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Chris Ravenhall

Lesley Storm's *Three Goose Quills and a Knife*:
A Burns Play Rediscovered

Scots playwright Lesley Storm whose real name was Margaret Cowie, wrote seventeen plays, ten volumes of prose fiction which include novels and short stories, and eight film scripts. Her career spans more than forty years. Her first novel, *Lady, What of Life*, was published in 1927 and her last play, *Look No Hands*, was first performed in 1971. Storm was born in Maud, Aberdeenshire, in 1899, where her father, the Reverend William Cowie was a Church of Scotland minister. Educated at Peterhead Academy, she won a bursary to the University of Aberdeen towards the end of the First World War and gained a Master of Arts degree. She was proud of her highland ancestry and was a distant kinswoman of the poet Byron.¹ Following her marriage to Dr. James Doran Clark she lived in London with her husband and their two sons and two daughters. She died on 19 October 1975.

Her eldest son, James Doran, recalls that she "didn't care much" for her early novels which she thought were "the products of her salad days as a writer and wouldn't keep copies of them on her bookshelves" (Doran). As a journalist for the *Daily Herald* during the Second World War she covered Mrs. Roosevelt's morale boosting tour of Britain and her play *Great Day* (1945) was based on that assignment. Most of Lesley Storm's plays were written for and performed in the theaters of London, and a number of them were very successful, running for more than a year. Her best known play, *Black Chiffon* (1949),

¹Appreciation by her son, James Doran, in the program for a 1996 revival of *Black Chiffon* at the Theatre Royal Windsor. Henceforth Doran.

a tense family drama starring Flora Robson, ran for 409 performances at the Westminster Theatre, London. The play was recently revived with Susan Hampshire in the leading role and one critic commented, "In its analysis of the dark forces that send families spinning on a destructive inwards spiral, it is as relevant as ever."² Her most successful play, *Roar Like a Dove* (1957), described by one critic as "a kind of fertility rite,"³ ran for more than 1000 performances. The plays are nearly all set in what Kenneth Tynan terms "Loamshire"⁴ and focus on the middle classes of England. Of the West End plays, only *Roar Like a Dove* has a Scottish setting and the focus of this play is a titled family.

In September 1967 the Glasgow Citizens Theatre premiered *Three Goose Quills and a Knife* which was described in the program as Lesley Storm's "first all-Scottish play in which she uses the language she was born into." The author's note in the program states that the play "covers the adult life of Robert Burns from his twenties to his death at the age of thirty-seven." The premier generated considerable press interest, and prior to the opening night Lesley Storm, who attended some of the rehearsals for the play, was interviewed by several of the Scottish daily newspapers. She is quoted as saying that her "play might shock the sentimentalists"⁵ and that "The Victorians have handed us down a distorted identikit picture of Burns—I show the man as he really was—a revolutionary."⁶ Barbara Scot, in *The Glasgow Herald*, presumably in an effort to establish Lesley Storm's Scottish credentials, assures readers that "Lesley Storm is an exiled Scot... [who] keeps up a specially strong link with her homeland through frequent visits north. Tiree is her favorite holiday spot."⁷

Following the opening night, press reaction was mixed. While Robins Millar's article is headlined "Rabbie the Rebel,"⁸ in *The Scotsman*, Allen Wright comments that the play is "long-winded and inclined to be maudlin."

²Mark Fisher, *The Herald* [Glasgow], Mar. 19, 1996.

³Quote from Lesley Storm's obituary, *The Times*, October 20, 1975.

⁴K. Tynan, *A View of the English Stage* (St. Albans, 1976), p. 148.

⁵Allen Wright, *The Scotsman*, Aug. 14, 1967. Henceforth Wright.

⁶*Sunday Mail*, Aug. 8, 1967.

⁷Barbara Scot, *The Glasgow Herald*, Aug. 18, 1967.

⁸Robins Millar, *Daily Express*, Sept. 4, 1967. Henceforth Millar.

Winnie Lees states that the play is “an entertaining new look at Burns,”⁹ but the *Daily Mail* headline says “Burns’ Warmth Lost in Gloomy Sandwich”¹⁰ and goes on to opine that there is “one good act sandwiched between two that are woefully weak.”

It is almost thirty years since *Three Goose Quills and a Knife* opened and it has not been given another professional production in Scotland since then. It is bold for any playwright to take as his or her subject a man who is the subject of much annual eloquence and of whole libraries full of literary comment, so Lesley Storm was perhaps rash in promising to cover “the adult life of Robert Burns” in a three-act play. This critic is perhaps equally rash in trying to assess the play at a distance of thirty years and from the position of a theater critic rather than that of a Burns scholar. However, the play deserves to be accorded its place amongst the other writings about Burns.

There are, at least, two versions of the script of *Three Goose Quills and a Knife*—the original script, which was typed and then duplicated, and the prompt script, which was used during the performance in 1967, and which notes the cuts and additions to the original. Both versions are available in the Scottish Theatre Archive in the Special Collections Department at Glasgow University Library. The play was never published.

A large number of cuts are noted in the prompt script. Several pages and a whole scene as well as a number of individual speeches and passages from songs were not in the eventual performance. It seems likely that minor changes were also made during the rehearsal period as a means of reducing the performance time. An additional page of the prompt script records that at the first timing the play, including two twelve-minute intervals, lasted two hours and fifty minutes. The final running time was two hours and thirty-five minutes, including intervals. If the complete original version of the script had been performed the audience would have been in the theatre for well over three hours.

By examining the cuts and additions it is possible to deduce what, in 1967 at least, were considered to be the most important aspects in the portrayal of Burns. The author, the director and the theatre management would all have been involved in this decision. It is also possible that the Censor might have required some cuts before issuing a license, because until stage censorship in Great Britain was abolished, in 1968, any theatrical event required a license from the Censor prior to its first performance.

⁹Winnie Lees, *Sunday Mail*, Sept. 3, 1967.

¹⁰A. Y., *Daily Mail*, Sept. 4, 1967.

In performance the three acts, in fifteen scenes, of *Three Goose Quills and a Knife* give what one critic calls "selected fragments"¹¹ of Burns's life. Whole episodes are omitted. There is no mention of Highland Mary, although the Vagrant Woman in Act 1, scenes 2 and 3 may represent her. Nor is there any dramatization of the Clarinda affair. Agnes M'Lehose is alluded to in Act 3, scene 1, when Burns, in conversation with his brother Gilbert, admits that there is a women in Edinburgh who "has held me in the palm o' her hand for the last two years."¹²

Burns's powerful sexuality is implied rather than explored. One critic chose to emphasize the implied sexuality in his review, where he explains that Anne Kidd, who played the role of the Vagrant Woman, "appears naked from the waist—but keeps her back to the audience,"¹³ in what he calls "a mini-happening." Two pages from Act 1, scene 1, which are cut from the performance script, show William accusing his son of "the sin of fornication" and Robert admitting that he has been unchaste while he was living in Irvine, joking that fornication made "a change from a' that flax" (O.1,1.11). In Act 2, scene 1, we note that Bess, Burns's illegitimate child by Elizabeth Paton, lives with the Burns family. In the same scene Robert's reputation with the lasses is mentioned when his sister comments that Robert is "either in the Whitefoord Arms or Jean Armour's arms—depends on the weather" (P.2,1,6). In performance Jean Armour and the Vagrant Woman are the only dramatized representatives of the women with whom Burns had a sexual relationship.

The character of Burns in the play does articulate his sexuality, in a very literary and decorous way. Jean Armour is terrified of her father's wrath when he discovers that she is pregnant and Robert tries to calm her fears by reassuring her:

Jean, we held out against it for a long time, deep in love and unable to marry... till it became a torture that couldna be endured... God in heaven, where's the sin—He planted these passions and instincts in us well knowing their force. *Well knowing their force*, Jean (P.2,2,11).

He goes on "He courses the blood through your veins like liquid fire!" (P.2,2,11). Later in the play when Jean has given up Burns's signed declaration of marriage to her father, Robert discusses it with Gilbert and comments: "I'm twenty-seven and I want marriage... I need marriage. I'm a man of

¹¹Christopher Small, *The Glasgow Herald*, Sept. 3, 1967. Henceforth Small.

¹²Lesley Storm, *Three Goose Quills and a Knife*. Prompt script, Act 3, scene 1, page 5. Hereafter reference will be given in the text using P for Prompt script and O for Original script, followed by Act, scene, page number.

¹³Gordon Hyslop, *Sunday Express*, Sept. 3, 1967. Henceforth Hyslop.

strong passions and I *cannot* lead a celibate life” (P.3,4,23). Gilbert reminds him that “A man can control his passions,” and Robert, with dry humor responds that “He can try... He can also cut off his right hand if it proves to be his spiritual enemy...but faith he canna geld himsel” (P.3,4,23). On his return from one of his visits to Edinburgh, and after confessing that he’s loved another woman for two years, Robert admits that he fathered Jean Armour’s newly delivered, and newly deceased, twins. Gilbert is incredulous:

Gilbert: Twa year? ... Yet ‘tis only months since you got Jean Armour wi’ twins.

Robert (VERY DRY): Twins were nae in our minds at the time... I’ll tell you something about these occasions, my dear chaste brother... when the instinct to procreate becomes absolute it flattens everything in its path like a tornado.

Gilbert: Including your conscience?

Robert: Conscience is the first to quit. She tak’s to her heels as if she’d just heard the Last trump. (P.3,1,5)

An extremely lewd joke is on one of the several pages cut from Act 3, scene 2. When Kirsty Flint and Stephen Clarke are visiting Jean and Robert they toast the King “over the water” and Robert comments that “They say he made a bonnie lassie...let’s hope these bare-assed Highlanders were wise to his secret!” (O.3,2,2,23). It is a matter of speculation whether these pages were cut because of the lewd joke or because of the Jacobite sentiments conveyed by the surrounding dialogue. In some of the pages that were cut from the performance, Burns denies that he’s a Jacobite saying, “Tis naught now but a romantic memory...the one thing that still lives is my hate for that hell-commissioned swine Cumberland” (O.3,2,22).

The radical political views of Robert Burns, his support for the ideals of the French Revolution and dislike of the Anglo-French war are made clear when he says to Robert Aitken, “I can’t conceive of myself as an enemy of people whose cry was ‘Liberty—equality—fraternity” (P.3,3,31). However, the anti-English and anti-establishment sentiments which he expresses in the same conversation with Aitken are often the victims of cuts in the prompt script. After Aitken’s persistent persuasion, Robert reluctantly decides to join the local volunteers, a decision seemingly motivated by the desire to prevent his pregnant wife and his children from becoming “outcasts” (P.3,3,31). Robert thinks that his action in joining up is a “blasphemous errand” (P.3,3,32) by which he is “disowning” (P.3,3,33) himself. It seems that there was an effort to sanitize the original script in performance, and this may account for the opinion expressed by some critics that the sensational portrait promised in the pre-opening publicity does not materialize. The portrayal of Burns is called

"genteel" (Hyslop) and Robins Millar seems to regret that "She [Lesley Storm] suppresses the drinking and tones down the seductions" (Millar).

Rigid Calvinism is anathema to Robert Burns in the play. He calls the hell-fire preachers "bigots" (P.1,1,8), but some of his more forceful comments about them being "sleuth hounds" (O.1,1,8) and "hate-ridden" (O.2,5,30) are cut in the prompt script. The Kirk's practice in the eighteenth-century of making individuals thought guilty of the sin of fornication appear at worship for public rebuke is dramatized in Act 2, scene 5. Evidence from Burns's own writing shows that while Jean Armour was made to sit on what was called the "stool of penitence," Burns himself was allowed to stand in his own place for the necessary three services. However, Lesley Storm uses some dramatic license to create a scene which is theatrically very effective and in which the audience is made to adopt the role of church congregation while the characters of Jean and Robert sit on stools facing the back of the stage. The audience is also given the last few minutes of what they are led to believe has been a "two hours and thirty-five minutes" (P.2,5,28) hell-fire sermon from the Reverend William Auld. The absolution from sin concludes "And I say to you, beware! Beware of returning to your sin like the dog to its vomit or like the sow that is washed to her wallowing in the mire" (P.2,5,30). These last lines were, according to Mackay, part of the "sonorous formula of the Established Church."¹⁴ One critic describes the scene as the "most stirring moment" in the play (Millar).

Many characters in the play accuse Robert of lacking a conscience, especially in relation to his dealings with the women in his life. Time and time again we are shown a man struggling to balance his desire for freedom both personal and political, with his responsibilities—first to his parents and later to his wife and children. As Robert says:

Women need a roof and a fire and a wheel for their spinning. A man has to provide it if he has a heart in him, even a vagrant heart like mine... and I'm cursed wi' a conscience that yelps at me like a dog (P.1,3,28).

In spite of the fact that he loves Clarinda, with his "whole mind and heart" (P.3,1,7) and that in comparison Jean Armour is "a farthing taper beside the sun" (P.3,1,7), when he sees Jean "forlorn, destitute and friendless" (P.3,1,7) Robert chooses to stand by his irregular marriage contract. At this point in the play Robert feels only pity for Jean but in the last scene of the play, in a monologue which is only in the original script, he says "I dearly love you Jean. I wish I could have said you were my one and only love" (O.3,5,3).

¹⁴James Mackay, *R B: A Biography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 191.

There are a few expletives in the original text but most of them are cut; for example, a reference to Prince Charles Edward Stuart as a "poor sod" (P.3,2,22) and a "Bullocks" (P.3,1,2).

The scene which is cut in its entirety from the prompt script, Act 2, scene 7, is set in Edinburgh shortly after the publication of the Kilmarnock Edition in 1786. As it deals with Robert's first visit to Edinburgh it does not focus on, or even hint at, the Clarinda relationship. One purpose of the scene seems to be to emphasize Robert's novelty value as a ploughman poet in drawing-room society. As the Duchess of Gordon says, "I have never before seen a ploughman in the flesh" (O.2,7,1). If anyone shows any sexual interest in Robert it is the Duchess who comments: "these naturals, I am told, are always amorous" (O.2,7,1), and she goes on to make a remark about his fine eyes. In dramatic terms this scene is interesting because it is a mirror image of Act 1, scene 4, which takes place in Poesie Nansie's lodging house, the scene of Burns's "Jolly Beggars." The scene at Poesie Nansie's involves the Soldier's Doxy who, in the character list, is to be played by the same actress as the Duchess of Gordon; the Vagrant Woman (with whom Robert, in the play, has a sexual relationship) is doubled with Mrs. M'Lehose; Racer Jess who is doubled with Margaret Chalmers and the Soldier, Fiddler and Tinker who are doubled as three Male Guests. With the exception of Miss Chalmers, all of these characters are also drawn from "The Jolly Beggars."

In both scenes the characters sing most of the Love and Liberty: A Cantata (to give "The Jolly Beggars" its official title) sequence while Robert watches from behind a gauze. The mirror image makes the point that, in spite of their fine manners, the nobility are not in essence any different from the people who frequent the inn. A common humanity is shared by all. There would also have been dramatic interest in seeing the Duchess of Gordon, with her Anglicized speech pattern and fancy clothes, raucously singing

I once was a maid tho' I cannot tell when
And still my delight is in proper young men (O.2,7,3).

The character of Robert Burns in the play seems to have no illusions that as far as Edinburgh society is concerned he, and his work, found acceptance because "I was the fashion" (P.3,1,3).

Three Goose Quills and a Knife ends with Burns's funeral and a rendition of "Auld Lang Syne." This might be seen as a slightly maudlin touch which was guaranteed to please the sentimentalists in the audience. There are a number of versions of the last scene (Act 3, scene 5) and all of them verge towards sentimentality. The original version, several pages longer than the version which was eventually performed, has a distraught and hysterical Jean having a vision of Burns's ghost visiting her on its way to the cemetery. The ghost delivers a fragmented monologue before Stephen Clark arrives to give a report of the funeral. In this version it is Clarke who concludes the play with:

He was part of them—the poor and humble. He still is and he will be. Part of the possessions of the people of Scotland.

(STEPHEN FINISHES THE PLAY BY SINGING “AULD LANGE SYNE”
(O.3,5,40)

It is clear from the additions and deletions in the prompt script that the ending was changed a number of times during the rehearsal period. In the final prompt script it is Aitken who finishes the play by describing events to Jean, who gave birth to Burns's youngest son, Maxwell, on the day of the funeral:

...his own folks are there as well in their hundreds, lining the streets to see him pass. From far and near they've been flocking into the town since dawn. And there was real grief and real tears. You'd have been a proud woman to see it! And last night—last night in the Globe Tavern just before they closed they sang a song of his... Auld lang Syne. And you know Jean, a strange thing happened. As they sang it, each man reached out and took the hand of his neighbour. Friends, strangers—it made no odds. Brotherhood seemed to descend. It was a very rare thing and new.
(CHORUS PLAYED ON VIOLIN) (P.3,5,40)

Three Goose Quills and a Knife has epic and episodic qualities which were quite avant-garde in 1967. Its structure is unlike that of any of Lesley Storm's other plays and is markedly different from the conventional three-act play which dominated theater stages until the rise of the “agit-prop” and “alternative” theater companies which proliferated during the 1970s. It intersperses musical interludes with dialogue which, although accepted in pantomime, was not usual in a straight play at the time of its first performance. It follows the story of Burns's life, focusing briefly on a variety of incidents rather than concentrating on one moment. The setting changes frequently, from the farmhouses at Lochlea and Mossgeil to Burns's house in Dumfries; from Poesie Nansie's to the Kirk; from the countryside to an Edinburgh drawing-room. The large number of characters are written so that the roles can be played by a small number of actors and the doubling illuminates the common humanity of individuals regardless of class. These structural features give the impression that it is a much more modern play than it is.

Lesley Storm uses some of the known and documented events of Burns's life and, according to Christopher Small, by “the condensation, elision and allusion to which a dramatist is entitled” creates an entertaining and theatrically interesting portrait of Robert Burns. Writing in the *Glasgow Herald* on the morning after the first performance, he adds that:

It would be unfair to describe her play as an addition merely to the Burns cult, but it shares enough of that religion (by club and custom established) not to offend its innumerable enthusiasts, and, meeting them half-way, gives them back their dearest beliefs new shining, enlivened, and very skillfully conceived in theatrical form.

As Tony Paterson, who was Dramaturge at the Citizens Theatre at the time of the production, notes:

With all its good qualities...it is difficult now to account for the lack of excitement in Glasgow over the play, with little or no life thereafter.¹⁵

I too believe that Lesley Storm's only Scottish play, *Three Goose Quills and a Knife*, deserved more attention than it has received.

University of Strathclyde

¹⁵Anthony Mason Paterson, "Glasgow Citizens Theatre 1957-1969 the middle years" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Strathclyde, 1989), p. 248.