for the American revolution (speaking of "the Royalty of Man" in an ode on Washington's birthday), and notebooks that indicate a Republican enthusiasm for the French revolution even as he was having to convince patrons of his loyalty. Carruthers has described Burns as "hiding his politics in plain view."

Burns's poems include tender love lyrics alongside a robust physicality and sensuality, and a blending of language registers from local Scots to standard English. As Lord Byron noted of Burns's letters: "What an antithetical mind. Tenderness, roughness, delicacy, coarseness, sentiment, sensuality, soaring and grovelling, dirt and deity all mixed up in that one compound of inspired clay." Lochhead sees in this rather accurate assessment of Burns's qualities merely Byron's "positively smacking his lips in delight."

Even Lochhead's somewhat shifty defence of Burns's greatness has not been shared by all. Her appalling reference to Weinstein has chimed with a wider attack both on Burns as a man of his time—the Enlightenment, significantly—and on poetic freedoms. Stuart Kelly, critic and literary editor of *Scotland on Sunday*, wrote last year about the 1788 letter. He too called Burns a rapist, and, like Crawford, rejects any consideration of rhetorical or historical context in understanding the letter ("Even if it is merely braggart behaviour, I wonder why we all raise a glass to the poet …?").

Kelly goes further than the implicit attack on the Enlightenment and Lochhead's casual smear of Byron. He points to Percy Bysshe Shelley's great essay *A Defence of Poetry*, with its distinction between a poet's moral character and their work:

"Their errors have been weighed and found to have been dust in the balance; if their sins 'were as scarlet, they are now white as snow'; they have been washed in the blood of the mediator and redeemer, Time." Kelly finds Shelley's ideas "increasingly problematic."

One is reminded of Macaulay's essay devoted to Byron: "[O]nce in six or seven years our virtue becomes outrageous. We cannot suffer the laws of religion and decency to be violated. We must make a stand against vice. We must teach libertines that the English people appreciate the importance of domestic ties. Accordingly some unfortunate man, in no respect more depraved than hundreds whose offences have been treated with lenity, is singled out as an expiatory sacrifice… He is, in truth, a sort of whipping-boy, by whose vicarious agonies all the other transgressors of the same class are, it is supposed, sufficiently chastised. We reflect very complacently on our own severity… At length our anger is satiated. Our victim is ruined and heart-broken. And our virtue goes quietly to sleep for seven years more."

Burns is simply collateral damage in Kelly's attempt to find a Scottish poet with less historical baggage. Kelly rules out major poets on political grounds (Walter Scott for his opposition to the 1832 Reform Bill, as well as the Stalinist Hugh MacDiarmid for his poems praising Lenin and, in his Scottish nationalist zeal, apparently sanctioning the "Imminent Destruction" of London by German bombing in 1940) or subjective judgement (Robert Louis Stevenson for being a "bit louche"), and suggests Veronica Forrest-Thomson. Elsewhere there have been calls for the north-eastern poet Nan Shepherd to take Burns's place.

The poetry, too, is also not Lochhead's target: "My quarrel isn't with Burns … My problem's with, well, not quite all, but 99 out of 100 Burns Suppers."

Burns's greatness as a poet is subordinated to the anodyne requirements of a nationally acceptable figure, when everything that is greatest about Burns speaks against that easy homogeneity. It is unjust both to Burns and to those suggested in his stead, because they cannot be read as the poets they actually were. There is a place in poetry for all sensual aspects of human experience, not just those which suit narrow provincial interests.