



Mr. President, Distinguished Guests, Lassies & Laddies,

I am going to address you tonight on a mysterious topic, at least to us Laddies – the Lassies. Being a man, I naturally do not know why the ladies seem to dance to a different tune from us. I did however receive a certain insight into this matter at a young age, and would like to share this with you. *Na cailíní* was how we Irish *buachaillí* referred to these mysterious beings in the all-boys' Christian Brothers School in Glasnevin, Dublin, where some few years ago I had the dubious pleasure of receiving my education from the *bráthair*, along with liberal doses of their favorite weapon, *an leathar*. In memory of those halcyon days, I will now don my school *caipín*, with its motto *Confido*. We believed it meant "I beat" – in Latin classes later we learned to our disbelief that it meant "I trust". As preparation for later chaste contact with *na cailíní*, we received instruction in Irish dancing – *an rince*. We learned such set classics as the Walls of Limerick – *Baille Luimní*. As there were no available *cailíní*, our dancing teacher separated us into two groups. One group would learn to dance like real men, the other would offer their services as ersatz *cailíní*. To my astonishment I spent the subsequent years learning *ceilí* dancing from the girls' side. This did not help in the slightest to figure out why the ladies dance to a different tune, but I did learn that it is possible to move in the same general direction, and how important it is to avoid treading one another's toes.

When the 17<sup>th</sup>-century microscopist Anton van Leeuwenhoek looked down his microscope at pond water, he was the first to see rotifers<sup>i</sup> – tiny animals with rapidly flailing cilia that make the rotifers spin like rotating wheels. He was struck by their beauty and elegance, and did not suspect that some species of rotifer reproduce asexually, and hold the world record for sexual abstinence – their last love affair was about 70 million years ago. Robert Burns, our focus tonight, was the polar opposite of the rotifers. Being supremely interested in Lassies and Lassies' goings-on, he was the most un-rotiferous man imaginable.

George Bernard Shaw, the Irish man of letters, sometimes quoted himself in speeches, just to liven things up a little. In contrast, I will quote only Burns tonight, along with one little snippet of Schubert, two short jokes, and Nicki Chisholm, who will reply to this Toast. As gentlemanly behavior dictates in these matters, I showed Nicki an advance copy of my speech. She rejected my offer to review her speech in turn, saying "Well, 'twas ever thus in the war of the sexes: just because you've shown me yours doesn't mean I have to show you mine...." Gentlemen, be warned! This is a well-known female scam. Always make sure that she is going to show you hers, before you show her yours, or you may wind up empty-handed.

During a transatlantic flight, a plane is struck by lightning in a severe storm and lurches heavily. A woman passenger stands up, panic-stricken, and wails: "I'm too young to die! But if I have to, then I want my last moments on Earth to be filled with wild passion. I've had many men, but have never been fulfilled. Is there any man on this plane who can make me feel like a woman?" Silence. All contemplate their own peril. Then, a tall, slim, dark-haired and handsome man stands up. "I can make you feel like a woman," he says. He walks slowly towards her, undoing his shirt one button at a time. He reaches her and removes his shirt. Silence. Her heart pounds. He extends his muscular arm to her, [pause] holding out his shirt. He whispers to her: "Iron this!"



Now, while we all appreciate the crisp feel of a freshly-ironed shirt, and take pleasure in a smart appearance, there is a time and a place for ironing, and our handsome friend in the story chose sartorial elegance over wild passion. The story of Robbie Burns' relationships with women, which I shall relate to you, shows that he might have chosen differently.

Some of you may have heard of the current best-selling book "**Eats Shoots and Leaves**", which offers a humorous zero-tolerance approach to punctuation, and much other fine pedantry besides. If I were to write the following words for you: "Woman without her man is nothing", and ask you to punctuate them correctly, men might write: "**Woman, without her man, is nothing.**" Women would probably write: "**Woman! Without her, man is nothing.**" Burns appears to have favored the second form, although very much in the plural!

He was not a conventional lover. Franz Schubert, born the year after Burns' early death, and also a prolific songwriter, has the Miller Boy offer faithful love to *die schöne Müllerin*<sup>ii</sup>:

Die Treue ist hier  
Sollst liegen bei mir  
Bis das Meer will trinken  
die Bächlein aus

Burns loved by contrast an entire posse of lassies. As there was a touch of the rooster about him, he wrote about his affairs, which allows us to follow his adventures in the flesh.

In early 1784, Burns met his abiding love, Jean Armour, jewel of the *Mauchline Belles*<sup>iii</sup>. By early 1786, Jean was pregnant. Burns promised to marry her, but her father insisted that she abandon him, and seek only support for the coming twins. Deflated, Burns went to Edinburgh, to arrange for the publication of the **Kilmarnock Edition** of his poetry. He became the darling of Edinburgh society during the winter of 1786. Making a tour of Scotland, he returned home, and was reconciled to Jean. She found herself again with a bun in the oven. They married in April of 1788, and moved to farm at Ellisland for 3 years, before Burns moved with the growing family to Dumfries, to take a full-time post with the Excise Office, a post with a secure income arranged for him by his benefactors.

Married life showed him the many different sides of woman. The sweet feeling of love:

O my Luve's like a red, red rose,  
That's newly sprung in June  
My Luve's like the melodie  
That's sweetly played in tune,

the devotion of husband and wife, after a long life spent together:

We clamb the hill thegither ...  
Now we maun totter down, John  
And hand in hand we'll go  
And sleep thegither at the foot



The scathing opinion held by a waiting wife, waiting for her man to return from important business affairs which have detained him in the tavern

She tauld thee weel thou was a skellum  
A blethering, blustering, drunken blellum

and, like Tam O'Shanter, how utterly useless it is to dash too late from said tavern back home

whare sits our sulky, sullen dame,  
Gathering her brows like gathering storm  
Nursing her wrath to keep it warm

Jean bore Burns 9 children, the last on the day of his funeral in 1796. He wrote of his love:

But day and night my fancy's flight  
Is ever with my Jean

Having spent a large part of her life with child, Jean might enjoy the following story: The instructor was teaching a class of pregnant women and their partners about how to breathe properly. He also gave instructions to the men, announcing: "Exercise is good for the ladies. Walking is especially beneficial. Gentlemen, it wouldn't hurt you to take the time to go walking with your partner!" The room went quiet. Finally, a man in the middle of the group raised his hand. [pause] "Is it alright if she carries a golf bag while we walk?"

Burns was not a conventional lover by our standards. He stated the limits of his fidelity<sup>iv</sup>:

Let not Woman o'er complain  
Fickel Man is apt to rove ...  
We'll be constant while we can-  
we can be no more, you know

He had numerous affairs throughout his lifetime, admitting to the feeling that:

The sweetest hours that e'er I spent  
Are spent among the lasses, O<sup>v</sup>

His family servant girl, Betsey Paton, bore Burns his first illegitimate daughter Bess. Summoned before the parish kirk session<sup>vi</sup> to explain the *wean*, Burns was fined a guinea, and sat unhumbled on the stool of repentance beside Betsey. He relates:

But my downcast eye by chance did spy  
What made my lips to water  
Those limbs so clean where I, between,  
Commenc'd a Fornicator

Burns satirized the proceedings in *The Court of Equity*<sup>vii</sup> where the village rakes must answer for their transgressions. The following lines may explain what drew the Lassies to Burns. He knew how to make a Lassie's heart flutter, and – may I emphasize - in his words, not mine – how to make her tirlie whirl and her clitter clatter:

... there's witness borne,  
And affidavit made and sworn,



That ye had bred a hurly-burly,  
 'Bout Jeany Mitchel's tirlie-whirley,  
 And blooster'd at her regulator  
 Till a' her wheels gang clitter clatter

*Highland Mary* Campbell sadly died in premature childbirth. During his second winter in Edinburgh, Burns houghmagandied<sup>viii</sup> with another servant girl, Jennie Clow, who bore him a baby boy, only a week after Jean also gave birth<sup>ix</sup>. Jean was a saintly woman, willing to put up with his wild nature, even taking in his illegitimate daughter by his last mistress Anna Park after her death, with the remark 'Our Robbie should have had twa wives.'

We could well do with such men and women as Robbie and Jean Burns today. The Scottish welfare system of the time knew no state-provided pensions, nor supplemental private pension funds, which offered a legally guaranteed minimum interest rate (although if there had been, I do not doubt that the King would also have tried his royal hand at *Rentenklau*). Then, welfare was based upon having children – lots of them. The birthrate in Switzerland in 2002 was 0.984 births per 1'000 of population. In Finland, where the winter evenings extend into the mornings and even into the afternoons, it is somewhat higher at 1.06 children per woman. Ireland hits the rhythm with 1.46. Scotland however rocks the fertility stakes with 1.49. Although meager in comparison to Jean Armour's total of 9 children, a short calculation shows that today's Scottish woman receives 50% more attention than her Swiss counterpart. Jean Armour received an astonishing 10 times more sporan time.

There will now follow a Roasting of the Laddies. But first, Gentlemen, I would ask you to be upstanding with charged glasses and join me in drinking a Toast to the Lassies, the companions of our sweetest hours, partners of our hearts, mothers to our children, objects of our desires, sharers in our dreams. In the Connoisseur's own words:

Auld Nature swears, the lovely Dears  
 Her noblest work she classes, O  
 Her prentice han' she try'd on man  
 An' then she made the lasses, O

To the Lassies!

<sup>i</sup> New Scientist, 6 Dec 2003, p44

<sup>ii</sup> Des Baches Wiegenlied, Franz Schubert, Die Schöne Müllerin op 25, D795

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.robertburns.org/encyclopedia/BurnsJeanArmour1767-1834.160.html>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.glasgowguide.co.uk/wjmc/letnotwo.shtml>, 1794 song Inconstancy in Love to the melody "Duncan Gray"

<sup>v</sup> Robert Burns, the man and his work. Hans Hecht. Alloway publishing. Ayr. ISBN 0 907526 51 9: p70: Green grow the Rashes O

<sup>vi</sup> Dirt & Deity, A Life of Robert Burns, Ian McIntyre Flamingo 1996 ISBN 0 00 638759 4, pp 48 *et seq.*

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.robertburns.org/encyclopedia/CourtOfEquityThe.234.shtml>

<sup>viii</sup> from Holy Fair

<sup>ix</sup> McIntyre, p278