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Robert Burns and “Clarinda”

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ROBERT BURNS & “CLARINDA”

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If Agnes M’Lehose did not know about Robert Burns when he arrived in Edinburgh on November 29, 1786, she learned about him on December 9, when his *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* was reviewed in the *Lounger* by the editor Henry Mackenzie. Agnes subscribed to that publication and decided that she wanted to meet the “Heaven-taught plough-man,” as Mackenzie somewhat patronizingly described him. The poet was in Edinburgh to arrange for an enlarged edition of his volume and was to be in and out of that city for over a year.

Burns and Mrs. M’Lehose finally met on December 4, 1787, and it was apparently love at first sight. Burns dislocated his knee and was unable to take tea with Agnes, and so began what was to become one of the most famous exchanges of love letters in the language. Following eighteenth-century tradition, there was planned spontaneity in their letters, and while there is passion in the exchange, it is sometimes studied passion. By his fifth letter (December 28, 1787), Burns had ceased signing himself Burns and began signing himself “Sylvander.” Mrs. M’Lehose had become “Clarinda,” a name that Allan Ramsay had used in his time. Already by this letter the tone had become amorous, even though he had not yet been able to take tea with her. He exclaimed, “O Clarinda! shall we not meet in a state, some yet unknown state of Being, where the lavish hand of Plenty shall minister to the highest wish of Benevolence; and where the chill north-wind of Prudence shall never blow over the flowery fields of Enjoyment? if we do not, Man was made in vain!” *(Letters, I: 190)*

More of Burns’s letters to Agnes M’Lehose are known to survive than those from her to him. From the texts it appears evident that some of the Clarinda letters are missing. I would suggest that whereas she had no
reason to be discreet about letters she received, Burns did. He would soon be married, and although his wife-to-be, Jean Armour, knew very well that her husband was not always faithful to her, there may have been letters from Clarinda that he felt should be quietly destroyed. The edition of the correspondence between the two published by Agnes M’Lehose’s grandson in 1843, for instance, does not contain the letter from Clarinda to Sylvander of February 5, 1788, which is now in the G. Ross Roy Collection. At the height of his epistolary romance, the poet wrote four letters to Clarinda on February 13 and 14; these letters were preceded by one on the twelfth and followed by one on the fifteenth.

Burns was more open in his avowal of love for Nancy, as her friends called her, than she was about her love for him. Although she kept falling back on her Calvinist upbringing, she would occasionally dart out of her refuge and allow her heart to speak frankly. For instance when Burns wrote to her from Glasgow on February 15, 1788, she responded on the nineteenth, finishing the first part of the letter “I have kissed your dear lines over and over” (M’Lehose, 1843, 224) And surely there was a trace of possessiveness in her mind when she wrote on the night of January 7, You told me you never had met with a woman who could love as ardently as yourself. I believe it; and would advise you never to tie yourself, till you meet with such a one. Alas! you’ll find many who canna, and some who manna; but to be joined to one of the former description would make you miserable. I think you had almost best resolve against wedlock: for unless a woman were qualified for the companion, the friend, and the mistress, she would not do for you (M’Lehose, 120-21).

It seems pretty obvious that Clarinda is obliquely saying that the only woman who would fit that bill and make Sylvander happy is Clarinda. Unwilling to fully commit herself, though, she injected and stressed the word manna. As usual she included some religious thoughts in the letter; in this case it was a statement about and defense of her Calvinism—it should be recalled that several of her ancestors had been men of the cloth.

The following day Burns opened his letter with “I am delighted, charming Clarinda, with your honest enthusiasm for Religion” (Letters, I: 201). The God that Burns then outlines is less stern than the one suggested by Mrs. M’Lehose, more ready to tolerate failings, and one who through Jesus will “bring us all, through various ways and by various means, to bliss at last” (201). In swift succession Burns’s letters became more passionate. By February 3, 1788 (but dated January 27 in the 1802 edition), he opened his letter with these words: “I have just been
before the throne of my God, Clarinda....Yesternight I was happy. ...I kindle at the recollection; but it is a flame where Innocence looks smiling on, and Honor stands by, a sacred guard” (Letters, I: 225). In this letter and in a following one, there are portions that have been removed, one supposes by Clarinda, most likely because they were too intimate.

Nancy too was capable of studied ambiguity. In one letter she wrote, “I will not deny it, Sylvander, last night was one of the most exquisite I ever experienced. ...But though our enjoyment did not lead beyond the limits of virtue, yet today’s reflections have not been altogether unmixed with regret” (M’Lehose, 141). Regret that they went too far, or that they didn’t go far enough? We readers aren’t quite certain.

All things move on, and Burns left Edinburgh to take up farming at Ellisland and marry Jean Armour. Clarinda and Sylvander met for the last time on December 6, 1791. A few days later Robert Burns sent Agnes M’Lehose these words: 

Ae fond kiss, and then we sever!
Ae farewell, and then forever!

Had we never lov’d sae kindly,
Had we never lov’d sae blindly,
Never met—or never parted
We had ne’er been broken-hearted. (Letters, II: 125).

Nancy never forgot Burns, and forty years to the day after their last meeting, she entered in her journal, “This day I can never forget. Parted with Burns, in the year 1791, never more to meet in this world. Oh, may we meet in Heaven!” There is an echo here of that same sentiment that Burns had written to Mrs. M’Lehose in December 1787.

Burns loved several women during his lifetime, some only fleetingly. I believe that for a short time he was genuinely and deeply in love with Agnes M’Lehose. He wrote fine songs for some of his loves (“Of a’ the Airts the Wind can Blaw” and “Thou ling’ring Star, with less’n’ing Ray” come to mind), but none, in my opinion, can compare to the haunting poignancy of “Ae fond Kiss.”