Burns's Politics 'In Another View': Late 1792/Early 1793

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Robert Burns lived in politically interesting times. He was 16 at the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War, defeat in which discredited the British political system and led to campaigns for reform; he was 30 at the outbreak of the French Revolution, whose bloody progress tended to consolidate that system and closed down the reform movement for a generation. Approaches to understanding the relation of his writing to this turbulent background have usually tried to identify the political values adhered to by the poet. Most influentially, Liam McIlvanney has demonstrated the extent to which Burns adopts a “Patriot” or civic humanist political language, an inheritance transmitted by Scottish Calvinism as well as by the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment.¹

In this essay I will take a different tack. I will examine a poem and a song from a quite specific period in Burns’s life, texts in which, I will argue, he does not take sides in the political argument of the day (as he had clearly taken sides in the politics of the church, for example), but attempts instead to bracket political argument, to cordon off politics—such from other areas of life. Delimiting the space of politics is itself deeply political, of course, but not in the sense that is usually ascribed to Burns’s verse.

The period in question runs from 26 November 1792, when an actress, Louisa Fontenelle, read the first of my chosen texts, “The Rights of Woman,” from the stage of the New Theatre in Dumfries, to 5 January 1793, when Burns sent his song “Why should na poor people mow” to his patron on the Scottish Board of Excise, Robert Graham of Fintry, in a

letter defending himself against charges of disaffection to government made anonymously to the Board at the end of the previous year. In restricting my temporal scope in this way I follow McIlvanney’s suggestion that

the poems and songs written by Burns in the 1790s are perhaps best approached, not in relation to longstanding political discourses and ideological formations, but as interventions in the political moment, as responses to a developing political situation. (McIlvanney, p. 189)

In order to think about these texts as “interventions in the political moment,” this essay will examine the rhetorical work Burns asks them to do in the discursive contexts in which he circulates them within this narrowly delimited period of time, as well as the generic resources that they bring to those contexts. In doing so I hope that, along the way, it will also demonstrate the usefulness of re-examining well-known Burns texts by putting them in dialogue with work usually held in lower regard, such as “The Rights of Woman.”

1. “The Rights of Woman” in the theatre and in the correspondence with Frances Dunlop

On 20 September 1792 the army of the recently-declared French Republic faced down the invading Prussians at Valmy, and their commander, the Duke of Brunswick, pulled his forces back across the Rhine; then on 6 November the French defeated an Austrian army at Jemappes and pressed on to occupy the Austrian Netherlands. These events provoked often disorderly celebrations in the streets of many Scottish towns and cities, where the survival of the French Republic was taken to herald a new era of political change in Britain as well. On 6 December, Burns wrote from Dumfries to his friend Frances Dunlop in Ayrshire:

We, in this country, here have many alarms of the Reform, or rather the Republican spirit, of your part of the kingdom.—Indeed, we are a good deal in commotion ourselves, & in our Theatre here, “God save the king” has met with some groans & hisses, while Ça ira has been repeatedly called for.—For me, I am a Placeman, you know; a very humble one indeed, Heaven

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knows, but still so much so as to gag me from joining in the cry.— What my private sentiments are, you will find out without an Interpreter.—In the mean time, I have taken up the subject in another view, and the other day, for a pretty Actress’s benefit-night, I wrote an Address, which I will give on the other page, called The Rights of Woman.  

Burns describes a polarising domestic political situation, and places himself (in his “private sentiments”) with those calling for the “Ça ira” and refusing to sing “God Save the King.” His language here implies, I think, that this has happened on more than one occasion. But Burns also says that “The Rights of Woman” looks at this “commotion” “in another view.” To understand what this means, we need to examine the role this text plays in the three contexts in which it finds an audience at the end of 1792: in the theatre at Dumfries, in the correspondence with Mrs Dunlop, and in the reformist Edinburgh Gazetteer, where it was first published on 30 November. But first we must identify the central idea of the poem itself.

“The Rights of Woman” begins by invoking the present crisis: the fate of Austria’s empire, the fall of Louis XVI, the drafting of a constitution for the new French Republic, and Thomas Paine’s defence of the revolution in Rights of Man (1791):

While Europe’s eye is fixed on mighty things,
The fate of Empires, and the fall of Kings;
While quacks of State must each produce his plan,
And even children lisp The Rights of Man;
Amid the mighty fuss, just let me mention,
The Rights of Woman merit some attention.—

What follows is a humorous assertion of those “rights”: “Protection” (l. 8), “Decorum” (l.16), and “Admiration” (l. 28). Looking at the political crisis “in another view” seems to mean looking in another direction: something else “merits our attention.” Mary Wollstonecraft’s The Rights of Woman, published earlier in 1792, seized the revolutionary moment to make a case for women to be treated as the moral and intellectual equals of men. At first glance, this poem seems to turn away from the revolutionary moment altogether. If the claims of women on men which it articulates echo any of the texts of the revolution controversy, it is surely

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none of Paine’s or Wollstonecraft’s but their antagonist Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), where he recalls the admiration commanded by the “delightful vision” of the young Marie-Antoinette at Versailles, and mourns the passing of an “age of chivalry” in which “ten thousand swords must have leapt from their scabbards” to protect her from insult.⁵

But the third verse paragraph, asserting the second “right,” decorum, appeals to a different idea:

> There was, indeed, in far less polished days, 
> A time when rough, rude man had naughty ways: 
> Would swagger, swear, get drunk, kick up a riot, 
> Nay even thus invade a lady’s quiet.— 
> Now, thank our Stars! these Gothic times are fled, 
> Now well-bred men (and you are all well-bred) 
> Most justly think (and we are much the gainers) 
> Such conduct neither spirit, wit, nor manners.— (ll.17–24)

Like Burke, Burns looks back, but finds in the past not a standard of chivalry from which the present has fallen away, but “Gothic times” from which the present has thankfully escaped. That is, this passage understands present-day norms of conduct between men and women as the effect of modernity. In doing so, it reproduces a connection between women’s place in society and historical progress particularly characteristic of Scottish Enlightenment conjectural history. Whether or not we think that man “has been improved by the progress of arts and civilization,” argues William Robertson, “That women are indebted to the refinements of polished manners for a happy change in their state, is a point which can admit of no doubt.”⁶ John Millar uses the social position of woman as the organising principle of the first chapter of *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1778), where modern Europe is characterised thus:

> When the disorders incident to the Gothic system had subsided, 
> the women began to be valued upon account of their useful talents and accomplishments; and their consideration and rank […] came to be chiefly determined by the importance of those departments

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which they occupied, in carrying on the business, and maintaining
the intercourse of society. 7

As Silvia Sebastiani observes, “By the 1770s the history of women had
become a crucial element of the history of society as stadial progress” of
the Scottish philosophers. 8 The fourth verse paragraph of Burns’s poem
develops this point in claiming women’s right to “admiration”:

In that blest sphere alone we live and move,
There taste that life of life—immortal love.—
Smiles, glances, tears, sighs, fits, flirtations, airs;
’Gainst such an host, what flinty savage dares.—
When aweful Beauty joins with all her charms,
Who is so rash as rise in rebel arms? (ll. 29–34)

The martial metaphor of line 34 casts the “host” of charms listed in line
31 as the army of a legitimate ruler, and the women who possess these
charms as wielding a power analogous to political power. Women, that is,
are being imagined as agents of historical progress, rather than as its
passive beneficiaries as in the previous verse paragraph. The conventional
gallantry of these lines identifies “immortal love” as the object of that
agency. But the categorization of the man unmoved by love as a “savage”
briefly resorts to the vocabulary of the historical schema evoked
previously. We are thus invited to imagine heterosexual desire, prompted
by feminine loveliness, as itself a means whereby the savage is civilised,
and women as themselves in part the authors of the social amelioration
from which they benefit. This too replicates an eighteenth-century
commonplace. “What better school for manners than the company of
virtuous women, where the mutual endeavour to please must insensibly
polish the mind […]?,” asks David Hume; what better school for
manners, that is, among “a polite people.” 9 But by Hume’s time this idea
was already familiar from Addison and Steele’s Spectator:

Had our Species no Females in it, Men would be quite different
Creatures from what they are at present; their Endeavours to
please the opposite Sex, polishes and refines them out of those

7 John Millar, The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks, third edition, corrected and
enlarged (London: J. Murray, 1779), 119.
8 Silvia Sebastiani, “‘Race’, Women and Progress in the Scottish Enlightenment,”
in Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor, eds., Women, Gender and Enlightenment
(Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), 75–96 (p. 78).
9 David Hume, “On the Rise of the Arts and Sciences” (1742, 1777), in Selected
77 (p. 74).
Manners which are most natural to them [...] In a word, Man
would not only be an unhappy, but a rude unfinished Creature,
were he conversant with none but those of his own Make.\textsuperscript{10}
Starting from this premise, heterosociality, the polite conversation of the
sexes, is promoted in the \textit{Spectator} and elsewhere (most importantly in
the Richardsonian novel) as a school for manners and moral virtue, and
finds its fullest expression in the reciprocal moral cultivation of
companionate marriage.

That Robert Burns was a product of the Scottish Enlightenment, that
he was familiar with and responded to its ideas, is generally recognized.
His entanglement, both imaginative and practical, in the processes of
technological and economic modernisation ("improvement") that the
Scottish philosophers explained, legitimated, and encouraged, has
recently been surveyed with great insight by Nigel Leask in \textit{Robert Burns
and Pastoral}.\textsuperscript{11} That Burns’s writing might be implicated in the
programme of \textit{social} modernisation promulgated by the \textit{Spectator}, and its
concern with polite manners and domestic virtue, is perhaps
counterintuitive. A father of four illegitimate children, a collector of
bawdy lyrics, and an enthusiastic participant in the homosocial world of
drinking clubs and freemasonry, seems an unlikely recruit to the cause of
heterosocial politeness and companionate marriage. And yet the
\textit{Spectator}’s values are also those of the Scottish Enlightenment, which
understands polite manners as those appropriate to life in the commercial
stage of a nation’s development. Crucially, polite manners could be
practiced by those excluded from political power, and thus from the
public virtues of the ‘patriot’ legislator of the civic humanist tradition.

The central place – it is not saying too much to say – in Whig
ideology between the English and French Revolutions was
occupied by the concept variously expressed as manners,
politeness or taste; this offered not only defence against criticism
in the name of patriot virtue, but defence against that partially
buried Titan haunting the imagination of the age, the explosive
power of [religious or political] enthusiasm. The leading British
and European exponents of the ideology of manners were the

\textsuperscript{10} [Joseph Addison.] No. 433 (Thursday, July 17, 1712), in Donald F. Bond, ed.
\textsuperscript{11} Nigel Leask, \textit{Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late
moral philosophers, conjectural historians and political economists of Scotland.\textsuperscript{12} To understand what the ideology of manners is doing in a poem by Robert Burns, we must turn from the ideas deployed in the poem to the various contexts in which the poem was deployed: that is, to the rhetorical work which Burns sets it in the particular material circumstances in which it was heard or read.

Written, in the first instance, to be spoken by a leading lady from the front of the stage, “The Rights of Woman” adapts a quite specific literary form: the dramatic epilogue. In the metropolitan theatres of the mid eighteenth century, the epilogue had come to fulfil a range of functions. Though almost always written by a man, it was increasingly performed by the star actress who was a major draw for the main play that began the evening’s entertainment. Usually spoken in character, but directly addressing the audience from outside the action of the play itself, epilogues could help an actress build a consistent persona across her various roles and thus increase the pulling-power of her name on the bill. They could give her the opportunity to flirt with the male auditor or appeal to the female ones, acknowledging the social heterogeneity of a Drury Lane or Covent Garden audience by “addressing specific segments of the audience such as apprentices, milliners, cits and beaux, and especially ‘the Ladies.’”\textsuperscript{13} But in doing so, they also allowed a critical distance on the preceding play, mediating between the world it portrayed and the real world inhabited by the audience: “Women performing epilogues at stage’s edge served to ease the transition between the historical moment of the play and its actual performative occasion, to update classical or heroic plays and translate one culture or period to another” (Nussbaum, 21).

“The Rights of Woman” is not an epilogue, because it is not attached to a specific play, and when Louisa Fontenelle performed it on the evening of Monday 26 November, it did not take the place of an epilogue: we know from the playbill that the play in which she acted the title role, The Country Girl, was immediately followed by Mrs Warrell singing “The Soldier Tired of War’s Alarms,” before Fontenelle returned to the stage (see Fig. 1). But it fulfils some of the functions that epilogues had


Fig. 1: Playbill, New Theatre, Dumfries, November 26, 1792
(image used with the permission of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland; first published in *The Gallovidian*, Winter 1904, p. 212)
taken on in the mid-century theatre. An actress’s flirtatious claim on her male auditors’ respect for feminine influence is the sort of thing epilogues indulged: Frances Abington, one of the stars of Drury Lane, spoke several written by David Garrick, its great actor-manager, “in which she entertained audiences with precocious claims for female power.” The appeal to polite manners had moreover a very particular meaning when spoken by an actress. For if women in general were “indebted to the refinements of polished manners for a happy change in their state” as Robertson claimed, actresses were more indebted than most. Until the reforms initiated by Garrick in London and Thomas Sheridan in Dublin, beginning in 1747, male audience members could, for a fee, have access behind the scenes, even during the performance, in order to approach the actresses. A survival from the Restoration, when actresses were acknowledged courtesans, this access was claimed as a right accruing to their social status by “fine” or “fashionable” gentlemen, from the class occupying the boxes along the sides of the theatre. The gentlemen did not take the loss of this privilege quietly; Sheridan’s first attempt provoked a riot, and “fifteen years were required to accomplish a more or less complete reformation” of this practice. In the British theatre, the times when “rough, rude man” would “invade a lady’s quiet” were still in living memory. But the managers succeeded because they had the rest of the audience on their side, the people in the pit and the gallery, overwhelmingly drawn, not from the fashionable elite, but from the “middling sort” between them and the poor.

The moral reformation of the theatre in accordance with the polite manners demanded by this class of theatregoer extended to the texts of the plays themselves. The Country Girl is based on William Wycherley’s 1675 comedy The Country Wife, but rewritten by Garrick to accord with

16 Pedicord (ch. 2, pp. 19–43) gives a helpful breakdown of the social composition of the mid-century London theatre audience.
the modern values of 1766, as he explains in the Advertisement to the printed edition:

Though near half of the following Play is new written, the alterer claims no merit but his endeavour to clear one of our most celebrated comedies from immorality and obscenity. He thought himself bound to preserve as much of the original as could be presented to an audience of these times without offence; if this wanton of Charles’s days is now so reclaimed as to become innocent without being insipid, the present editor will not think his time ill employed.\textsuperscript{17}

Thus Wycherley’s celebration of adultery, in which a jealous older husband is cuckolded by a handsome young man-about-town, becomes the story of a young man rescuing the country girl of the title from impending marriage to her jealous guardian. The alteration of one scene exemplifies the sort of changes required. In Act III of Wycherley’s play, the seduction happens the moment Mr Pinchwife’s back is turned, with the rake, Horner, “haling away” Mrs Pinchwife from the stage while his fellow rakes restrain her maid, Lucy (“I have something to present you with too” leers one of them) and sister-in-law.\textsuperscript{18} In \textit{The Country Girl}, our heroes are Harcourt, genial uncle to Belville, who is in love with Peggy, who thinks she is committed to marrying her guardian Moody. Act III is now set in St James’s Park, and when Harcourt suggests that his nephew show Peggy one of its sights, he asks, “Shall I have that pleasure?” and she replies, “With all my heart and soul, sir.”\textsuperscript{19} The ‘haling away’ has been replaced with consent, politely asked and politely given; and rather than allow the audience to imagine any sort of seduction, Garrick adds a scene of private dialogue between Belville and Peggy, in which he explains that she does not have to marry Moody, proposes to her, and is accepted. Gentlemanly sexual rapacity has been replaced with the promise of loving marriage. The “rough, rude ways” of naughty gentlemen have been banished from this play, as they had been banished from the theatre in which it was first performed, by David Garrick.

\textsuperscript{17} Harry William Pedicord and Frederick Louis Bergmann, eds., \textit{The Plays of David Garrick vol. 7: Garrick’s Alterations of Others, 1757–1773} (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1982), 199. The Dumfries playbill misattributes this work to “Mr Sheridan.”


\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Plays of David Garrick}, 7:229. For a summary of Garrick’s changes to Wycherley’s play, see Pedicord, \textit{Theatrical Public}, 106–116.
So although “The Rights of Woman” is not an epilogue to *The Country Girl*, it does one of the jobs that an actress’s epilogue had come to perform, by making a connection between the play and the social context in which it was being played. But while, according to Nussbaum, this mediation could serve to “update classical or heroic plays and translate one culture or period to another,” in this case the updating or translation has already taken place, in Garrick’s revision of Wycherley’s play; and the connection between the play and the theatre in which it has been played is that the latter, too, has been the scene of a moral reformation. Accordingly, rather than reflect on the particular role she has performed in this particular play, the actress speaking “The Rights of Woman” reflects on the particular historical situation that has demanded that sort of play, and the sort the theatre in which it has been performed. In this relation, the provincial Scottish context is acutely relevant. Although a company had performed in Dumfries on improvised stages for several years, the purpose-built theatre on Shakespeare Street had only been open for two months when Louisa Fontenelle spoke Burns’s lines. Bob Harris, in his ground-breaking work on Scottish towns in this period, uses the building of theatres as one of his markers of the agency of a self-consciously modernising burgh elite. For a county town like Dumfries, a theatre could function as both sign and vehicle of its own “improvement,” a means by which its people could feel that they were participating in modern British society. Thus “The Rights of Woman” locates its own performance in a history of improvement, at once universal (in the thinking of the Scottish historians), national (the reformation of British theatre), and local (the opening of the New Theatre in Dumfries).

It ends, however, by returning to a different sort of history, the current political crisis invoked by its beginning:

But truce with kings, and truce with Constitutions,
With bloody armaments, and Revolutions;
Let MAJESTY your first attention summon,
Ah, ça ira! THE MAJESTY OF WOMAN!!! (35–38)

So it is not quite true to say that this poem simply turns its gaze away from its fraught political context; rather, it turns that context into a source of metaphors for the ameliorative power of polite heterosociality: no

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civilized man could be so rash as to “rebel” against women’s “majesty,” her moral authority over what Millar calls “the intercourse of society;” and “ça ira” now celebrates the inevitability of woman’s social triumph. Public politics are not being ignored here, but rhetorically folded into the private world of relationships between men and women, and thus contained, or displaced. Claudia Johnson provides a useful word for the work which this poem is doing in relation to its political context: “depolemization.” I borrow this term from her discussion of the relation between Jane Austen and those published novelists of the 1790s who adopted clear positions on one side or the other of the Revolution controversy.

When we compare Austen’s novels to those of her more conspicuously political sister-novelists—conservative and progressive alike—we discover that she routinely employs a lexicon of politically sensitive terms, themes, and narrative patterns that she inherited from their fiction, [but,] without alluding to the topical considerations which originally animated them, Austen was able not to depoliticize her work—for the political implications of her work are implicit in the subject matter itself—but rather to depolemize it.21

In a very similar way, “The Rights of Woman” adopts a lexicon of politically sensitive terms but swings their reference away from the “topical considerations” that gave rise to them. Indeed, this poem’s strategy of depolemization might replicate the ideological work of the courtship novel more generally, and not just Austen’s. Nancy Armstrong has argued that such novels provide an imaginary solution to real conflicts of social class by mapping them onto differences of gender, which the plot can then resolve in marriage: “It is only by thus subordinating all social differences to those based on gender that these novels bring order to social relationships.”22 Just as much as Pamela or Emma, though in iambic pentameter couplets rather than prose narrative, “The Rights of Woman” represents the moral authority of the domestic woman as underpinning the social order of the modern commercial nation; an authority which locates itself outside of, and prior to, politics.

There is one interesting moment in the poem when the politics of this apparently apolitical authority reveals itself. I noted above that one of the aspects of mid-century theatre which an actress’s epilogue could exploit

was the social heterogeneity of its audience. At line 22 of this poem, instead, Fontenelle assures the masculine portion of her audience of their homogeneity: “you are all well-bred.” This is a very striking statement, since we know that those she was addressing included at least one man who was not, by eighteenth-century standards, “well-bred”: former tenant farmer, now Excise officer, Robert Burns. In the context of the verse paragraph on “decorum,” the meaning is clear enough: to be “well-bred” is not a matter of rank or income but of manners, of not kicking up the sort of riot that Sheridan and Garrick had confronted. Of course, although the words “you are all well-bred” stretch the culture of manners to its most inclusive extent when spoken back to Burns, that culture could not be all-inclusive. Polite behaviour was not the only price of admission to the New Theatre: a place in the pit cost a shilling, putting it out of the reach of a very great proportion of Burns’s fellow citizens (Burns got in for free). Accordingly, the word “riot” could have signified to Fontenelle’s audience two different recent threats to the polite decorum of their theatre. Its allusion to the drunkenness and sexual licence associated with the old elites may have called to mind the annual meeting of the Caledonian Hunt, the social club for the Scottish landed classes, which had been held in Dumfries in the last week of October. We have the word (perhaps surprised, or just relieved) of the Dumfries Weekly Journal that this was “conducted with the greatest propriety and regularity,” including the Hunt’s patronage of the new theatre.23 But two years later Burns would complain to Mrs Dunlop of the “roar of Folly and Dissipation” of their next visit, and specifically the “Profligacy & Outrage” of “[m]ost of our fashionable young men” (II:321). On the other hand, “riot” would certainly have recalled the politically-motivated disorder that had disrupted the theatre that autumn, and that Burns mentions in the letter to Mrs Dunlop with which I began my discussion of this poem. Pocock reminds us that the ideology of manners was a defence against “that partially buried Titan haunting the imagination of the age, the explosive power of enthusiasm.” In November 1792 that Titan fully disinterred

23 Dumfries Weekly Journal, 14:4 (Tuesday 30 October), 3c. This issue is dizzy with gratitude for the Hunt’s visit, but it had been four years since the previous one, and the absence of manufacturing (noted in the same issue, 3a) made the town unusually economically dependent on gentry patronage (see Harris, “Cultural Change,” 113–14), so it was keen to have them back on a regular basis. There are no such effusions in the Weekly Journal over later visits, such as the one Burns complains of in 1794.
itself and roamed through Scotland’s public spaces in the form of popular political protest; and one evening, and perhaps for several evenings, it invaded the polite world of the theatre in Shakespeare Street. “You are all well-bred” is a compliment, but it is also drawing a line. Polite culture could admit the lowly-born and those of limited means, such as Burns, into the improved social spaces of a commercial town, such as a theatre, but on condition of the suppression of political partisanship. Burns’s words, in the persuasive mouth of the “pretty Actress,” take back the theatre as the space for an ongoing project of social amelioration from the disruptive forces of national politics which had briefly occupied it. The ideology of manners may have previously defined itself in opposition to aristocratic profligacy, but the language in which it did so could now be turned against a new antagonist, a politics associated with those from the other end of the social spectrum.

In the previous paragraph I have assumed that this poem’s performance on 26 November 1792 postdates the “commotion” which Burns mentions in his letter to Mrs Dunlop, even though that performance precedes the letter that reports the commotion by ten days. The fact is that we don’t know exactly which evening, or evenings he is referring to. What we do know is that later in December Burns was accused of (among other things) taking part in the commotion to his bosses on the Board of Excise; in Burns’s letter of 5 January to a member of that Board, his patron Robert Graham of Fintry, defending himself against these accusations, he admits to being in the theatre’s pit on one of those occasions.

I was in the playhouse one night, when Ça ira was called for.—I was in the middle of the pit, & from the Pit the clamour arose.—One or two individuals with whom I occasionally associate were of the party, but I neither knew of the Plot, nor joined in the Plot; nor ever opened my lips to hiss, or huzza, that, or any other Political tune whatever.—I looked upon myself as far too obscure a man to have any weight in quelling a Riot; and at the same time, as a character of higher respectability, than to yell in the howlings of a rabble (II:173).

In his biography of Burns Robert Crawford says this about “The Rights of Woman”, or rather about its last line, or rather about two words of its last line:

24 There is no mention of any trouble at the theatre in the surviving issues of the Dumfries Weekly Journal from this period.
Burns [...] would have known that such “ça ira”-ing on 26 November would clash with the pre-announced singing of “RULE BRITANNIA IN FULL CHORUS.” His subversive hint would be bound to be picked up in the playhouse. Soon he had to confess to Graham of Fintry there had been “a Riot” in Dumfries theatre when Louisa Fontenelle had been performing and playgoers in the pit sang the revolutionary song.25 Crawford cites the advertisement in the Dumfries Weekly Journal, which does not mention Burns’s poem.26 But we can see from the playbill that “The Rights of Woman,” the third item of the evening, could not have “clashed” with “Rule Britannia” at its end: the pit would have needed to nurse any revolutionary ardour roused by Burns’s words through “A favourite Hunting Song by Mr. Meadows,” Sheridan’s The Critic, and “a Representation of a grand Naval Engagement, Between Admiral Drake and the famous Spanish Armada, With Fire Ships, &c. &c. And the British Navy Triumphant,” before they would have had a chance to disrupt James Thomson’s famous ode.27 Besides, Thomson’s song is a hymn to liberty, written for the Patriot opposition to George II, not a loyalist anthem like “God Save the King”: its presence at the bottom of the bill might be a sign of the same impulse to displace political commotion that I have shown to be animating Burns’s verse, in this case by pre-occupying with unobjectionable patriotism the point in the evening when more divisively “Political tunes” might otherwise have gone head-to-head.28 In any case, my reading of “The Rights of Woman” might be summarised thus, that it is a mechanism for defusing the words “ça ira” of their incendiary potential: only someone who had ignored all the other words in the poem could have been incited to riot by their appearance in its final line. This poem is a response to prior politically-inspired disorder, not a provocation to engage in it. In the letter to Fintry Burns does not say that the “Riot” had happened on a night when Fontenelle was playing; but even if he had, this would give us no reason

26 Dumfries Weekly Journal, 16:7 (Tuesday 20 November), 3c.
27 See fig. 1; in this image, “To conclude with the FULL CHORUS of | RULE BRITANNIA” is obscured by the sticky tape running below “BRITISH NAVY TRIUMPHANT.”
28 “God Save the King” would only be institutionalised as the “National Anthem” during the war with Napoleon, so in 1792 there was no expectation that an evening at the theatre would end with this song rather than another.
to link that event with 26 November, since Fontenelle was involved in almost every performance in the season.

If I am right in arguing that the meaning of “The Rights of Women” in its first iteration was so completely embedded in the practices of the late-eighteenth-century theatre, and in the recent history of the particular theatre in which it was first read, we might wonder what happens to that meaning when it is reproduced in different material contexts. But its role in Burns’s correspondence with Mrs Dunlop is easy to identify once we understand that correspondence as itself a practice of mutually-improving heterosociality and thus, like the Dumfries theatre, another of the spaces of polite culture. The main criterion by which Mrs Dunlop judges Burns’s work is its admissibility in mixed company: he has no excuse for reprinting the few “indecencies” of the Kilmarnock Poems in a new edition “after so long a residence in the polite world.”

Burns admits on his side that corresponding with a descendent of William Wallace “exalts me in my own idea” (I:86), but also has a therapeutic function: “To counterwork these baneful feelings, I have sat down to write to you; as I declare upon my soul I always find that the most sovereign balm under Heaven for my wounded spirit” (I:305). And Dunlop more than once refers to Burns as her moral “teacher”, for example on 22 January 1789, when she hopes the effect is reciprocal: “You see your moral lessons are not lost upon me. Nay, I flatter myself you may improve by writing them, as well as I by reading” (Wallace I:204). “Endeavours to please the opposite Sex” produce moral and social improvement, the man offering the woman moral lessons while the woman polishes the man out of his “natural” rudeness: the correspondence between Robert Burns and Frances Dunlop acts out the Addisonian agenda for heterosociality, their difference of gender cancelling out, to some extent, their difference of social rank.

With Mrs Dunlop there was, indeed, also a difference of politics to negotiate. This was openly acknowledged, and to begin with centred on attitudes to the king: she did not like the disrespect inherent in “The Dream” in the Kilmarnock Poems (Wallace I:36), and he admitted that he was “not devoutly attached to a certain monarch” (I:403). But even as the Revolution controversy got under way, this difference could be absorbed into their correspondence as its subject matter. For example, in one letter,

from 12 July 1791, Dunlop worries that the work of Thomas Paine, “your brother Exciseman who writes Common Sense and answers to Mr. Burke’s book on the French Revolution,” is “much calculated to sow the seeds of discontent, if not revolution, in Britain next,” and then launches into a defence of the naturalness of “hereditary honours” (Wallace II: 166–7). But rather than starting an argument between them, such open disagreement serves to confirm her sentimental doctrine that “Every address to a friend or from a friend ought to stand in the first chalk, the spontaneous effusion of the soul, uncorrected by any secondary consideration” such as the anticipation of a difference in political opinions (Wallace I:205; 22 January 1789). Burns is generally more guarded than this doctrine would require in his expression of political ideas to Dunlop; but he too uses their political disagreement to confirm the priority of private friendship when he at once evokes and evades his readiness to call for the “Ça ira” in his letter of 6 December 1792: “What my private sentiments are, you will find out without an Interpreter.” That he does not need to spell out his radical politics confirms his confidence in her interpretation of his meaning; the allusion to his “political sentiments” signifies, not his political sentiments, which remain unarticulated, but the sentimental communion between writer and reader which makes their articulation unnecessary. In the aftermath of his accusation to the Board of Excise, this confidence is amplified into a claim to the distinction of this communion, the sentimental election of this correspondence above all others. On 2 January, explaining these circumstances, he pauses in his fury to comment, “I have set, henceforth a seal on my lips, as to these unlucky politics; but to you, I must breathe my sentiments.—In this, as in every thing else, I shall shew the undisguised emotions of my soul” (II:170). And then again, when he continues this letter on 5 January, after anger has driven him to his French, he adds in a parenthesis, “By the way, I do n’t know if this is French; & much would it go against my soul to mar anything belonging to that gallant people: though my real sentiments of them shall be confined alone to my correspondence with you” (II:172). In fact, Burns had plenty of male correspondents more in sympathy with his politics: the political difference between Burns and Dunlop is evoked here only in

order to assert the difference of this correspondence from the rest. These letters, that is, make contemporary political controversy the sign of something else, of the heterosocial relationship as the privileged site of moral and cultural amelioration; and thus perform the same depolemicizing function as the poem included in the first of them, “The Rights of Woman.” In this context, the poem represents a dramatization of the ideology of manners assumed by the correspondence into which it is folded, and confirms the participation of that correspondence in the national and historical process of social improvement which it invokes.

2. “Why should na poor people mow” and the letters to Mr and Mrs Graham

At this point it is useful to consider another text which Burns sent to his friends in this period, one which is, in an obvious sense, very impolite.

While Princes & Prelates & het-headed zealots
    All Europe hae set in a lowe,
    The poor man lies down, nor envies a crown,
    And comforts himsel with a mow (ll. 1–4).31

In contrast to “The Rights of Woman,” this song has received a lot of critical attention. It is probably the most celebrated of the bawdy lyrics, unpublished in Burns’s lifetime, which were first printed (in this case, in heavily revised form) in The Merry Muses of Caledonia. It is also celebrated as an outspokenly republican text, for example by McIlvanney:

    When Dumouriez crushed the Allied armies, he had thrown off a celebratory ballad, “Why should na poor folk mowe”, which he sang in a Dumfries pub. In short, Burns had paraded his progressive political views as he had paraded his heterodox theology as a young man in Tarbolton kirkyard. And with the same result: he “raised a hue and cry of heresy” against himself. […] In late December, Burns’s recklessness caught up with him. He was denounced to the authorities as a republican […].32

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31 Because I am interested in the work these texts are doing in this particular historical moment, I take the text of this song from the version with this title that Burns sent to Robert Cleghorn on 12 December 1792. Editions usually use the title-less version sent to George Thomson in July 1794, which changes “people” to “folk” in the chorus, and revises the last two lines of the last verse (cf. Kinsley II:668–669: K395). For the Cleghorn version, see Henryk Minc, “Editing Burns’s ‘Princes and Prelates,’” Burns Chronicle (Winter 2003): 35–48, or Robert Crawford and Christopher MacLachlan, eds., The Best Laid Schemes: Selected Poetry and Prose of Robert Burns (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2009), 150.

32 McIlvanney, Burns the Radical 205.
Yet while this song broadcasts Burns’s delight in the victories of the French Republic, we might ask why any British poet would be denounced as a republican on the evidence of a song whose final verse is a toast to the reigning monarch.

But truce with commotions & new-fangled notions,
A bumper I trust you’ll allow;
Here’s George our good king, & lang may he ring,
And Charlotte & he tak a mow.— (ll. 25–28)

Of course these lines upend a symbolic hierarchy of high and low by inviting us to imagine the middle-aged George and Charlotte enjoying the same pleasures as the “poor man” of the first stanza. To that extent, we can follow McIlvanney, earlier in the chapter from which I quote above, in understanding this song as an example of the “carnivalesque” in Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense (169–177). But to do so is to admit that “Why should na poor people mow” was not likely to get him into trouble with “the authorities”, however much it would have appalled Mrs Dunlop. For carnival’s upending of normal social values, structures and conventions is temporary and contained: in Eagleton’s words, “a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony [...]. Carnival laughter is incorporative as well as liberating, the lifting of inhibitions politically enervating as well as disruptive.”

It is no sort of threat to the restoration of hegemonic values and structures once the moment of carnival has passed, and it may even serve to reinforce them.

We can see this more clearly if we compare this song’s evocation of royal conjugal bliss to James Gillray’s caricatures from the same post-revolutionary moment. If Burns’s representation of the royal couple can be termed “carnivalesque” in its cheerful effacement of social hierarchy by bodily appetites, then so can Gillray’s etchings, in their representation of the middle-aged flesh of king and queen finding fulfilment in the same pleasures as the poor, though in eating rather than sex. A diptych of 1791, for example, depicts the unattractive couple, each crouched over a humble fireplace, gleefully frying sprats (Charlotte) and toasting muffins (George) (see Fig. 2). This graphic separation is used to emphasise their mutual compatibility: traversing the print below both pictures are the words “Ah! sure a pair was never seen, So justly formed to meet by nature!” (the beginning of a song from Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s 1775 comic opera The Duenna). As Linda Colley observes, “it was clear that

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even the satirists had become hopelessly entangled in the myth of royal ordinariness.”34 And this tended to insulate George from discontent at his government’s policies: as a contemporary observer put it, “The father, and the husband, protected and sheltered the Prince.”35 Indeed, Lora Rempel has argued, in the case of another Gillray, that both the domesticity of the English monarchs, and the viewer’s licence to laugh at it, draws an implicit contrast with the absolutist monarchs of the continent and their censorious regimes: “That Britons possessed the liberty to laugh at the king is inseparable from the collective nod of approval.”36 This is a contrast that Burns makes explicit in “Why should na poor people mow,” and to the same effect. The conjugal togetherness of the British king and queen is offered as a standard of “nature” against which the wickedness of the German princes can be gauged. In toasting the husband rather than the prince, Burns’s bawdy shelters George from the satire it directs at the continental allies:

When Brunswick’s great Prince cam a cruising to France,
    Republican billies to cowe,
Bauld Brunswick’s great Prince wad hae shawn better sense
    At hame wi’ his Princess to mow.—

They acted as princes: they should have attended instead to their duties as husbands. “Why should na poor people mow” mocks the defeated allies with reference not to the democratic political values of the army that had defeated them, but to the domestic values of private life, available to rich and poor alike. Imagining the king and queen having sex offers the reader a laugh at their expense, carnival’s moment of release from official hierarchies; but at the same time it reproduces the myth of George’s

35 Sir Nathaniel William Wraxall, A Short Review of the Political State of Great Britain at the Commencement of the Year 1787 (London: Debrett, 1787), 8. My point about Burns’s participation in “the myth of royal ordinariness” extends Nigel Leask’s observation that “The Dream” adopts “an irreverent agricultural idiom particularly suited to the emergent myth of ‘Farmer George’” (Leask, 2010, as in n. 11 above, p. 141). “Why should na poor people mowe” revives the earlier poem’s “couthy (but also deeply conditional) loyalism” in vastly more fraught political circumstances: implicitly, the condition is now that George should not follow his continental peers into war with France.
“ordinariness” in terms of heterosexual domesticity, and invites a “nod of approval” from readers for whom this provides the most significant moral horizon of their lives.

We can identify the same values even in the sexual violence inflicted on Catherine of Russia in this text, so utterly unlike anything imagined for her male fellow-princes.

Auld Kate laid her claws on poor Stanislaus,
And Poland has bent like a bow;
May the deil in her a— ram a huge pr–ck o’ brass,
And damn her in hell with a mow.—

Here a useful comparison is with the pornographic stories and cartoons of Marie-Antoinette circulating in France in greatly increased number after the Revolution, and with the hostility of reformist or republican men to aristocratic women of the court that they express. Joan Landes argues that, for critics of absolutism, the power that it gave elite women, through their “jealously guarded intimacy with the monarch or his personal representatives,” was one the things most obviously wrong with it.37

Accordingly, satires on the queen or other woman in public life, such as Louis XV’s mistress, Mme du Barry, were also attacks on courtly politics as a whole. The *libelles* in which these women were attacked offered salacious details of “unnatural” sex (incest, lesbianism, sodomy), but the underlying target was the unnaturalness of women enjoying political influence. Discussing the case of du Barry, Landes observes: 

> Sexual and moral disease signalled to a receptive audience the horrible maladies of political despotism. Even writers of the most pornographic texts deployed powerful moral vocabulary. And where morality was at stake, a protest against public women was often implied (Landes, 56).

The official ideology of the French Republic, accordingly, vilified the women of the court, and valorised women’s domestic roles as wives and mothers, despite producing some emancipatory legislation.\(^{38}\) Thus the *libelles* of the Revolution can be seen to replicate, in sexually explicit terms, the moral contrast between the courtly lady and the domestic woman drawn by Addison in the *Spectator*.\(^{39}\) That is, pornography served to enforce a strict gendering of social roles which, in the French context, it is perhaps appropriate to call “bourgeois”: “for all their obscenities, the *libelles* were strongly moralistic. Perhaps they even propagated a bourgeois morality that came to full fruition during the Revolution.”\(^{40}\) In “Why should na poor people mow”, Catherine is punished, when the other princes are not, because she is a politically powerful woman; and, as in the *libelles*, female power is associated with unnatural sex. In Burns’s song this is her punishment, not her crime, but the comparison with the *libelles* demonstrates that its obscenity could serve to propagate, rather than undermine, the domestic ideology.

Mrs Dunlop objected to the word “arse” in “The Twa Dogs” on the grounds that “There are some words which [...] custom has wholly prescribed [*sic*] in upper life, so that an author should have some very strong temptation before he introduce what it would be an insult to his company for a gentleman to read aloud” (12 July 1791; Wallace II, 162). It is clear from the context that Mrs Dunlop is thinking of the insult to

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\(^{39}\) For example, in the comparison of the courtly Fulvia with the domestic Aurelia in *Spectator* No. 15 (17 March 1711): Bond 1965, I:68–9.

mixed company. In “Why should na poor people mow” we find a song which at once assumes companionate marriage as a moral norm, but transgresses the standards of polite discourse in which that norm was usually inculcated. This is not a contradiction once we consider the specifically male audience among whom Burns expected his song to circulate. We find this restriction spelt out in the correspondence with his patron Robert Graham of Fintry in the aftermath of his denunciation to the Board of Excise, and it explains why this song, far from getting Burns into trouble as McIlvanney implies, was part of his epistolary effort to get himself out:

A tippling Ballad which I made on the Prince of Brunswick’s breaking up his camp, & sung one convivial evening, I shall likewise send you, sealed up, as it is not every body’s reading.— This last is not worth your perusal; but lest Mrs FAME should, as she has already done, use, & even abuse, her old priviledge [sic] of lying, you shall be the master of every thing, le pour et le contre, of my political writings & conduct.— (5 Jan 1793; II:174–5).

The “tippling Ballad” is “Why should na poor people mow.” Sending it to Fintry, but designating it “not every body’s reading”, implicitly appeals to a cross-class homosocial solidarity, the levelling fraternity of the drinking club (it was composed “one convivial evening”) or the Masonic lodge (Burns “speak[s] in Masonic” earlier in the same letter). By offering Fintry this song as an example of the limit of his political radicalism (“you shall be the master of every thing, le pour et le contre, of my political writings”), Burns promises him that this radicalism is contained within existing social structures without threatening them, just as the song’s satire of the allies is contained within its celebration of domestic felicity, and just as the homosocial spaces of club and lodge are contained within the polite conventions of mixed society, without threatening them. Mrs Dunlop had indeed been disturbed by rumour of the bawdy side of Burns’s oeuvre, and hoped that this was a folly of his early days now “polished off by mine, if not by better company” (22 January 1789; Wallace I:207). Burns’s reply was telling. He did not deny

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outright that some of his writing might be improper for mixed company, “for a clergymans’s reading to a company of ladies,” but expressed contempt for anyone who communicated the “mysteries” of homosocial “wit and mirth” “to the ear of cool Sobriety or female Delicacy” (5 February 1789; I:370–371). If, as “The Rights of Woman” claims, the rough rude ways of naughty men no longer invaded a lady’s quiet, it seems that this was not because those ways had been “polished off” by heterosocial intercourse as Addison had hoped, but because the borders of the homosocial spaces in which they could be practised were being more effectively policed. On the same occasion as the letter to Fintry enclosing “Why should na poor people mow,” Burns sent “The Rights of Woman” to Fintry’s wife. In its own way, this division of labour confirms a version of the polite “decorum” celebrated in the latter poem. The drinking song is sent to the man, while the eulogy on the fair sex is sent to the woman, preserving the sanctity of the domestic space, heterosocial but under feminine moral authority, from masculine discursive licence.

Indeed, once we recognise that domestic values underpin the satire of “Why should na poor people mow” we can also see how much the two poems have in common. Like “The Rights of Woman,” the song seems, initially, to be blaming republicans as well as princes and priests for setting Europe alight: its “het-headed zealots” are surely the Jacobins and the perpetrators of the September massacres. Both texts enter their closing movement with the same words, “But truce with”: in “The Rights of Woman” it is truce with “Constitutions” and “Revolutions” as well as “Kings”; “Why should na poor people mow”, having spent four stanzas denouncing the war-mongering of continental princes, demands a truce as well with the domestic “commotions” of November, and with the “new-fangled notions” (of the second part of The Rights of Man, published earlier in the year) supposed to have inspired them. But most significantly, both texts begin with the same gesture: “While Europe’s eye is fixed on mighty things [...]”; “While Princes & Prelates [...] / All Europe hae set in a lowe”: while all that is going on, here is something else. And in both cases the something else is the private world of relations between men and women. In both, the divisive political moment is subordinated to a particular social agenda for heterosexuality. In both, ruling-class men need to be reformed into compliance with the needs of women: into politeness (“The Rights of Woman”) or into husbands (“Why should na poor people mow”). For all that it is a celebration of the sexual act, “Why should na poor people mow” is doing essentially the same ideological work as Pride and Prejudice or Mansfield Park.
3. In The Edinburgh Gazetteeer

“The Rights of Woman” was first published, anonymously, on 30 November 1792, in the third issue of The Edinburgh Gazetteeer. This four-page weekly was closely aligned with the Scottish Association of the Friends of the People: its editor, Captain William Johnston, had helped found the Association the previous July, in emulation of the one established by Opposition Whig MPs and peers in London in April. The aim of the Association was to reform the House of Commons through an extension of the franchise and more regular elections, but it understood these reforms as “restoring our constitution to its original purity” rather than overthrowing it. It was also, to start with, a group of landowners, lawyers and wealthy merchants, until the declaration of the French Republic and its unexpected triumph over its enemies brought a sudden and massive increase in the number of affiliated associations all across Scotland, whose members were mostly weavers and other artisans, tradesmen and shopkeepers. The difficulty faced by the Friends of the People at this point lay in the street disturbances that also accompanied this “abrupt, and unprecedented, expansion in the sense of the politically possible.” The liberty trees raised in the public spaces of Dundee and elsewhere asserted popular political aspirations beyond “the trammels of Whig constitutionalism.”

And although these events had no connection with the Friends of the People, they were bound to alienate from the Association the propertied classes whose support it needed for success. The third issue of the Gazetteer is punctuated with denunciations of public disorder, in the resolutions of the reform societies of Dunbar (“all persons who may attempt to precipitate the people of Scotland into riot and sedition, are the enemies of this country, and ought to be discountenanced by, and refused admittance as members of, all Constitutional Societies”), Edinburgh (“the name or names of any person or persons belonging to the Associated Friends of the People, who may be found guilty of rioting, of creating or aiding sedition or tumult, shall be expunged from the books of the Society”), and Stirling (“firmly attached to tranquility and order” and holding in abhorrence “every idea

43 Harris, The Scottish People 78.
of tumult and sedition”). On the back page, below Burns’s poem, is a letter written by his friend and former neighbour, the landowner Robert Riddell. This calls for the meeting of “the Landed Interest of Scotland” to reconvene in pursuit of reform, but it begins by reminding readers that at a period when a REFORM of many abuses that have crept into our excellent Constitution, is loudly called for,—I would caution my fellow citizens from running into the other extreme; and beg leave to advise them to draw a line betwixt Liberty and Licentiousness. The first a blessing that cannot be held in too great estimation—the second a curse that cannot be held in too great detestation. (4a)

It is in this context of anxious demarcation of legitimate politics from the actions of “the mob” that “The Rights of Woman” was first published.

The other poems by Burns that appeared (also anonymously) in the Gazetteer have a straightforward relation to its editorial line in their straightforwardly political themes: “Extempore on some late commemorations of the poet Thomson” is a complaint against aristocratic patronage, and “Here’s a Health to them that’s awa” is a eulogy on Opposition Whig parliamentarians. Of the two texts this essay has examined, “Why should na poor people mow” corresponds more clearly to the Gazetteer’s politics, although it could not, for obvious reasons, be published there. In three successive paragraphs the editorial in the second number of the Gazetteer, like Burns’s song, hails the victories of the French armies (“We congratulate them [...] on this victory of freemen, who have fought and conquered—not for themselves alone—but for the whole family of the Human Race!”), condemns the “het-headed zealots” of Jacobinism (“Marat […] so universally and so justly execrated throughout France, for his inhuman excesses”), and dismisses the “new-fangled notions” of Paine that had proved so fascinating to the labouring classes at home (“Schemes, splendid and captivating in theory, but impracticable or destructive in execution, may indeed please the imagination whilst reviewing the gay vision, but can have no tendency to serve the real interests of the community”). But the song also belongs to the precise moment when this politics was becoming “defensive and embattled” (Brims, as n. 42 above, p. 42). The inaugural national convention of the Scottish Friends of the People met in Edinburgh on 11 December, but spent most of its time discussing, not programmes for

44 Edinburgh Gazetteer, No. 3 (Friday, November 30, 1792) 1a, 3d, 4d.
45 Edinburgh Gazetteer, No. 2 (Friday, November 23, 1792) 3b–c.
reform or how to effect them, but means of countering the loyalist attribution to the Association of responsibility for street disorder (Brims, p. 41). The next day, Burns sent “Why should na poor people mow” to his Edinburgh friend Robert Cleghorn saying that it was “just finished this moment” (II:168). Although the song celebrates “the Prince of Brunswick’s breaking up his camp,” news of which had appeared in the Dumfries Weekly Journal on 9 October, it does not reflect the sudden “expansion in the sense of the politically possible” of that time, but responds instead to the Friends of the People’s later loss of control over that expansion. For the property-owning section of the Gazetteer’s readership in early December this song would have conjured up a beguiling counter-factual scenario. If only the poor man didn’t envy a crown! If only he would lie down, and comfort himself in the arms of his wife, instead of taking to the streets, erecting liberty trees and burning effigies of Henry Dundas, and bringing the Friends of the People into disrepute!

It is perhaps this political pressure on the reformers to disavow any connection with “riot” that also explains the appearance in the necessarily polemical context of the Gazetteer of “The Rights of Woman,” a poem which, I have argued, sets out to depolemicize the polarised political discourse of its historical moment. While this poem’s praise of feminine influence in civilising masculine savagery seems strikingly at odds with the very masculine civic humanist discourse that dominates the paper, it brings into its pages a rhetoric of reformed manners that might appeal to the “middling ranks,” the demographic to which the Friends of the People had to appeal if they were to have any chance of success. George Home of Branxton, writing from Edinburgh to his cousin Patrick Home of Wedderburn MP, is an often-quoted hostile witness to this political logic; and often misquoted, and thus worth quoting at length:

The Spirit of Reform as you know, was first begun among the Master Manufacturers, in many places particularly about Glasgow they are now come to repent of it when it is too late, they foresee that any convulsion must produce unavoidable ruin to them, and are now doing every thing in their power to check and restrain that Spirit of Sedition they have raised, in so much that the Reform Societies about Glasgow are daily diminishing in numbers, and so now consist only of the very refuse of the People—This has produced a very great change in the language of the Tribunes of the People, the Leaders of the Reform; at first they Spoke only of demanding their priveledges [sic] and the rights of men with the musquet on their Shoulder and the Pike in their hand, they now
deprecate all violent measures, recommend peace good order and moderation—They do all this to see if they can restore the Confidence of the Middle Class, get them to unite in an application to Parliament to render Elections more popular. 

The language of rights and privileges, of virtue and corruption, of slaves and tyrants, the language of The Edinburgh Gazetteer, is the language of eighteenth-century aristocratic opposition politics, but it had proved frighteningly available for appropriation by those Home calls “the very refuse of the People.” The ideology of manners, on the other hand, was not: while an aristocrat could prove himself “well-bred” by conforming to polite norms, there was a social limit (in the Dumfries theatre, a shilling for the pit) below which those norms could not be naturalised. “The Rights of Woman,” I have argued, folds the political language of rights into an ostensibly non-political language of heterosocial relationships. But the mere inclusion of the poem in the Gazetteer is not enough to re-politicise its language in a way that would reassure “the Middle Class” that a programme of rapid political improvement could be continuous with their long-standing commitment to incremental social and cultural improvement. Instead, the discontinuity of the poem’s rhetoric with the rhetoric surrounding it dramatizes the impossibility of harnessing the latter to the former.

Conclusion

In April 1793, John Francis Erskine of Mar, having heard that Burns had lost his job because of his politics, wrote to Burns’s friend, Robert Riddell, offering to start a subscription for him. In replying to Erskine, Burns took the opportunity to defend, not only his political opinions, but also his right to have political opinions. A rhetorical tour de force, and clearly written with an eye to posterity, this letter builds to the following climax:

Does any man tell me, that my feeble efforts can be of no service; & that it does not belong to my humble station to meddle with the concerns of a People?—I tell him, that it is on such individuals as I, that for the hand of support & the eye of intelligence, a Nation has to rest.—The uninformed mob may swell a Nation’s bulk; & the titled, tinsel Courtly throng may be its feathered ornament, but the number of those who are elevated enough in life, to reason &

46 Correspondence to Patrick Home of Wedderburn mostly from George Home of Branxton, National Records of Scotland, GD267/1/16, f.7 (25 November 1792).
reflect; & yet low enough to keep clear of the venal contagion of a Court; these are a Nation’s strength.— (II: 209–210).

This essay has not asked the biographical question of Burns’s position in the social hierarchy of late eighteenth century Britain: it has restricted itself to identifying the values encoded in his writing within a very limited, and historically very specific, period of time. But in this passage Burns places himself in a broad social middle, defined in cultural and moral, rather than economic, terms: a group with sufficient information to “reason and reflect,” but which remains insulated from the corruption of aristocratic politics. Burns’s attribution to this group of centrality in the public life of the nation is a version of a claim often made in the British eighteenth century. David Hume, in 1742, had used very similar terms in arguing for the political benefits of an expanded commerce:

the tradesmen and merchants acquire a share of the property, and draw authority and consideration to that middling rank of men, who are the best and firmest basis of public liberty. These submit not to slavery, like the peasants, from poverty and meanness of spirit; and, having no hopes of tyrannizing over others, like the barons, they are not tempted, for the sake of that gratification, to submit to the tyranny of their sovereign.

To give another example: Horace Walpole records William Beckford, plantation-owner and City MP, protesting in the Commons, in November 1761, at the ministry’s failure to move decisively against Spain on its entry into the war, given the present wealth and unity of the nation, understood as follows: “It was not the mob, nor two hundred great Lords (who received more from Government than they paid to it), that made us so firm: the middling rank of men it was in which our strength consisted, and who called upon us to demand peace sword in hand.” For both Hume and Beckford, as for Burns, those socially in between the “mob” and the nobility formed the moral and political backbone of Britain.

Certainly, neither Hume, who makes “authority and consideration” conditional on the acquisition of property, nor Beckford, one of the richest men in Britain, would have included an excise officer on a salary of £70 per annum in their idea of the “middling rank of men.” That could

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not prevent Burns from appropriating this rhetoric to legitimate his own involvement in national debate. But its power to legitimate rested precisely on the extent to which the moral distinction of “the middling ranks,” however defined, was no longer a matter for debate. That was increasingly taken for granted; and, crucially for Burns in early 1793, taken for granted by both sides in the political polarisation of national life in the 1790s. So we find Joseph Priestley, two years later, reflecting that “the middle classes of life, who are above the fear of want, and yet have a sufficient motive for a constant exertion of their faculties” enjoy the most virtue as well as happiness; and Hannah More, in 1799, warning that the “contagion” of aristocratic fashions had infected the young women of “the middle orders”: “And this revolution of the manners of the middle class has so far altered the character of the age, as to be in danger of rendering obsolete the heretofore [sic] common saying, ‘that most worth and virtue are to be found in the middle station’”. Priestley, of course, had suffered materially from the backlash against reformers that had only briefly threatened Burns: his Birmingham home, with its library, laboratory and papers, had been destroyed in 48 hours of loyalist rioting, winked at by the authorities, in July 1791 (in 1795 he was writing his memoirs from the safety of Philadelphia). Yet Priestley shares his valorisation of “the middle station” with the conservative evangelical More, writing to rally upper-class women to the loyalist cause. Indeed *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* attempts to render such women “useful” to this cause precisely by persuading them to behave less like aristocrats and more like the idealised domestic woman of middle-class ideology. In the 1790s, that ideology transcended the division between reformer and monarchist. So Burns, in the letter to Erskine, can conclude this episode in his life with a justification of his involvement in political controversy by aligning himself with the uncontroversial moral hegemony of the “middling sort.” This tactic is less surprising if, as I have argued, it is what he was doing from the start.

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Nothing in this essay calls into question Burns’s commitment to the imperative of constitutional reform in Britain, or his sympathy for the revolution in France. But it does reveal, in these particular texts, at this turning point for both causes, a commitment to another, less explicitly political, sort of change, what Gary Kelly has called a “professional middle-class cultural revolution” which made the values and priorities of the “middling sort,” discussed here under the names of “polite norms” or an “ideology of manners,” hegemonic for the nation as a whole.\(^\text{53}\) That revolution had been underway in Britain for most of the eighteenth century, although the mismanagement of America by aristocratic government, and the perceived threat to social order from the labouring classes in the 1790s, accelerated its progress. For there to have been a theatre in Dumfries for which “The Rights of Woman” could be written, that revolution must have been underway in the county towns of Scotland too, overcoming the antipathetic religious “enthusiasm” of the Presbyterian church.\(^\text{54}\) This cultural revolution, with its anti-courtly slogans of “nature,” “sincerity,” and “feeling,” had afforded Burns his literary authority; like the authority it afforded the woman writer, this was conditional and precarious. If his interpellation in a middle-class cultural revolution becomes more visible at the end of 1792, it might be because that revolution appears then to be under threat from the other sort. Two revolutions are at stake in Burns’s writing in this period, and to understand his relation to the revolution that did not happen in Britain in the 1790s, we must also understand his relation to the one that did.

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