

NEWS



Lochhead, left, said Burns seemed to boast of assaulting his girlfriend, later wife, Jean Armour, pictured right in a painting with granddaughter Sarah. The poet married Armour shortly after the 'offensive' letter



#RabbieToo — Bard was Weinstein of his day

Liz Lochhead brands Burns a 'sex pest' for the treatment of his pregnant girlfriend

Tim Cornwell

His sexual exploits are almost as legendary as his poetry.

However, a letter penned by Robert Burns, who died in 1796, in which he seems to boast of raping his heavily pregnant girlfriend, has been described as "Weinsteinian" by one of Scotland's best-known poets.

Liz Lochhead said the bard's "disgraceful sexual boast" suggested a lack of respect for women that echoes the alleged behaviour of Harvey Weinstein, the shamed Hollywood mogul.

Lochhead, a former makar of Scotland, points to a letter from Burns in 1788 that described a sexual encounter with his girlfriend, Jean Armour.

In it, Burns, a renowned womaniser, bragged of jumping on a "destitute and friendless" Armour and giving her a "thundering scalade" [military assault] on a horse manure-strewn floor when she was pregnant with his twins. The couple later married.

Lochhead, who will deliver a talk on "Burns and Women" later this month, said the shocking account made her think that it would be more appropriate to wear black for the occasion, rather than tartan.

"As I was doing my research into what the hell I was going to say on 'Burns and Women', I looked up a notorious letter he sent to his friend Bob Ainslie. I had to laugh as I thought, 'bloody hell, should I be ditching my usual tartan jacket and going in black?'" said Lochhead.

"The disgraceful sexual boast to his friend seemed very like a rape of his heavily pregnant girlfriend – pregnant with the second set of twins she would bear him just before he did marry her. It's very, very Weinsteinian, that little disgraceful letter; it is notorious, and I am going to quote it."

Lochhead, a much-loved icon of the country's literary scene, will speak on Burns and Women at a dinner for the Scottish Hellenic Society in Glasgow.

She will also read from Ae Fond Kiss, seen as the apogee of Burns's unconsummated love for Agnes Maclehose, whom he named Clarinda.

"The more one reads about [Burns], the more one is faced with what a contradictory character he was," Lochhead said. "He was a genuine romantic, easily flamed to passionate love. He was a sex pest as well I think. Does that mean he isn't worth reading? It's not really relevant. Why should we look to artists to be

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good people? I don't see why we would be hating everything that the apparently hideously bullying Weinstein's ever done – I hate everything he has done to women as a man with power over them – but why should we wonder if we can still watch his films?"

Since October, more than 80 women have made allegations of sexual abuse against Weinstein, the 65-year-old American film producer. They include the British actress Lysette Anthony, who claims she was raped by Weinstein in her London home in the late 1980s.

The scandal has spawned the #MeToo

movement on social media, with women speaking out about sexual harassment.

Lochhead will take part in a Burns celebration in Edinburgh as well as Glasgow this year, in the Burns Unbroke festival at the Summerhall venue, where both contemporary artists and poets will respond to his work.

There she will read her parody From a Mouse, a response to his To a Mouse. It includes the lines: "Burns, baith man and poet, liked to dominate/His reputation wi the lassies wasna great."

Of Ae Fond Kiss, and the letter to Ainslie, Lochhead, said: "There's no reason to suppose Burns was not sincere in both these things. He's just as sincere in his romantic love for Clarinda as he is for the horrible sexual braggart that he makes himself sound in his letter."

"For all we know his reconnection with Jean Armour, for all its roll-in-the-hay setting, was not in actuality experienced by either at the time as other than passionate and loving and (perhaps) a huge relief of a homecoming to him. We know that he married Jean a week or two later and wrote a letter about that and about his love for his new wife that would have offended no one, not even Jean's father."