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The immediate stimulus for my discussion today, of Jane Austen and Robert Burns, two writers whose lives overlapped but who are seldom brought together by literary critics, is a passage in a novel which Jane Austen sadly did not live to finish, *Sanditon*, which survived in manuscript and was first published on its own in an earlier period of Jane Austen fever, the 1920s. The passage was first drawn to my attention at, appropriately, a Burns supper. I will first give you a little of the plot context. *Sanditon* tells the story of a sensible, pretty, rather wry young woman, called Charlotte Heywood (she always puts me in mind of a slightly younger and prettier version of Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth Bennet’s friend from *Pride and Prejudice*). Charlotte is paying a visit to the Parkers, a pleasant but rather eccentric family. Mr. Parker, the head of the family, who has inherited a middling sort of fortune, is trying to turn the eponymous village of Sanditon into a seaside holiday town in the mould of Weymouth. Under Charlotte’s mildly satirical eye, the locals are shown trying to lure summer visitors with such novelties as a lending library, fashionable medical practitioners, a spanking new hotel, etc. The conversation about Robert Burns that I will come to takes place between Charlotte and a personable but rather silly young man, a baronet whose stepmother is one of the most important of the local entrepreneurs. But all you really need to know is that it takes place between a marriageable young man and a young woman who, like all of Jane Austen’s heroines, is in need of, but not in quest of, a husband. So the conversation is between two people who could, though probably won’t, fall in love. That gives it its particular flavour.

Like the rest of the draft, which is about sixty pages long, what we’re reading is stopped forever at an early point in the composition process. Jane Austen was ill, indeed, though she did not know it, dying, all through the writing, so it is interesting and perhaps poignant that
among the novel’s preoccupations, illness and hypochondria, medical cures and quack practices, loom large. In the following passage, the topic of poetry is treated satirically and the suggestion is that the subject of Burns is a fashionable one. This is the young baronet speaking:

‘But while we are on the subject of poetry, what think you, Miss Heywood, of Burns's lines to his Mary?—Oh! there is pathos to madden one!—If ever there was a man who felt, it was Burns.—Montgomery has all the fire of poetry, Wordsworth has the true soul of it—Campbell in his pleasures of hope has touched the extreme of our sensations—“Like angel’s visits, few and far between.” Can you conceive anything more subduing, more melting, more fraught with the deep sublime than that line?—But Burns—I confess my sense of his pre-eminence, Miss Heywood.—If Scott has a fault, it is the want of passion.—Tender, elegant, descriptive—but tame.—The man who cannot do justice to the attributes of woman is my contempt.—Sometimes indeed a flash of feeling seems to irradiate him—as in the lines we were speaking of—“Oh! Woman in our hours of ease” —. But Burns is always on fire.—His soul was the altar in which lovely woman sat enshrined, his spirit truly breathed the immortal incense which is her due.—’

The buoyancy of tone alters markedly in Charlotte’s reply:

‘I have read several of Burns’s poems with great delight,’ said Charlotte as soon as she had time to speak. ‘But I am not poetic enough to separate a man’s poetry entirely from his character;—and poor Burns’s known irregularities greatly interrupt my enjoyment of his lines.—I have difficulty in depending on the truth of his feelings as a lover. I have not faith in the sincerity of the affections of a man of his description. He felt and he wrote and he forgot.’ (vii 175–76)

This would seem to be a very damning critique of Robert Burns, but we’ll see whether, by the end, we think it really is.

Burns was sixteen when Jane Austen was born in 1775, and interestingly, only a year earlier he had first committed what he called ‘the sin of Rhyme’, writing some lines as part of a campaign to, of course, woo a local beauty.¹ Robert Crawford, author of a notable biography

¹ ‘This kind of life—the cheerless gloom of a hermit, with the unceasing moil of a galley-slave, brought me to my sixteenth year; a little before which period I first committed the sin of Rhyme’. Letter to Dr John Moore (August 2, 1787), in The Works of Robert Burns, containing his Life by John Lockhart (New York: Pearson, 1835), p. 283.
of Burns, and himself a good love poet, comments about this phrase, and these early poems, that it is worth noting both how closely Burns connects the poetic and the erotic impulses, and also that the word ‘sin’ should attach itself not only to love but to rhyme. He thinks of Burns as having, along with his renowned sense of the pleasures offered by the world, the flesh and the devil, a pervasive sense of sin.\(^2\) My own thought here is that Burns has a sense, as Keats does, of the earthly pleasures, and indeed of sexual attraction and sexual pleasure, as fleeting.\(^3\) ‘My luve is like a red, red rose’, in the famous late lyric, written only two years before his death, is not initially very promising—how long does a rose last? Yet in the same poem, he promises also to love, to feel what it is to love the girl (which is not the same thing as marrying her, or committing to her for life, as we’ll see) ‘till a’ the seas gang dry [...] And the rocks melt with the sun’.\(^4\) Here, and we’ll see this again, images of fleetingness rub against, are haunted by, images of a deeper, longed-for, permanence—‘till rocks melt with the sun’. A tough, even a harsh image. To bring to life the cliché ‘till the end of time’, forever.\(^5\)

Burns’s short life, early and late, was marked by sexual liaisons, mostly brief, with a number of women for whom he wrote songs, and though the important relationship is with Jean Armour, whom he eventually married, I want to look at two other relationships which produced songs. But I will start by looking at an imaginary relationship that, as we’ll see, eventually produced an alteration in one of Burns’s songs, and the paragraph in the unfinished novel that we have already looked at: the relationship between Robert Burns and Jane Austen.


\(^4\) *The Works of Robert Burns*, p. 191

\(^5\) As fair art thou, my bonie lass,
Sae deep in luve am I;
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
Till a’ the seas gang dry.
Till a’ the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi’ the sun;
I will luve thee still, my dear,
While the sands o’ life shall run. (Lines 5–12; *The Works of Robert Burns*, p. 191)
Let’s do some comparisons first. When Jane Austen was born in December 1775, Burns was, as I’ve said, sixteen and a budding poet and a precociously sexual, hardworking farmer. His father had already taken on a second farm, and the crushing debt that would mar all their fortunes, but the Burns family never tried to save money by stinting their sons’ education (as, decades later, Charles Dickens’s hard-pressed family would try to save money). Burns, the farmer’s son, who drove a plough and worked with his hands, actually received a more intensive education in mathematics, English, French and Latin, and, I should add, was a much better speller (he won a prize for spelling) than the parson’s daughter Jane Austen. However, both were precocious writers. Flash forward to 1787. Burns, after a season of litigation with Jean Armour’s parents as to whether he would marry the mother of his children, or whether, indeed, he had already married her, had published the Kilmarnock volume of Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect, and was in Edinburgh receiving the star treatment, enjoying conversations with Edinburgh’s great literary men, and having at least one affair and fathering at least one illegitimate child. Hundreds of miles to the south, Jane Austen was perhaps reading aloud to her family from her first ‘novel’, the eight-page Frederic and Elfrida. From the lofty viewpoint of a twelve-year-old genius, she looked down on the sentimental literature of the day, of which she seems to have read, and relished, even at that age, a great deal, having characters fall in love, fall out of love, and die for love with a rapidity that would have astonished even the fast-moving Burns. Into the novel’s prose and conversation she also interweaves some verse, songs and an epitaph for one of these passionate creatures, a young woman who, in a predicament Burns would have understood, has entered into two simultaneous engagements and chooses suicide as a way out:

Here lies our friend who having promis-ed
That unto two she would be marri-ed
Threw her sweet Body and her lovely face
Into the Stream that runs thro’ Portland Place. (Juvenilia 9)

This is what the author of Pride and Prejudice was writing at the age of twelve. This burlesquing, cheerfully heartless attitude to love and death is characteristic of her juvenile work, more mature in its brilliant style perhaps than in its emotion. Adult lives and feelings seem merely
absurd to the brilliant, precocious little girl. Since these early writings were among the few original manuscripts that were saved, and exist today, we can assume, I think, that the Austen family supported and encouraged her efforts. A few years later, at fifteen (the age at which Burns committed ‘the sin of Rhyme’ for the first time) she wrote her wonderful eleven-page History of England, whose heroine is, fascinatingly, Mary, queen of Scots: ‘this amiable Woman [...] abandoned by her Son, confined by her Cousin [...] firm in her Mind; Constant in her Religion; and prepared herself to meet the cruel fate to which she was doomed, with a magnanimity that could alone proceed from conscious Innocence’ (Juvenilia 184). So, Jane Austen’s attentions were on matters Scottish in that year, 1791, just five years before his death, when Burns wrote some of his most beautiful verses, including ‘Ae Fond Kiss’, which I will look at in a moment. These will take us back to Sanditon and Persuasion and Jane Austen’s incursions into Burns territory.

But first I want to look at the moment in Burns’s writing which brings him, I think, deepest into the kind of world we associate with Jane Austen—the world of men and women and manners—and that is the wonderful, funny, touching poem ‘To a Louse’, set in a church (we might pause here to note that no long scene in the novels of Jane Austen, the parson’s daughter, is set during a church service). Burns’s poem depicts a moment between a young man and a young woman of which the young woman is completely unaware (like Elizabeth under Mr. Darcy’s surreptitious gaze). Seated in church behind a pretty girl in a fancy hat, the poet notices a head louse in action on the hat:

Ha! whare ye gaun, ye crowlin’ ferlie?  
Your impudence protects you sairly,  
I canna say but ye strunt rarely,  
Owre gauze and lace,  
Tho’ faith! I fear ye dine but sparely  
On sic a place.6

The poem is often described as a satire, and the young lady’s pretensions to glamour are lightly mocked: ‘sae fine a lady!’ (line 10). The fat grey louse is told firmly to ‘crowl’ on ‘some poor body’ (line 12), and the

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6 Lines 1–6; The Works of Robert Burns, p. 42.
famous last stanza would seem to reprimand the young lady for not having ‘the giftie/ To see oursels as ithers see us!’ (lines 43–44), or the gift to see the back of her head! But assigning the poem solely to satire is missing its tenderness, a tenderness emphasized, I think in works where Burns uses the ‘standard Habbie’ stanza with its gentle dragging close: the double effect, the combination of sympathy and mockery in ‘sae fine a lady’ and ‘O’ Miss’s bonnet’ (line 24). Who can, after all, see the back of her own head? This is the kind of very complex attention to absurdities that begins to appear in Jane Austen’s writing in the novels she started working on in the year Burns, of whom by then she was aware, as we’ll see, died, 1796.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, and especially in *Sense and Sensibility*, her richest characters are both absurd and touching: Mrs. Jennings in *Sense and Sensibility*, with her infuriating matchmaking and her devoted nursing; Jane, Elizabeth’s sister, in *Pride and Prejudice*, who frustrates clever Lizzy with her absurd inability to see wrong in anyone and who, in the end, is proved to be right about Mr. Darcy. Both these great writers, both Burns and Jane Austen, in their mature work, display qualities of attention that enable them to see human lives as complicated, as not simply tragic nor simply comic, as both foolish and moving in their self-deceptions and their desires. Both also, and this is noted more often in the case of Burns than in Jane Austen, are curious about how people behave, how they manage their bodies, in public. ‘O Jenny, dinna toss your head’ (line 37), the poet warns the poor young lady—and surely, sitting near someone of Burns’s class in church in Scotland in 1786, this cannot be other than quite a poor young lady, dressing herself as fine as she can manage? And body-conscious Jane Austen notes with scorn Mrs. Bennet’s winks and fidgets and Lydia Bennet’s ‘violent yawn’ (I xviii 115), but also, more sympathetically, Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*, broken-hearted after Willoughby’s desertion, ‘perfectly indifferent’ to her toilette (II xiv 282)—not caring at all, at this stage of her young life, how ‘others see us’.

Where Burns and Jane Austen come together most closely, even before those words in *Sanditon* quoted above, among the last which Jane Austen wrote, is in Jane Austen’s music. During the years that she and her family were without a permanent home, living in rented rooms in Southampton and Bath, she was separated from her beloved piano. Unlike the Burns family, the Austens on the whole were not
very musical; she was the musician among them. The pieces played by young ladies in those times were not often pieces by composers we now consider great. She does not seem to have played Mozart. But she did play at least one Burns song. Recent scholarly examination of a cache of musical manuscripts which are known to have been in her possession reveals that she had a copy of Burns’s 1795 song ‘Their Groves o’ Sweet Myrtle’:

Their groves o’ sweet myrtle let foreign lands reckon,
Where bright-beaming summers exalt the perfume;
Far dearer to me yon lone glen o’ green breckan,
Wi’ the burn stealing under the lang, yellow broom.

Far dearer to me are yon humble broom bowers
Where the blue bell and gowan lurk, lowly, unseen;
For there, lightly tripping, amang the wild flowers,
A-list’ning the linnet, aft wanders my Jean.

Tho’ rich is the breeze in their gay, sunny valleys,
And cauld Caledonia’s blast on the wave;
Their sweet-scented woodlands that skirt the proud palace,
What are they?—the haunt o’ the tyrant and slave.

The slave’s spicy forests, and gold-bubbling fountains,
The brave Caledonian views wi’ disdain;
He wanders as free as the winds of his mountains,
Save Love’s willing fetters—the chains of his Jean.7

What is most striking about Jane Austen’s relationship with this song is that in her copy ‘Jean’ is replaced by ‘Jane’ and ‘the chains of his Jean’ becomes ‘the charms of his Jane’.8 Since her manuscript is not the

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7 The Works of Robert Burns, p. 196.
only one to have this variant, too much should not be made of it, but one wonders with what emotions she sang those words: with a sense of the absurd, or with a sense of admiration both for the poet and for the nature of this feeling. Reading the song, with its equation of love of a woman with the love of a country, one thinks of the passage in *Northanger Abbey* when Henry Tilney chides Catherine for thinking that the sort of murderous goings-on she is imagining, and which of course would be run of the mill in Italy, could happen in England: “‘Remember that we are English, that we are Christians!’” (II ix 203). Perhaps Jane Austen was thinking of the contrast between those ‘spicy forests, and gold-bubbling fountains’ (line 13) where dark, Gothic doings occurred, and the ‘cauld’ if not ‘Caledonian’ (line 10) blast with which Henry blows Catherine’s imaginings away.

In 1791 Burns had written another and more famous song, which we don’t know if Jane Austen read or not, though she could easily have done so, and that is the great—for some the greatest of his lyrics—‘Ae Fond Kiss’, and it is this song which echoes most hauntingly the question which Jane Austen’s heroine raises in *Sanditon*: the connection between feeling and forgetting:

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\text{Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;} \\
\text{Ae farewell, alas, for ever!} \text{\footnote{9}}
\]

The song was written, most likely, for the woman called ‘Clarinda’, with whom Burns had a fleeting affair, and who, lest we become too tender-hearted towards the Bard, considered suing him when she heard he was married to Jean Armour. Their actual affair seems to have been measured in weeks, and this was possibly true of a number of his dalliances. In some cases, he surely felt, and forgot. But the words of this song are about that very forgetting, and about the tug of memory when it persists beyond forgetting:

\[
\text{Had we never loved sae kindly,} \\
\text{Had we never loved sae blindly;}
\]

\footnote{9}{Lines 1–2; *The Works of Robert Burns*, p. 188.}

Never met—or never parted,
We had ne’er been broken-hearted.\textsuperscript{10} (lines 13–16)

All the doubleness of feeling which is, at once, for him, overpowering and fleeting, is summed up in the wonderful haunting rhyme of ‘sever’ with ‘forever’.

To return now at last to \textit{Sanditon}, the woman in Burns’s life to whom the young man who admires Burns so much is referring is neither ‘Clarinda’ nor Jean Armour but the legendary ‘Highland Mary’, Margaret Mary Campbell, the young servant girl who came briefly into Burns’s life and flickered there briefly in 1786, and to whom Burns, at that time in a kind of marriage or betrothal with Jean Armour, seems to have proposed. He seems to have proposed to one woman while promised to another. But sometime in the autumn of that year Margaret Mary Campbell died, and she is memorialized in the poems ‘Highland Mary’, ‘Mary in Heaven’, ‘My Highland Lassie’ and probably in ‘Sweet Afton’:

\begin{quote}
My Mary’s asleep by thy murmuring stream;
Flow gently, sweet Afton, disturb not her dream.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

‘Highland Mary’ was a subject of much speculation in the years after Burns’s death, and it is deeply appropriate that that such a silly young man as the baronet in \textit{Sanditon} should be concerned with the heroine of what was even then known as ‘the mysterious episode’ in Burns’s life. We might want to compare this to some of the speculation about whether Jane Austen had her heart broken by any of a series of young men whose names appear in her letters. Readers love a mystery.

But let us end by revisiting those passages from Jane Austen with which we started. I’ll just repeat the criticism from Charlotte with its lovely, rather Burnsian, rhythm: ‘he felt, and he forgot’. What I would like to point out in this statement is that though she does question his truth, there is no suggestion in the comment of Burns having been deceitful. ‘Truth’ and ‘sincerity’ here seem to be more like loyalty, perhaps, close to what today is known as ‘commitment’. Burns is not being called a Wickham, nor a Willoughby, just someone whose feelings were stronger.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{10} Lines 13–16; \textit{ibid.}\textsuperscript{11} Lines 23–24; \textit{The Works of Robert Burns}, pp. 188–89.
\end{flushright}
than his memory. And if Jane Austen did know, which she easily could have known, ‘Ae Fond Kiss’, she might on reflection have added, ‘He felt, and he forgot, but sometimes he remembered what he had forgotten’.

I said earlier that Jane Austen’s heroines, though sympathetically presented, and important viewpoints through which we can see most of the story, are not identical with Jane Austen, or with her narrators. The young girl who wrote those stinging satires had grown into an adult young lady, a tireless dancer and party-goer, who was, as Mary Russell Mitford said, ‘a husband-hunting butterfly’, then into the spinster author of a number of brilliant novels. That’s a path none of her heroines takes. The one who goes farthest down it, simply by growing older, reaching the advanced age of twenty-seven, is that great lover of poetry (though she never mentions Burns) Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, whose words I also looked at earlier. Let’s look at them in greater detail now before we close. To remind you of the context, Anne is here talking to the retired sailor Captain Harville, who, stung by the fact that his friend Captain Benwick, who was once engaged to his sister, has very quickly after her death met someone else and asked her to marry him. “she would not have forgotten him so soon!”’, he says of his sister, and Anne replies feelingly that no woman would forget a man she loved (II xi 252). Captain Harville says, in some surprise, that women are always—it’s a cliché—known for their fickleness, their changeability.

So what does Anne, twenty-seven years old, suffering from eight aching years of silent love for Captain Wentworth, what does she reply? “All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone”’ (II xi 256). When Burns felt spurned by Jean Armour, he turned to Highland Mary; when Mary died, back to Jean; in Jean’s many pregnancies, he turned to other women, like Clarinda; then back to Jean, who, ‘loving longest’, survived him by many years, bringing up her own children, and some of those he fathered on other women. In Jane Austen’s novels depth of feeling is most often indicated by the refusal to accept substitutes. Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility* remains true to her first love, as does Anne, and Fanny in *Mansfield Park*. The thoughtful heroines, like Jean Armour, ‘love longest’ even when they think ‘existence and hope’

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are gone. But the heroes, or some of them? Captain Wentworth flirts, almost disastrously, with two teenage girls he meets in a country house; Edward in *Sense and Sensibility* falls in love first with the scheming Lucy Steele, and then with Elinor, with seemingly little sense that this is a problem; and, also in *Sense and Sensibility*, Colonel Brandon, that deep, that serious man, who has loved and lost in his youth, learns to love again with Marianne. And we ought to spend some time with Marianne, that heroine most likely to have sung Burns’s songs. Marianne, who so scorNS the idea of second attachments, at fifteen thinks she will never meet anyone up to her high standards, at sixteen falls in love with a deceiving scoundrel, and at nineteen marries Colonel Brandon, who becomes the love of her life, but who is undoubtedly a second attachment. What are we to think of such apparent self-contradiction? Let me remind you once again that Jane Austen knows more than any of her heroines, and take one last flash back to the opening of *Persuasion*, that 300-page hymn to first attachments, where we read some words no one ever talks about, in which the wise narrator says, of Anne’s first broken engagement and its painful aftermath, ‘No second attachment, the only thoroughly natural, happy, and sufficient cure, at her time of life, had been possible to the nice tone of her mind, the fastidiousness of her taste, in the small limits of the society around them’ (I iv 30–31). Many things are possible in human life, Jane Austen would seem to be suggesting here, among them feeling, forgetting, remembering, and feeling again. Her final heroine in the tragically unfinished *Sanditon* may not be able to love Burns’s poetry when she thinks about the man, but I think Jane Austen could.