

**“Ye Jovial Boys Who Love the Joys:”**

**An examination of the life, poetry,  
and philosophy  
of the failed farmer  
and frequent fornicator  
Robert Burns**

By Ammon J. Ford  
[ammonford@gmail.com](mailto:ammonford@gmail.com)

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The life and poetry of Robert Burns is widely studied and read in academic circles, yet oddly enough, his overt sexuality and emphasis on a humanist philosophy based on pleasure and peace have received too little attention. This overt sexuality and humanism is extremely intertwined within his discussion of political and religious subjects, especially in his satires. In the context of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Scotland, in which Burns lived, that he is unapologetic and often proud of his violations of social order illustrate his radical individualism; most notably of his rejection of the Kirk's authority to define morality, god and the correct social order. Many of his poems illustrate not only his views on love and sex, but through love and sex we see his philosophy on class, life, and religious oppression.

But before we approach his poetry, it would do best to offer some background information on the society, in which Burns' lived as well as his own life and times.

Burns was born in 1759 and lived to the age of thirty-seven when he died of heart disease in 1796. The son of a self educated farmer, Burns was raised and educated largely on a farm in Kilmarnock, then later in Ayrshire. As an adult he worked as a tenant farmer for a time, never saw consistent success and eventually went to work as a tax collector for the Crown. While in this profession, his outspoken support for the French Revolution in its early stages nearly lost him his post.

From a young age he was unsure of any ambitions to continue farming. In a 1787 letter to a Dr. John Moore he writes, "I had felt early some stirrings of ambition, but they were the blind groping of Homer's Cyclops round the walls of his cave: I saw my father's situation entailed on me perpetual labor." Then later in the same letter, "But far beyond all the impulses of my heart was, un penchant a l'adorable moitiee du genre humain.—"

My heart was completely tinder, and was eternally lighted up by some Goddess or other.”<sup>1</sup> Roughly translated, the French here is: “the learned are the charming half of mankind.” Watching his father work himself to death convinced Burns that the hard life of a tenant farmer was not what he wanted, but he always saw something beautiful and meaningful in it.

Following the ratification of the Union of the kingdoms in 1707, most Scots no longer concerned themselves with governance. Many simply believed that “the nation ... had ceased to exist.”<sup>2</sup> Technically, there was a small delegation of Scots who would travel to Parliament, but were not seen as a true representation of the nation. Burns felt that his forefathers had made a shameful mistake in ratifying the union and expressed his views in poems like *Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation*, as well as many others.

This vacuum of power and authority in Scotland opened the way for another powerful institution to take effectual control: the Kirk. Kirk is merely a Scotch word for ‘church’<sup>3</sup> and was used to refer to the Presbyterian hierarchy in Scotland. It saw its peak of power in the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, was somewhat divided by schematics in the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup>, but by the 1750’s had regained its social and political strength.<sup>4</sup> At it’s strongest, it had been “the ministers [that] had been the real rulers of Scotland,” and not the General Assembly.<sup>5</sup>

In Burns’ own time, the Kirk made it’s power felt most directly through it’s local parishes; each parish was uniformly controlled by one minister and a council of

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<sup>1</sup> Ferguson, 139

<sup>2</sup> Snyder, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Cuthbertson, 236.

<sup>4</sup> Snyder, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Snyder, 19.

parishioners, which were collectively called the Kirk Session. It was the Kirk Session that had the power and responsibility to keep watch over the people and punish sins. It was Burns' local Kirk Session that subjected him and Jean Armour to public humiliation and ridicule, depicted in his poem *The Fornicator*. It was "oppressive" and left no person unmolested, or unafraid. Franklyn Snyder describes the power and effect of the church thus:

By the inherent qualities of its procedure it turned every parish into a hotbed of gossip, encouraged spying, and made all evils known abroad. In a static community it had enormous influence, but the ills it caused were almost as serious as those it sought to cure. Thus it came about that the Kirk Session did indeed represent the power and dignity of the Church in every Scottish hamlet, it degenerated into a medium of ecclesiastical tyranny which ultimately provoked even sober conservatives to protest, and brought forth derisive laughter from the ungodly who delighted in Burns' satires.<sup>6</sup>

Doctrinally, Presbyterianism is a Calvinist form of Christianity, meaning that it is founded on the principles taught by John Calvin, specifically, a strict adherence to the bible and an emphasis on faith. Calvinists believe in the doctrines of total depravity, original sin, predestination and election. Total depravity and original sin means that men are naturally evil and that on top of that we are all tainted by the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; even if it were not for original sin, through our weakness we are bound to fail God and that therefore the only way to enter Heaven is through God's grace and forgiveness. Predestination is a concept similar to fate: we all have a life to live, in which we will do specific things that God has in store for us, but still allowing free will.

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<sup>6</sup> Snyder, 23.

Election refers to the belief that those who will receive God's grace and go to Heaven were chosen before they were even born, therefore either you are saved or you are not and there is nothing to be done about it—the clever catch is that the only way to know the chosen from those who will burn in hell for all eternity is by their superior faith, temporal righteousness, and in some cases monetary wealth.

It is important to have a basic understanding of the Kirk because it frames the society in which he worked and his foundational education, even though he himself was not a proponent; also, because of his satires centered around the hypocritical intolerance of the church.

*Holy Willie's Prayer*<sup>7</sup> is a biting criticism of the Kirk, Calvinist teachings and perhaps even God himself. This was written in response to a friend of Burns' being condemned as a heretic by the Kirk for having written against them. The poem begins by addressing God, who "sends [one] to Heaven, and ten to Hell/ A' for Thy glory." (lines 3-4) His criticisms are mixed with subtle antagonism like: "I bless and praise Thy matchless might, / When thousands thou has left in night." (lines 7-8) He then asks why he is to be doomed for "Adam's Cause" (line 18) and that as a newborn, God would have "plung'd me deep in hell." (line 20) The point of these opening stanzas are to engage the reader's sympathy for Willie and demonstrate his devout belief, regardless of whether or not he likes it.

Willie goes on to confess his own sexual exploits (lines 37-60), vowing never to do it again, but noting that maybe it is just God's plan for him; that maybe he is lucky enough to be one of the elect. He then suggests that God should take out his wrath more

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<sup>7</sup> Kingsly, p.56.

on rulers, priests and specifically the “Presbyt’ry o Ayr,” (line 80) Burns’ hometown; that “for thy people’s sake destroy them, / An dinna spare” (lines 95-96)—careful to note at the end that God should “remember me and mine” (line 97). This poem is at once very dark and yet still offers a good laugh. This raises the question of who is truly evil: the sinners, the judgmental faithful, or the all-powerful God who is going to subject you to needless torture for all eternity. The seemingly arbitrary power of God and the Church to condemn and control just simply seems wrong to Burns and counter to human experience, joy, suffering and pain.

His poem *The Fornicator*<sup>8</sup> first addresses those who “love the joys/the blissful joys of Lovers” (lines 1-2) and beckons them to listen to his tale because he’s recently become a Father. He then describes his experience in having to stand in front of the congregation and be publicly denounced as a fornicator. The scene though is not described as shameful or awkward as one might imagine, instead he happens to see “handsome Betsey’s” (line 11) legs and remember back to their joyful deed, which makes his “lips to water” (line 14). In the next stanza he describes meeting Betsey in the park, where he offers a “parting kiss,” (line 21) which quickly turns to sex. The poem does not shield what it is about; in fact it is very upfront and directly challenges the moral tenets of the Kirk Session. The joy and frivolity in Burn’s description shows that not only is he not sorry for his action, he is quite proud of it. In the following stanzas he swears that as long as he’s got any money, that the dear girl is “welcome for to share it” (line 28) and that the “roguish boy” will be the “darling of his [father]” (line 29-30). This stanza is particularly interesting because it shows a sense of honor and responsibility for one’s

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<sup>8</sup> Kinsley, p. 79

actions and the result thereof, in contrast to Burns' rejection of the moral sentiments of the Kirk. It is clear here that Burns defined his own morality and did not allow others to control it.

To this point, in the fifth stanza Burns admonishes those who have gotten sexually transmitted diseases from prostitutes or promiscuous women, saying that he is loath to "rank you in the Quorum," (line 36) and that a "bonny lass upon the grass" (line 37) is far nobler.

To redefine and reclaim the term Fornicator he offers us this clean, spring like image of two beautiful people on the grass in the sun and tells us that "O that's a Fornicator" (line 40); not the dirty fool in a dark pub. Farther, in the final stanza he marks that all the greatest "kings and heroes" (line 41) are "ranked Fornicator!!!" (line 48)

This poem is a wonderful satire and protest against the sexual oppression under the Kirk, and Christianity in general. He begins the story in a very narrow frame, and slowly broadens it until he come to reclaiming the abstract term, marking it a virtue and identifying the best and the greatest as those who agree with him. This logical, humanist philosophy is prevalent in Burns' poetry and clearly indicates where his loyalties lie. This confrontational and radical theme is carried over into *Green Grow the Rashes*, and especially *Why should na poor folk mowe*.

In *Why should na poor folk mowe*<sup>9</sup> he introduces a more direct political message that the royalty and aristocracy are not morally above the common man. The most serious and moving lines come in the chorus when he sings,

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<sup>9</sup> Kinsley, p. 533

And why shouldna poor folk mowe, mowe, mowe,  
 And why shouldna poor folk mowe:  
 The great folk hae [silver] and houses and lands,  
 Poor bodies hae naething but mowe.”

Here he is making a direct statement that sex is one of the few pleasures that the poor actually can have, and for the powerful to take it away is simply cruel. His also offers specific suggestions of how and where the greatest monarchs of Europe should have sex with their queens, mixes in political statements of peace, and says that they would all be better off staying home for a mowe. This is admittedly a bit cheeky of him, but it is also very daring, and clearly demonstrates his philosophical class preference and light-hearted, humorous view of sex.

The preference for the simple life is again seen in *The Lass O Ballochmyle*.<sup>10</sup>

Here he tells of walking through nature and stumbling across a beautiful young woman. In seducing her he speaks more generally of women in nature: that this girl is “Nature’s vernal smile,” (line 14) and that “Women [is] Nature’s darling child,/There all her charms she does compile” (lines 21-22) He goes on to say that he’d be happier with a “country maid” (line 25) in the “lowest shed” (line 27) than in any place fancy. That the “thirst of gold might tempt the deep” (line 35) and “pride might climb the slipp’ry steep” (line 33), but that he’d rather have “ev’ry day ... with th’ bonie lass o Ballochmyle” (lines 39-40). Again, the regular man and the Earth supercede the rich, powerful and prestigious.

As I am sure you have noticed, we are seeing a pattern here. Burns’ poetry offers a radical and idealistic notion: that human joy and happiness is what is most important, that sex is merely part of that joy, as are the children who may come after, that the

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<sup>10</sup> Burns, p. 160.



judgmental and hateful parishioners who spy, condemn and punish are morally wrong—even if they are doctrinally right.

Morality then is paramount, and morality comes from man's pleasure vs. man's pain. In this sense, Burns' appears to be a moral hedonist, which is not the case, so we must broaden our scope just a little.

In his famous poem *A Man's a Man for A' That*<sup>11</sup> Burns describes what he believes a good and moral man should be. He dives right in saying that he's there "for honest poverty" (line 1), that he'd "dare be poor" (line 4) with "toils obscure" (line 6) for freedom's sake—and that "man's the gowd for a' that" (line 8). That he will dress poor, but "[give] fools their silks, and knaves their wine" (line 11) because "the honest man, tho e're sae poor, / Is king o men for a' that" (lines 15-16) That there will be those with rank and title whom "hundreds worship" (line 19) but he's a "coof" (line 20) because "the man o independent mind, / He looks an laughs a' that" (lines 23-24). That noble titles can be given at a prince's command, but "sense an pride o worth, / Are higher rank than a' that" (lines 31-32). The final stanza I think is worth quoting in full: (lines 33-40)

Then let us pray that come it may  
 As come it will for a' that,  
 That Sense and Worth o'er a' the earth,  
 Shall bear the gree and a' that.  
 For a' that, an a' that,  
 It's comin yet for a' that,  
 That man to man, the world o're  
 Shall brithers be for a' that

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<sup>11</sup> Burns, p. 131

This poem offers us a strong moral sentiment. It is neither about God nor neighbor, but about virtues, right and honor. This shows a desire for a higher humanist moral standard can be found in many places in Burns' work, especially in his patriotic, historical and political poetry like *Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat?* and *Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation*.

In conclusion, the poetry of Burns varies widely in its subject and form, but whether it be about a young lass he meets in the glen or Napoleon's threat of invasion, or the Monarchs of Europe warring while the Church denies the poor the pleasure of a good mow. He always maintains an underlining humanist philosophy, which places virtue above wealth and the temporal happiness above religious piety.

The times in which he lived made these priorities very controversial; in fact, they are still very controversial. His idealistic focus on love, pleasure and peace in life through nature show his dissatisfaction with the goals and priorities of the society in which he lived. He loved it there and still found enormous beauty in the women of Scotland, the people's spoken dialect, their written word and culture. His philosophy of life and happiness ultimately offer us Burns the man: honorable, jovial, blunt, fearlessly honest, tolerant and always ready to accompany a pretty lass—if it suited his pleasure.

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