“A Man’s a Man for a’ That”

The Search for Equality in the Poetry of Robert Burns

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This essay explores the theme of equality in the poetic work of Robert Burns. The poem “Is there for Honest Poverty” makes for Burns’s most significant statement in support of the inherent dignity of man. It is, moreover, a cry for a social revolution where the barriers of rank and status are brought down giving way to a new order based on universal brotherhood and mutual acceptance and recognition.

Additionally, the theme of equality is present in other poems and excerpts of poems written by Robert Burns. In order to bring Burns’s egalitarian views to light, there is an attempt to establish parallels between “Is there for Honest Poverty”, and poems such as “The Vision,” “The Twa Dogs,” “Address of Beelzebub,” and “The Tree of Liberty,” to name a few. Nevertheless, the intertextuality of poems is not, by itself, the exclusive factor that clarifies Burns’s ideology. For that reason, there is additionally an attempt to establish connections between Burns’s personal experience as a tenant farmer and exciseman and his desires for a more equal and fraternal society. In effect, Burns’s experience of poverty and precarity, as well as his struggle for survival in a world divided by issues of class and rank, led him to develop a deep sensitivity regarding the hardships surrounding the toils of the common man.

Therefore, as the Bard of Scotland, Burns used his position to voice the joys and sorrows of his contemporaries, particularly those who, like himself, originated from the lower end of the social scale. What is more, Burns’s struggle for a more inclusive society was not limited to his immediate context. As a true humanist, Burns was also interested in the defense and enhancement of the rights of the disenfranchised groups of the time, that is, women and the enslaved.
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I. Introduction

The common man’s search for his own place in history reached a climax in the 18th century, having its most significant moment in the French Revolution of 1789. Reclaiming the state to its people and giving a voice to the underdog, the marginalized, and the anonymous was the final goal of the people’s quest in a world where rank, power, and money made all the difference between social recognition and virtual nonexistence (Schama 254-255).

In Robert Burns’s Scotland, social problems such as hunger and unemployment were exacerbated by the oppression that the Scottish people endured at the hands of the English. After centuries of struggle for its own independence, Scotland found itself tied to England in a definitive manner in a 1707 act of Parliament which formalized the Union and gave rise to the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, a faction of the population remained loyal to the House of Stuart, whose highest representative had been exiled after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The struggle for the reinstatement of a Stuart King on the British throne continued in the successive, and failed, Jacobite rebellions of 1689, 1715 and 1745. Finally, the loss of the Battle of Culloden, on April 16th, 1746, which led to the defeat of the Jacobite cause, gave way to the destruction of the social, political, and legal strata of the Scottish Highlands, where support for Jacobitism was concentrated (Fry 178-198).

Overall, the state of the country had a particular impact on the lower classes, whose everyday struggle to make ends meet constituted an effective challenge. Circumstances such as famine, bankruptcy and dependence characterized the constant fragility of a society where the omnipresent desire for improvement seemed at odds with a reality of scarcity and unemployment (R. Crawford 76, Whatley 283-287). By all accounts, 18th century Scotland was a highly hierarchical society, characterized by an insurmountable “social segregation according to class and status” that constituted an invisible, but very real, barrier for the betterment of individual and collective conditions (Foyster and Whatley 6). Man was, therefore, valued in terms of social origins and purse, regardless of the talents that he might have possessed.

As a self-conscious and independent-minded individual, Robert Burns demonstrated a profound aversion to this type of value system from his younger years (R. Crawford 37). Despite his circumstances, Burns saw himself as someone with the
brilliance and the capacity to improve his condition in the world (Fitzhugh 6). Nevertheless, like many of his fellow men, he was faced with the inescapable reality of social inequality and the need for social connections in order to survive (Whatley 274).

Perpetually searching for the recognition of his own dignity as a human being, Burns decided to establish connections with like-minded people in order to compensate for the lack of acceptance that the stratified society of his time offered to people emerging from its lower echelons. This is one of the reasons behind his joining the Freemasons, a society in which men of all ranks were equal (O’Hagan 00:41:43). Moreover, it is the reason for Burns’s ideological proclivity toward the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789, the great event of his time that allowed for common people to have a say in the administration of their country and the control over their personal destinies (Burns qtd. in Noble and Hogg 516-517).

However, Burns wanted his activity to extend beyond an individual ambit. Using his incredible talent, Burns decided to become the voice of his people, the new Bard of Scotland, who would sing the joys, sorrows, and expectations of the common man (R. Crawford 133). A common man himself, Burns used his poetry to transcend the boundaries of class and socio-economic status, continually seeking to empower the powerless, and offer a voice to society’s outcasts. It was due to this universality and to the relatability of his writings that Burns became the people’s poet, not only in Scotland or throughout the Scottish Diaspora, but the world over (Davis 162-163).

The theme of equality is present from the beginning of Burns’s poetic work. Nevertheless, the epitome of the search for equality, recognition, and the dignity of man in the work of Robert Burns, is represented in the poem “Is there for Honest Poverty,” also known as “A Man’s a Man for a’ that.” Many have seen in it a manifesto of fraternity and equality following the molds of the French Revolution of 1789, calling it Burns’s version of the revolutionary anthem “Ça Ira” (R. Crawford 383). Taking a ground-breaking stance, Burns affirms “the uniqueness and sanctity of individual human beings” (T. Crawford 337), drawing a utopian vision of universal brotherhood. In a society where democracy was a “dirty word [and] a curse” (R. Crawford 145), Robert Burns stands out as a visionary who voiced the ideals and dreams of his contemporaries through the artistic means at his disposal.
II. A Short Biography of Robert Burns

Robert Burns was born in Alloway, County Ayrshire, on the 25th of January, 1759. He was one of a family of tenant farmers, a precarious lifestyle given how dependent his family was on the produce of the land. Recognizing his son’s extraordinary intelligence, Robert Burns’s father, William Burnes, decided to invest in his son’s education. Along with a handful of his Alloway neighbors, Burnes hired a private tutor for the local children (Crawford 37). The choice fell on John Murdoch, under whose direction Robert Burns progressed in the study of English language and grammar, French and music (McGuirk 90). It was at this time that Burns started to compose poetry, using a method that he would adhere to until the end of his life, by which he “composed orally and in his head before putting words on paper” (R. Crawford 40). In effect, this tendency to musicality and orality was present in Burns’s life from its very beginning. His mother, Agnes Brown, would often sing popular Scots and Gaelic songs in the house, exposing young Robert to the “rural sung heritage savoured in her rural Ayrshire”, with a repertoire including “lullabies, love songs, and ballads” (R. Crawford 19). The formal and informal education that Burns received would have great influence in his later work as a poet and songwriter.

Subsequently, in his desire to improve himself, Burns went on to join and preside over a debate club, the Tarbolton Bachelors’ Club, where he and his friends created a place for leisure and the sane exchange of ideas (Leask, Robert Burns and Pastoral 12). It was in this club that Burns made his first attempts at the composition of “verse epistles [and] ‘Kirk Satires’” (Leask, Robert Burns and Pastoral 12), as well as love songs and bawdy poetry. During this period of his life, Burns was invited to become a member of the Freemasonry. This was an association where the ideals of “universal brotherhood and liberty of conscience in belief” (R. Crawford 95) offered a striking contrast to Scotland’s rigid class system, as well as to the “theological fanaticism in Burns’s Ayrshire” (R. Crawford 94). In fact, among the Freemasons, Burns found a privileged space where he could live out his ideals of equality and fraternity, as well as a community of friends whom he could count on in his times of need (Halliday n.p.). This assistance was particularly felt by the poet at the time of the publication of his first volume of poetry, the 1786 Kilmarnock edition, as well as during his placement as an Excise officer in 1788 (McGuirk xvii). It was, indeed, the
precarity of the farming life that Burns had experienced since infancy that inspired his need to search for a secure source of income.

On a more personal level, Burns maintained a series of relationships with different women throughout his life, finally marrying Jean Armour in 1788. In spite of the tumultuous beginning of their relationship, occasioned by the Armour family’s opposition to the union, Jean remained loyal to Burns until the end of his life, bearing him nine children and taking charge of the education of his illegitimate offspring (Burness n.p.). The last of the couple’s children, Maxwell, was born on the day of Burns’s funeral (R. Crawford 403). After a prolonged illness, Robert Burns died on July 21st, 1796, leaving his family “in very indigent circumstances, but […] very liberal and extensive subscriptions [were] to be made for them” (Grierson qtd. in Purdie, McCue and Carruthers 141). Burns’s death had left not only an orphaned family, but also an orphaned nation which, through the words of an anonymous witness to the Bard of Scotland’s funeral, was heard saying “Wha’ll be our poet noo?” (Purdie et al. 141). In his lifetime, Robert Burns was acclaimed as the people’s poet, a man who had emerged from among his brethren to sing the toils of the daily life of the common folk of his country. After his death, Robert Burns’s memory was disseminated to the four corners of the earth by the Scottish Diaspora and the many organizations and institutions related to his work.
III. Burns, the Bard and Songwriter of the People

A man of great intelligence, Robert Burns quickly formulated his objectives and traced a clear path for himself as the future Bard of Scotland. The first Common Place Book, written by Burns between 1783 and 1785, appeared as a sum of his aspirations as a poet and songwriter (Purdie et al. 91). Moreover, it presented Burns’s creation of a poetic persona according to the tastes of the time. In an affected language, Burns appeared as the incarnation of the man of feeling, seeing the good side of everything and everyone, valuing love above reason, and showing solidarity to the less fortunate, man and creature alike (Mackenzie 1, 18, 34). It is interesting to note how, even in the personal journal in which Burns began his first drafts of poetical composition and personal description, there are already statements that indicate his search for recognition and equality. At the end of his introduction, Burns is concerned with stressing that the thoughts and considerations that follow are, indeed “HIS OWN”, thus asserting his intellectual merit (Robert Burns’s Common Place Book 1). Further along the text, he also enumerates the different emotions of man, indicating that these thoughts, feelings, “cares and passions […] operate pretty much alike, I believe, in all the Species” (Burns, Robert Burns’s Common Place Book 1). In this manner, Burns reclaims his equality to all men through the affirmation of his personal value. He then goes on to proclaim the common humanity of all individuals, claiming that, despite their external differences, in reality they share the same nature. In a society where democracy was the equivalent to the perversion of a deeply established and, therefore, untouchable way of life, and the common man was made exclusively for work, these were rather strong statements to make. Nevertheless, they could pass the scrutiny of the censors or even amuse upper-class readers when they appeared in the form of poems or songs.

At this early stage of his creative endeavor, Burns also made reference to what would become his trademark. In the first Common Place Book, Burns dedicated an entry to Scots, a language that despite “a certain irregularity […] glides in, most melodiously with the respective tunes” (48). The use of “Old Scotch” is, moreover, seen by Burns as the bridge between the unknown “glorious old Bards” of the past and himself, “a poor rustic Bard unknown” who desired to live in continuity with his heritage and, at the same time, remain open to contemporaneous influences such as
Ramsay and Fergusson (*Robert Burns’s Common Place Book 46-50*). Moreover, in a Scotland where the English language and customs were taking the primary role, it was of great importance to preserve the language and traditions of the rich local culture. One way of preserving this heritage for future generations was the collection of songs, a task which Burns would embrace until the end of his life, most notably with his contribution to James Johnson’s *Scots Musical Museum* (Crawford 278). In the first *Common Place Book*, Burns alludes to the art of songwriting, describing the method that he would use throughout his career. He states that “perhaps, it might be possible for a Scotch Poet, with a nice, judicious ear, to set compositions to many of our most favorite airs, particularly that class of them mentioned above,” that is, the irregular airs that were commonly sung, “independent of rhyme altogether” (*Burns, Robert Burns’s Common Place Book 49*). Burns’s life program was thus set. He would become the Bard of Scotland, dedicating his life to poetry and the composition of songs, in an attempt to commit to writing the experience of his “compeers, the common people” (*Robert Burns’s Common Place Book 48-49*). However, to Burns, the common man was not defined by rank or purse, but by the universal experiences of his humanity, which were, and still are, common to all individuals.
IV. “Is there for Honest Poverty”

Burns often addressed the themes of equality, brotherhood, and social injustice. In poems like “The Vision,” “The Twa Dogs,” and “Address of Beelzebub,” the author touches on poignant themes such as poverty, unemployment, the Highland Clearances, and the causes and consequences of social inequalities. Burns criticized the commodification of people, the injustices that the common man suffered at the hands of the gentry, and the stratified society in which he lived. Moved by his personal experience as a tenant farmer, Burns was sensitive to all forms of discrimination. More than anything, he longed for a society wherein man was valued in terms of his innate dignity and offered the opportunity to improve his circumstances. In fact, this might be one of the reasons why Burns was eager to join the Freemasons at a very young age, fascinated as he must have been by the equality practiced in an association where all men, rich or poor, were treated “on the level,” that is, as equals in every sense (O’Hagan 00:41:48).

In a country occupied by a foreign power, where any apparent demonstration of rejection of the ordinances emanating from London was viewed as treason, Burns and his contemporaries had to tread lightly. Despite living in a delicate situation wherein “‘spies’ and informers monitored the activities and even the correspondence of those associated with sedition,” Burns soon found a way of circumventing the constant scrutiny (R. Crawford 376). In his role as a song collector, Burns linked ancient tunes of revolutionary significance to “other struggles of the same nature, not quite so ancient” (Burns qtd. in R. Crawford 368, Burns’s emphasis). Building bridges between the old and the new worlds, Burns “asserted and glorified the voice of the people” at the same time that he developed “a cultural project with lasting political overtones” (R. Crawford 369, 277). In effect, Burns soon learned that the use of song was a very useful form of dodging the all-seeing eye of the censors of the time, and took full advantage of it (R. Crawford 369).

This is visible, among other instances, in the song “Is there for Honest Poverty,” also known as “A Man’s a Man for a’ that.”¹ This composition, in which

¹ It is interesting to note that this song was performed at the official opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, by Sheena Wellington (www.youtube.com/watch?v=hudNoXSuj0o).
Burns addresses the themes of equality and brotherhood, was first published anonymously in August 1795 in the *Glasgow Magazine* (Noble and Hogg 513). After a series of reprints, Burns’s authorship was eventually made known. In fact, the poem was issued with his signature on the 2nd of June 1796, in an issue of the *London Oracle*, a periodical known for its alignment with the ideology of the central government (Noble and Hogg 213). “Is there for Honest Poverty” summarizes Burns’s ideas on human nature and social order. For that reason, it is quoted here in its entirety:

Is there, at honest Poverty?
That hings his head, & a’ that?
A coward slave, we pass him by,
We dare be poor for a’ that!
For a’ that & a’ that,
Our toils obscure, & a’ that:
The rank is but the guinea’s stamp,
The Man’s the gowd for a’ that.–

What to’ on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hoddin grey, & a’ that;
Gie fools their silks, & knaves their wine,
A Man’s a Man for a’ that.–
For a’ that & a’ that,
Their tinsel show, & a’ that;
The honest man, tho’ e’er sae poor,
Is king o’men for a’ that.–

Ye see yon birkie ca’d a Lord,
Wha struts & stares & a’that;
Tho’ hundreds worship at his word,

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2 Whereas most versions of the poem use “Is there for honest Poverty,” Crawford and MacLachlan’s edition of Robert Burns’s poems reads “Is there, at honest poverty.”
He’s but a coof for a’ that.–
For a’ that & a’ that,
His ribband, star, & a’ that;
The man of independent mind
He looks & laughs at a’ that.–

A Prince can mak a belted knight,
A marquis, duke, & a’ that,
But an honest man’s aboon his might,
Gude faith he mauna fa’ that!
For a’ that & a’ that,
Their dignities & a’ that;
The pith o’ Sense, & pride o’ Worth,
Are higher rank for a’ that.–

Then let us pray, that come it may,
As come it will for a’ that,
That Sense & Worth, o’er a’ the earth,
May bear the gree & a’ that.–
For a’ that & a’ that,
Its comin’ yet for a’ that,
That Man to Man, the warld o’er,
Shall brothers be for a’ that.–
(“For a’ that & a’ that”3 158-159).

In this poem, Burns offers an excellent synopsis of his beliefs in the inherent dignity of man, while siding with the members of the lower sectors of society, of which he is an integrated part. Describing the frugality of the common man’s life, apparel and

3 The poem receives this title in Crawford and MacLachlan’s edition of Robert Burns’s poems. The poems quoted in this essay are taken from the referred edition, as it reflects the Scots vocabulary that Burns would have originally adopted. For this reason, in the in-text quotations, the poem appears under this designation.
victuals, Burns nevertheless exalts the “pith o’ Sense & pride o’ Worth” as being above the rank that is granted by the imposition of aristocratic titles or other high-ranking symbols (“For a’ that & a’ that” 159). Burns thus manifests his negative view on the farcical dimension of an artificially created system that privileges station above talent, intelligence, or virtue. In effect, in Burns’s own words, the common man who dares to live modestly, who questions his reality, and who looks beyond the vanity of appearances to see the true value of people and things “Is king o’ men for a’ that” (“For a’ that & a’ that” 158).

Following his tendency to align old and new struggles, Burns associated this poem with the Jacobite tune “Though Geordie reign in Jamie’s stead” (“Two Songs to the Same Tune”). He thus reinforced the radical connotations of a clearly controversial and deeply-charged poem which questioned the very foundations of his world. Moreover, this merging of lyric and song was far from being the nostalgic cry of a man longing for the restoration of a particular dynasty (Andrews 181). In reality, Burns and his fellow citizens longed for self-determination and autonomy, in the oppressive aftermath of a disadvantageous union that converted them into virtual slaves in their own land (Andrews 174). According to Thomas Crawford, Burns had the “habit of linking the national and revolutionary struggles of different periods together in his mind” (244). In the case of “Is there for Honest Poverty,” Burns transcends the ideals of freedom and nationalism, “in a blending of internationalism with the revolutionary idea of fraternity” (T. Crawford 245). This idea will be further explored in the following pages, while contrasting and connecting “Is there for Honest Poverty” with other poems that both complement and clarify Burns’s ideals and intentions. Additionally, there will be an attempt to relate these writings to the poet’s life and personal circumstances, in order to shed light on the deeper meaning of his statements.

In a politically unstable period, in which the powerful were dominated by the fear of a public insurrection fueled by the 1789 Revolution in France (Harris 185), Burns’s unmistakable alignment with the ideals of said revolution could potentially be perceived as an act of treason. Reclaiming “The Royalty of Man” (“Ode [for General Washington’s Birthday]” 152) was, likewise, understood as an instigation to rebellion and could lead to serious consequences. Moreover, Burns’s position as an exciseman and, therefore, an employee of the government of His Majesty King George III put
him in a particularly delicate position. In fact, Burns had already been the subject of an inquiry due to suspicions concerning his political conduct (R. Crawford 361). Fearing for his life and livelihood, Burns called for the assistance of his patrons and superiors, claiming his innocence and loyalty to the Crown while, at the same time, appealing to their human solidarity (R. Crawford 361-365). In effect, Burns’s radical demonstrations, which had become more evident in his later years (T. Crawford 236), could lead to the loss of his job, or even to imprisonment or deportation, which would leave his family on the brink of indigence (R. Crawford 361).

In order to clear his public image and demonstrate his firm and unquestionable allegiance to the Crown, Burns went on to publish a song “under his own name in the Edinburgh Advertiser […] toasting to King and Constitution” (R. Crawford 362). This poem would later be dedicated to the local brigade of volunteers from Dumfriesshire (R. Crawford 362). The Dumfriesshire Volunteers was one of many similar groups, which were constituted mainly of local men who would “form themselves into a body of cavalry […] only to be called in cases of emergency. These men were to serve without pay, supplying their own clothes and horses,” whilst the government would supply the rest of the resources (Harris 137). In a further demonstration of public loyalty, Burns joined the local regiment of volunteers in 1795, at about the same time that his poem for the liberty and equality of all men began to circulate (R. Crawford 382-383).

Burns therefore led a double existence, on a political level, divided between the public allegiance to authority and a secret penchant for a new order, in which the common man would be placed in the center of public life rather than at its periphery (R. Crawford 363). Even when, due to the nature of his job and the need to maintain a politically correct façade, he seemed to publicly betray his ideals, when time came for him to write his verses, Burns showed where his true allegiances lay. For, if on the one hand he was swearing loyalty to King and Constitution, on the other hand, he was declaring openly that “while we sing, God save the king, / We’ll ne’er forget the People” (“The Dumfries Volunteers” 161).

It is interesting to note that, in recent months, the debate surrounding the double life of Robert Burns in terms of radical ideology and its expressions has been renewed. The recent finding of two letters from John Mitchell, Burns’s Excise supervisor, to Graham of Fintry, Burns’s patron, appears to suggest that, in fact,
Burns’s colleagues at the Excise Office shared many of his ideas. What is more, Burns’s political inclinations were actually an “open secret.” This, nevertheless, did not exempt him from the need to measure his words so as to stay out of harm’s way (Carruthers, “Open Book Podcast – Episode One” 00:49:00, “Robert Burns Hid His Radical Politics in ‘Plain View’, Says Leading Academic” n.p.). It is, in fact, Gerard Carruthers’s opinion that the perception of Burns’s double life is an exaggerated notion that belongs to the realm of the myths created around the personality and context of his life, for the purpose of crafting the heroic figure of Burns as a victim of a persecution of sorts. In this manner, the advocates of this theory would also reinforce the idea of an overly reactionary Scottish identity, which does not correspond completely to the real events of the time (Carruthers, “Re: Robert Burns and Politics” n.p.).
V. The Theme of Equality

i. Equality as a Mission
In “The Vision,” one of Burns’s earliest poems, which was printed in the Kilmarnock edition of 1786, Burns traces the root of his bardic inspiration to a vision that he had of the muse Coila. While composing this poem, Burns places himself in the tradition of the ancient poets, and divides the poem into Duans, following the Ossianic tradition (Noble and Hogg 62). Through the voice of Coila, he then alludes to the incomparable riches of poetry and the obligation of the poet toward mankind, as a reminder and preserver of its inherent dignity. As the muse addresses him, she states:

Strive in thy humble sphere to shine
And trust me, not Potosi’s mine,
Nor King’s regard,
Can give a bliss o’ermatching thine,
A rustic bard.

To give my counsels all in one,
Thy tuneful flame still careful fan;
Preserve the dignity of Man,
With soul erect;
And trust the UNIVERSAL PLAN
Will all protect.
(“The Vision” 46).

The parallel between this excerpt of “The Vision” and “Is there for Honest Poverty” is striking. From the beginning of his career as a poet, Burns states that his ideal and function as the voice of the nation is to promote the dignity of man, regardless of his origins or occupation. By attributing these words to the muse, Burns ratifies the divine origin of his calling as his nation’s next national poet, in continuity with the great poets of the past. What is more, Burns builds a bridge between tradition and modernity, appealing to the urgency of defending “the dignity of Man” (“The Vision” 46). However, despite his discourse on equality, it is clear that Burns has a special
predilection for the plight of the common man. According to Thomas Crawford, “Burns’s [...] cult of the ‘Honest Man’, which was a common concept of the Enlightenment all over Europe, [...] was closely connected with the idea of fraternity” (338). The allusion to the universal plan, which Burns capitalizes as a sign of its importance, constitutes moreover a reference to the extension of the divine plan of equality between all men. It is, additionally, an expansion of the teachings of the Freemasons, whose concept of “brotherhood [implies] that each person must be judged as an individual, on his own merits, and that such factors as race, national origin, religious creed, social status, or wealth are incidental to the person's character” (“Freemasonry and Brotherhood”). Therefore, all men appear equal in dignity under the universal plan that is to be disseminated and defended through the poet’s works. It is through this equality, then, that the foundation of a brotherhood without borders is established. In addition to this, Burns defends his spirit of independence and tenacity, as he shall accomplish this mission “With soul erect,” not bending to the pressures that he may suffer to forfeit his enterprise (“The Vision” 46).

Interestingly enough, “The Vision” was published three years before the French Revolution of 1789, indicating that Burns’s predilection for themes such as equality, dignity, and brotherhood was a long-cherished aspiration rather than the product of momentary fervor. In effect, in the poem man’s poverty is exalted by the muse, who suggests to the poet that earthly possessions are void of satisfaction in comparison to the bliss of the “rustic bard,” whose fulfillment resides in shining in his “humble sphere” (“The Vision” 46). Likewise, in “Is there for Honest Poverty,” poverty itself appears as something to boast about, almost a challenge to the established order, as if through a life of obscurity and survival on menial tasks the individual is demonstrating that “Man’s the [actual] gowd for a’ that” (“For a’ that & a’ that” 158).

**ii. Equality and Class Struggles**

Another of Burns’s early poems is “The Twa Dogs,” where he reflects on the contrast between the life of the commoners and that of well-to-do people. The poem, first published in the Kilmarnock edition of 1786, consists of a dialogue between two dogs, Caesar and Luath, who belong, respectively, to a nobleman and to a farmer (Hogg and Noble 5). “The Twa Dogs” appears as a social review of the circumstances
and mores of the dogs’ owners, as well as a clear defense of the “Poor tenant bodies, [who] scant o’cash, / […] maun thole a factor’s snash” (“The Twa Dogs” 59). In fact, through the voice of Caesar, the lord’s dog, Burns criticizes the lascivious lifestyle of the powerful men who live at the expense of their tenant farmers, extracting all the money they can from them and taking them to court with or without reason. Burns thus alludes to his personal experience. It is a fact that, for many years his father, William Burnes, was harassed by the owner of Lochlea Farm. Lacking a written agreement whereby he was able to prove the terms and conditions of the lease he had taken led to a burdensome legal battle with his landlord, David McLure. McLure argued that Burnes had not kept with his efforts for the improvement of the land, thereby requesting a fine of £500 from his tenant. In the end, justice was served, and William Burnes was acquitted of all charges against him. Nevertheless, the continuous legal trouble led to the decay of Burnes’s health and his consequent passing on February 13th, 1784 (Leask, Robert Burns and Pastoral 28-29, 36).

This series of unfortunate events, however, did not shake Burns’s firm convictions regarding the inherent bliss to the lives of the common folk. In “The Twa Dogs,” as in other pieces, Burns makes it clear that the poor man, who lives in a precarious situation in terms of gaining secure clothing, housing, and nourishment, is nonetheless “moistly wonderfu’ contented” (“The Twa Dogs” 59). For, as he claims in his autobiographical composition “My Father was a Farmer,” a song probably written in 1782 but published only in 1808 (Noble and Hogg 539-540), “without an honest manly heart, no man [is] worth regarding” (“My Father was a Farmer” 3). Moreover, in spite of the “coach, horse, silken purse,” feasting, traveling, debauching, drinking, and carousing (“The Twa Dogs” 59), the rich man comes nowhere near “The honest man [who], tho’ e’er sae poor, / Is king o’ men for a’ that” (“For a’ that & a’ that” 158). Thus Burns reinforces the notion that it is man’s personal attributes that determine his true value, and not his title or estate. In effect, the lordlings whom everyone follows and adulates in the expectance of reward are nothing but worthless fools who come nowhere near the morally uncorrupted “man of independent mind”, who shines as the king of creation solely by virtue of his intellectual and ethical attributes (“For a’ that & a’ that” 158).
iii. Equality and the Reclamation of Human Dignity

Along the same lines as “The Twa Dogs,” Burns composed a poem reflecting on the tragic consequences of the Highland Clearances of the 1790s, a process through which cotters were evacuated to make space for sheep farming (Foyster and Whatley 8). “The Address of Beelzebub,” published posthumously in 1818 probably as a result of “the virulent intensity of its political dissent” (Noble and Hogg 616) is a cry for the dignity of men, women, and children who are “treated literally as animals” (Noble and Hogg 616). Burns presents his poem as a letter addressed by Beelzebub to the current president of the Highland Society. Created to assist the development and improvement of the Scottish Highlands and Islands (“History”), the Society had, in fact, sanctioned measurements against the departure of “FIVE HUNDRED HIGHLANDERS who […] were so audacious as to attempt an escape from their lawful lords & masters whose property they were by emigrating […] to the wilds of CANADA, in search of that fantastic thing – LIBERTY” (“Address of Beelzebub” 94). The commodification of people was evident in a time when the local lairds, still “unsure of the commercial value of sheep” wished to keep their servants at hand in case the new enterprise proved a failure (Noble and Hogg 616).

Moreover, the utter disrespect for the self-determination and dignity of the disadvantaged people who stood at the mercy of the powerful appears as a scandal of such gruesome proportions, that it can only be attributed to the direct influence of a demonic force. Burns describes the different trials that the former cotters, now unemployed and completely dependent on their masters’ assistance, suffer on a daily basis. Using poetic irony, Burns makes Beelzebub the author of a letter in which the lairds’ transgressions are praised by the Prince of Darkness himself, who recognizes the evident similarities between their actions and his own:

But Smash them! Crush them a’ to spails!
An’ rot the DYVORS i’ the JAILS!
The young dogs, swinge them to the labour,
Let WARK an’ HUNGER mak them sober!
The HIZZIES, if they’re outhlins fausont,
Let them in DRURY LANE be lesson’d!
An’ if the wives, an’ dirty brats
Come thiggan at your doors an’ yetts,
Flaffan wi’ duds, an’ grey wi’ beese,
Frightan awa your deucks an’ geese,
Get out a HORSE WHIP, or a JOWLER,
The langest thong, the fiercest growler,
An’ gar the tatter’d gipseys pack
Wi’a the bastarts on their back!
(“Address of Beelzebub” 95).

In this excerpt, Burns directly criticizes the base treatment endured by the Highlanders, from the violence aimed at breaking their “stubborn Highlan spirit,” and the appalling labor conditions that they had to endure, to dearth, prostitution, indigence and misery, prison and abuse (“Address of Beelzebub” 95). The sacrifice of people to their lairds’ economic gain in horrific conditions is comparable only to the most abject form of slavery, as these men and women were denied the most elementary of human rights, that is, the right to dispose freely of their persons. It is, therefore, logical that these aristocrats are compared to the great murderers and despots of antiquity, “HEROD […] an’ POLYCRATE,” or to the colonizers of the New World, “ALMAGRO & PIZARRO” (“Address of Beelzebub” 96, Noble and Hogg 616). These figures, known to Burns through the reading of The Annual Register, serve as a sort of parallel to the “imperial villains of often genocidal régimes of Rome, Greece and Spain” (Noble and Hogg 617-618, Noble and Hogg’s emphasis). Moreover, they are perceived as an allusion to the “absentee lords who populate [a] genuinely degenerate London” (Noble and Hogg 617). These men are the “parcel of rogues” whom Burns mentions in a poem about the corruption surrounding the Union of 1707, who sold not only their country, but also their fellow men “for English gold” (“Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation” 145). Belonging to the class of the traitors, such individuals are sure to find their place “in the after-life fireside of hell” (Noble and Hogg 618).

While exposing the violation of the Highlanders’ human rights, Burns also reclaims their dignity as human beings. In effect, the behavior of the aristocrats who consider only their profit, condemning their servants to the crudest form of indigence and refusing to assist them or allow them to decide upon their future, demonstrates
their truly depraved nature. The actions of the lairds in “Address of Beelzebub,” who harass their tenants by constantly imposing their “FACTORS, GREIVES, TRUSTEES an’ BAILIES,” throwing debtors in prison, making cotters work and starve, pushing young girls to a life of prostitution in “DRURY LANE,” or using their “HORSE WHIP” or their “JOWLER” to throw out begging women and their famished children are symptoms of the deep perversion of a society that remains passive while vulnerable people are treated as chattels. Once again, Burns makes it clear that “rank is but the guinea’s stamp”, in a world where social greatness is not a synonym for personal integrity or virtue (“For a’ that & a’ that” 158). As he goes on to say in his “Epistle to Davie, A Brother Poet,” dated from January 1785, and included for the first time in the Kilmarnock edition of 1786 (Noble and Hogg 97):

“It’s no in titles nor in rank;
   It’s no in wealth like Lon’on Bank,
To purchase peace and rest;
   It’s no in makin muckle, mair:
It’s no in books; it’s no in Lear,
To make us truly blest:
If Happiness hae not her seat
   And center in the breast,
We may be wise, or rich, or great,
But never can be blest:
Nae treasures, nor pleasures
Could make us happy lang;
The heart ay’s the party ay,
That makes us right or wrang.

Think ye, that sic as you and I,
Wha drudge and drive thro’ wet and dry,
Wi’ never-ceasing toil;
Think ye, are we less blest than they,
Wha scarcely tent us in their way,
As hardly worth their while?
Alas! How aft, in haughty mood,
GOD’s creatures they oppress!
Or else, neglecting a’ that’s guid,
They riot in excess!
Baith careless and fearless,
Of either Heaven or Hell;
Esteeming, and deeming,
It a’ an idle tale!
(“Epistle to Davie, a Brother Poet” 22-23).

True greatness, therefore, is measured by a happy and contented heart, not in terms of wealth or social standing. In fact, the rich and powerful, who oppress God’s children by making them toil and drudge, exposing them to hard work and inclement weather, or subjecting them to indigence and exploitation, cannot possess true happiness. It is, by all accounts, the inhumane conduct of these noblemen by name that seals their destiny in this life and in the next.

iv. Equality as a Fruit of Liberty
Among Burns’s posthumous writings there is a poem which makes for a striking parallel with “Is there for Honest Poverty.” More radical and explicit in its views and statements, “The Tree of Liberty,” first printed by Robert Chambers in 1838, is a clear declaration of Robert Burns’s humanist ideology (R. Crawford 374). According to different sources, the authorship of the poem remains uncertain, despite successive investigations into the matter (Crawford 246-251, Noble and Hogg 847-85, Purdie et al. 190); the first was conducted by Robert Chambers himself, who was persuaded of the plausibility of Burns’s authorship (Noble and Hogg 847). In a recent article written by Gerard Carruthers and Norman Paton, the authorship of the poem is once more disputed. The authors offer “a survey of the historical situation regarding ‘The Tree of Liberty’, a discussion of some ‘internal evidence’ of the text” and suggest a possible author in the person of Alexander Geddes. Ultimately, Carruthers and Paton leave the question unanswered, while indicating the need for proceeding to a deeper and more detailed study of the matter (242, 255). It is, nevertheless, important to note that the factor which weighs most heavily on the lack of consensus concerning the
attribution of the poem is the absence of an original manuscript. In any case, the existence of such manuscript would not be deemed sufficient by some critics to prove “that he [Burns] actually composed the poem” (Carruthers and Paton 245-249). Therefore, the difficulty of proving Burns’s authorship, as well as the issue of “finding an alternative author” in case Burns is rejected as such, “is not easily solved,” leading to an impasse. According to what has already been stated, the preferred solution is then leaving the matter open-ended (Carruthers and Paton 249, 255).

Before proceeding to a detailed analysis of the poem and its parallels with “Is there for Honest Poverty,” it is interesting to note the importance of the liberty tree, and its prevalence and symbology in revolutionary environments. As a symbol, the liberty tree was subject to transformation in terms of the meaning and connotations that its successive users wished to grant it. Such nuances were culturally contingent, as the tree was given different interpretations by the American and French Revolutionaries, as well as by the Scottish radicals (Andrews 174, T. Crawford 247). Therefore, those who adopted “the tree as their primary symbol could also deploy its meanings in support of their specific cause” (Andrews 176). One thing, though, appears to be clear, i.e. that “the liberty tree unequivocally represented political upheaval” (Andrews 176).

In the Scottish context, the concept of liberty was subject to many layers of interpretation, comprising the revolutionary ideals of independence as well as Scotland’s destiny within a united Britain (Andrews 177). In fact, the notion of liberty in Scotland was deeply connected to the consequences of the Union of 1707, while it also “invoked the abiding spirit of Jacobitism in Scottish political discourse, tempered by the failed uprisings in 1715 and 1745” (Andrews 174). Moreover, the 1790s had seen the rise of a radical reform movement of heterogeneous composition in terms of membership, with diverse fields of action, as “radicals could easily equate political with moral and spiritual reform” (Harris 111). It was, in fact, “during the Scottish Reform Movement of the seventeen-nineties [that] the Tree of Liberty became almost as much a Scottish symbol as the kilt, the lion, the thistle or the holly” (T. Crawford 247).

A man of revolutionary inclinations himself, it is not unlikely that Burns, as many Scottish poets before him, decided to write about the theme of liberty (Andrews
However, the contemporaneous environment of censorship did not advise public demonstrations of allegiance to radical ideals of “democracy, republicanism and the tree of liberty” (R. Crawford 374). Likewise, claiming authorship of a poem of such pro-revolutionary and anti-monarchic content would have placed an already investigated and physically weakened Burns in even more delicate circumstances. In fact, if “The Tree of Liberty” was written in 1794, as some speculate (R. Crawford 375), its composition coincided with a time in which Burns had severe concerns about the future of his wife and children. He could not, by any means, draw attention to himself or risk the loss of his position, as he believed that “in the event of his death the Excise would pay a pension to his dependants” (R. Crawford 375). Though a staunch radical, Burns was, first and foremost, a family man, whose fatherly feelings tended to outweigh any other consideration (qtd. in Black 255).

“The Tree of Liberty” encompasses the major themes in other poems related to Burns’s ideological appreciation of the American and French Revolutions, as well as to his anti-monarchic and anti-clerical ideology. Moreover, his praise of “Fair Freedom” (“The Tree of Liberty” 178) as the originator of a new order and the creator of the new man assumes a particular importance when connected to the independent man that Burns was and that he depicts in “Is there for Honest Poverty.” In “The Tree of Liberty,” Burns expresses the solace that is brought by the fruit of this tree to a life of toil like his own, along with the burning desire for equality and fraternity:

Without this tree, alake this life
Is but a vale o’ wo, man;
A scene of sorrow mixed wi’ strife,
Nae real joys we know, man.
We labour soon, we labour late,
To feed the titled knave, man.
And a’ the comfort we’re to get,
Is that ayont the grave, man.

Wi’ plenty o’ sic trees, I trow,
The warld would live in peace, man;
The sword would help to mak a plough,
The din o’ war wad cease, man.
Like brethren in a common cause,
We’d each other smile, man;
And equal rights and equal laws
Wad gladden every isle, man.
(“The Tree of Liberty” 178-179).

The fruit of the “Tree of Liberty” is such that, according to Burns, “It raises man aboon the brute,” offering him the necessary space for introspection so as to understand that “He’s greater than a lord” (“The Tree of Liberty” 177). Moreover, it makes the man of independent mind rise above his social standing and realize his dignity and value. He thus figuratively laughs at the constraints and rules of stratified society, so to speak, as he understands that they are human fabrication, much like the stamp that is used to mark the guinea.

Furthermore, the poet mixes expressions of eschatological4 nature which contain clear connotations regarding the world to come, with allusions to the achievement of the ideals of the French Revolution, in the form of the proliferation of trees of liberty the world over. Burns thus seems to suggest that, through the adherence to the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, embraced and popularized by the French Revolution, a new world order will come into existence (“Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”). The poet makes a clear reference to chapter two of the book of Isaiah, in which the prophet describes the unity of all peoples under one God, who will govern the world from Jerusalem, the holy city. As a consequence of this divine rule, people “shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (The Holy Bible – Authorized King James Version, Isaiah, 2.3-4).

4 According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, “the term eschatology refers to conceptions of the last things: immortality of the soul, rebirth, resurrection, migration of the soul, and the end of time. These concepts also have secular parallels […] Eschatological themes thrive during crises, serving as consolation for those who hope for a better world or as motivation for a revolutionary transformation of society. […] Some forms of collective eschatology […] involve political activism and the expectation of the public manifestation of God’s justice. Not only do they hope for collective corporeal salvation and a transformation of the world, but they actively prepare for it” (Landes n.p.).
Likewise, in a veiled manner, Burns claims that true religion is anthropocentric for, as Irenaeus of Lyon once remarked, “the glory of God is man fully alive” (qtd. in Osborn 251). In effect, for Burns, the fruit of the tree of liberty is the exaltation of the common man and the peace of the world has its origin in the recognition of this very dignity. Acting otherwise is going against divine ordinations, much like the crimes of which the tyrannical and ruthless lairds in “Address of Beelzebub” are guilty. According to its “strong religious connotation,” the tree of liberty was associated, in different stages, with the Edenic “tree of knowledge” and “with the cross of Christ,” appearing as an instrument of redemption and salvation for mankind. What is more, the tree of liberty carried in itself the seeds of a “new born race” which would stem from the “democratic ideals” that it represented and “would undo original sin and the suffering attendant upon it” (Carruthers and Paton 252). Thus, a new creation would emerge, and the utopian Paradise, where the chosen people were to “walk in the light of the Lord” would finally become a reality (Isaiah, 2.5). Therefore, the harmony of Creation that had been broken by the fall of Adam and Eve and their consequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden would be restored through the ideals of democracy, in the fulfillment of God’s plan for mankind (Genesis 3).

This passage, moreover, makes for an accurate reiteration of the last stanzas of “Is there for Honest Poverty,” which refer to the honest man’s capacity for rising above the limitations of rank and pomp, as “The pith o’ Sense, & pride o’ Worth, / are higher rank for a’ that” (“For a’ that & a’ that” 158-159). It is, similarly, through the virtues or attributes of sense and pride that Man “may bear the gree & a’ that,” turning into reality the ideal notion “That Man to Man, the warld o’er, / Shall brothers be for a’ that” (“For a’ that & a’ that” 159). A revolutionary cry in itself, “The Tree of Liberty” summarizes the aspirations of the common man for a different world, wherein he is recognized and valued for his true merits. A world, moreover, where man is served the justice of equality of rights in a society in which “to mouth ‘A Citizen’ [ceases to be] a term of scandal” and becomes an everyday occurrence (“The Brigs of Ayr. A Poem” 107).

v. Equality and Self-Determination
Liberty is a highly prized value in Burns’s life and works. It is, as far as he is concerned, something for which it is worth sacrificing one’s life. In “Scots Wha Hae,”
a poem published anonymously in the *Morning Chronicle*’s edition of May 8th, 1794. Burns defines slavery and freedom in terms of loyalty to one’s ideals (Noble and Hogg 466). In effect, the element that distinguishes the “base […] slave [from the] FREE-MAN” (“Bruce to his Troops on the Eve of the Battle of Bannock-burn” 154) is the latter’s capacity to sacrifice his own life for his personal freedom and self-determination, as well as for that of his fellow men. In a clear allusion to “the tennis court oath of the French revolutionaries” (Noble and Hogg 467), Burns takes a step further in the connection between the old struggle for Scottish independence and the modern revolutionary principles that bring equality and recognition to all individuals, proclaiming that “LIBERTY’S in every blow! / Let us DO or DIE!” (“Bruce to his Troops on the Eve of the Battle of Bannock-burn” 154).

This poem, as many others, is united with a Jacobite tune (Crawford 368), and serves to enlighten the meaning of the term “slave” as it is used in “Is there for Honest Poverty.” According to Burns, then, “the coward slave” whom men pass by (“For a’ that & a’ that” 158) is the man who betrays his fellow men and, moved by the prospect of personal gain, chooses to align himself with the “Proud usurpers [who] By oppression’s woes and pains” keep the children of the country in “servile chains” (“Bruce to his Troops on the Eve of the Battle of Bannock-burn” 154). This definition runs parallel to that of the “parcel of rogues” who sell their brethren “for English gold” (“Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation” 145). In the end, the value of man is the measure of his integrity, and cannot be bought or sold either by money or social standing, as “the artificial NOBLE shrinks into a dwarf before the NOBLE of Nature” (Paine qtd. in T. Crawford 365). Burns thus takes a firm stand against the society of his time, marked as it was by nepotism and a strict and impenetrable hierarchy that seemed to infiltrate its every layer. What is more, following the ideals of the French Revolution, Burns suggests that the struggle for a more equal and fraternal society goes hand in hand with the struggle for freedom, as equality comes into existence only when the individual owns his destiny and is able to choose how to shape his life in solidarity with and with respect for his fellow man (Paine 104). Moreover, the

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5 The poem’s title is, in effect, “Bruce to his Troops on the Eve of the Battle of Bannock-burn.” However, it is commonly known and referred to as “Scots Wha Hae,” as this expression belongs to the first line of the poem.
conquest of liberty is the product of the union between men who join forces in order to reach a common goal, making it clear that liberty, equality, and fraternity are interdependent and inter-generating instances. For this reason, they constitute powerful forces that have in themselves the potential to originate the universal brotherhood to which the poet aspires. In effect, due to the combination of these three elements, “all Europe” and, by extension, the whole world “may form but one great Republic” (Paine qtd. in T. Crawford 365), where “Man to Man […] Shall brothers be for a’ that” (“For a’ that & a’ that” 159).

vi. Equality and the Plight of the Enslaved
In Burns’s vision of a utopian world without barriers where fraternity would unite all men in a universal community, there was also the concern to promote the rights of the most vulnerable and disenfranchised members of the society of his time. Dedicating portions of his work to give a voice to the plight of women and slaves, Burns took advantage of his position to stir the consciences of his fellow men and bring about the desired changes in these individuals’ circumstances. One of the poems attributed to Burns in relation to the theme of slavery is “The Slave’s Lament,” which was first printed in Johnson’s Scots Musical Museum on August 13th, 1792 (Noble and Hogg 397). This song, however, appears to have been collected rather than written by Burns (Leask, “Burns and the Poetics of Abolition” 51). According to Carruthers, Burns’s silence in relation to the theme of slavery is likely to have been compensated for by the “otherwise disappointed politically correct readership for the Scottish Bard,” which aimed to connect the poet to the Abolitionist struggle (“Robert Burns and Slavery” 22-23). Moreover, as Burns had once planned to immigrate to Jamaica, where he would have worked as a “Negro Driver” (Leask, “Burns and the Poetics of Abolition” 47, 51), there might have been some urgency on the behalf of a group of readers to clear the poet’s image once and for all and dissociate him in a decisive manner from such a controversial phenomenon as slavery. In that sense, attributing the composition of a poem that was openly condemnatory of slavery to Burns would allow his unsatisfied readership to establish the Bard of Scotland’s unequivocal abhorrence of slavery in the face of his detractors.

Nevertheless, it appears that Burns was in fact vocal against slavery. According to Carruthers, in the poem “The Ordination,” originally written in 1786
and revised in 1787, Burns exposes the theological skirmishes between conservative and moderate currents of Calvinists and Presbyterians in Ayrshire. In a poem charged with irony, Burns lends a voice to the conservative faction of his community through the allusion to some of “its favourite darker biblical texts” (Carruthers, “Robert Burns and Slavery” 23). One of these texts is the passage corresponding to Genesis 9. 21-27, where Canaan was cursed by Noah into being the servant of his brethren. This passage was often interpreted as a divine ratification of the system of slavery. The excerpt from “The Ordination” reads as follows:

“Well, let a proper text be read,
An’ touch it aff wi’ vigour,
How graceless Ham leugh at his Dad,
Which made Canaan a nigger”
(“The Ordination” 186).

The passage of the book of Genesis paraphrased by Burns in the lines above became, over time, “the single greatest justification for Black slavery for more than a thousand years” (Goldenberg 1). Moreover, the negative connotations associated with the color black, as a symbol of “the demon, chaos, ugliness, vice, guilt, sin, and moral degradation” (De Montabert qtd. in Goldenberg 2) led to a sense of general justification in the base treatment and exploitation of men and women who were taken from their homeland, separated from their loved ones, and made to bear the burden of slavery while living in fear of “the cruel scourge” (“The Slave’s Lament” 397). “The Ordination,” then, as a critique of outdated religious values and perspectives, may be interpreted in this passage as a condemnation, albeit a veiled and brief one, of the use of biblical texts to degrade and objectify human beings that were created in God’s image. In this sense, therefore, it makes for a reproach of the inhumane system of oppression and objectification of individuals which was slavery.

vii. Equality and the Rights of Women
Burns’s desire for universal brotherhood and equality also extended to the rights of women. This position had been openly ridiculed in an article published in the Dumfries Weekly Journal at about the same time that the poet’s text on the subject
emerged (Robert Crawford 357). In fact, “since the 1790s, [the] advocacy of women’s rights had become discredited in middle-class circles by its association with support of the French Revolution and with the notorious private life of Mary Wollstonecraft, author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” (Midgley 127). Composed by Burns for actress Louisa Fontenelle’s benefit night on the 26th of November, 1792, “The Rights of Woman” was published in the radical Edinburgh Gazetteeer on November 30th, 1792 (Robert Crawford 357, Noble and Hogg 449). Thought of by Robert Burns as “a sincere Compliment to that Sex, the most amiable of the works of God…” (qtd. in Noble and Hogg 449), “The Rights of Woman” aims to draw attention to the defense of women’s rights in a society dominated by the revolutionary project of the recognition and defense of the rights of man. However, according to the mores of the time, the rights that Burns aims to defend are those of “Protection, Decorum, ADMIRATION [and] IMMORTAL LOVE” (“The Rights of Woman” 148). Nevertheless, the tone of its finale indicates that, despite its conservative content, Burns has, in fact, a penchant for “the rhetoric of egalitarian politics” (Robert Crawford 358), as he proclaims:

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

(“The Rights of Woman” 149).

By proclaiming the “MAJESTY OF WOMAN” while voicing the cry of the 1789 French Revolution, Burns makes it evident that his notion of the universal brotherhood of man is extended to the whole of humanity.

Conversely, in the song “Green Grow the Rashes,” published in 1787 (Noble and Hogg 228-229), Burns takes a step further, proclaiming not only the equality of women, but their superiority to man:

“Auld Nature swears, the lovely Dears  
Her noblest work she classes, O:  
Her prentice han’ she tried on man,
An’ then she made the lasses, O.”


Alluding to the creation of woman from man, in Genesis 2.20-24, Burns suggests that God practiced his work on man, and only after that created the “lovely Dears”, that is women, whom “Nature” classifies as her “noblest work” (“Green Grow the Rashes. A Fragment.” 20). In this excerpt, Burns makes an excellent use of theological argumentation to defend the rights of women in a time when the fall of Eve was used as an argument to legitimize their submission to men (Genesis 3.16). Contradicting this notion, Burns not only “displays more tolerance, or sympathy, for changing Enlightenment thought about women” but he also endeavors to demonstrate an incipient “proto-feminist” attitude which was uncommon for his time (Dunnigan 30-31).

6 This song is commonly known as “Green Grow the Rashes.” However, in Crawford and MacLachlan’s edition of the poems of Robert Burns, it appears with the addition of “A Fragment” to the original title.
VI. Conclusion

In a society where rank and social origins dictated an individual’s possibilities from cradle to grave, Robert Burns’s egalitarian ideology appears as a powerful cry for the recognition of the dignity of the common man. Conscious of the many injustices that people from the lower levels of society had to endure, Burns decided to add his voice to those of the revolutionaries and radicals of his time in a demonstration of “spontaneous and practical humanism” (Thomas Crawford 337). In his own lifetime, Burns experienced harassment, poverty, and uncertainty. However, as a man of independent mind and great talent, Burns was able to circumvent his personal circumstances and offer a voice to those who, like himself, experienced social injustice and disadvantage.

Following the mission given to him by the muse Coila in “The Vision,” Burns took every opportunity at his disposal to proclaim the majesty of the common man who, “tho’ e’er sae poor / Is king o’ men for a’ that” (“For a’ that & a’ that” 158). Exalting common sense and natural talent above rank and status, Burns defended the inherent dignity of man, regardless of social station or material wealth. Taking up the causes of laborers, slaves, and women, Robert Burns dared to dream of a utopian world wherein all human beings were accepted and valued for their own merits. The poem “Is there for Honest Poverty” appears, in this sense, as the condensed expression of the Bard of Scotland’s beliefs regarding the true value of man. According to Burns, this was to be measured in terms of virtue and intelligence rather than by the quantification of external symbols associated with fabricated titles which do not necessarily constitute a guarantee of soundness of character.

At a distance of over two centuries, the words of the Bard of Scotland, whose voice is that of a deeply human “brother and friend” (Mme. Raït-Kovaleva qtd. in T. Crawford 337), remain alive and relatable. Then, as now, the poems produced by Robert Burns constitute a privileged space where his readers can meet as equals and recognize their common experience as human beings in a world which, in spite of the distance in terms of space and time, is yet to become the fraternal society to which Burns and his contemporaries aspired.
VII. Works Cited


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