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Gendering the Scottish Ballad: The Case of Anne Bannerman's *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry*

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When Anne Bannerman died in 1829, very few people mourned her passing or even remembered that earlier in the century she had published two books of poetry, the second of which was one of the earliest forays by a female poet into the gothic ballad tradition. The next year her fellow countryman Walter Scott memorialized her by writing that "Miss Anne Bannerman likewise should not be forgotten, whose *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* appeared about 1802. They were perhaps too mystical and too abrupt; yet if it be the purpose of this kind of ballad poetry powerfully to excite the imagination, without pretending to satisfy it, few persons have succeeded better than this gifted lady, whose volume is peculiarly fit to be read in a lonely house by a decaying lamp" (IV. 16-7). Scott was accurate in his estimate of both the date of publication and the critics' dismissive reaction to the poems. "Mystical" and "abrupt" are appropriate complaints against the poems. But neither Scott nor Bannerman's other critics appreciated the specifically gendered nationalistic agendas in her ballads.

The ballads express the melancholia, loneliness, disappointment, betrayal, and homelessness, that pervaded Scotland after it had merged with England in the Acts of Union, 1707, and its hereditary leaders (known as "the Pretenders") failed to liberate the country from the English in 1715 and 1745. While *faux* medievalism oozes from the pages of Bannerman's second book of poems, *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry*, published in London in 1802, this "lost" Scottish female poet also participated in at least three major cultural movements.

First, Bannerman subscribes to the Whig nationalistic enterprise of uniting Scotland, Wales, and England as one country by resurrecting in her poem "The Prophecy of Merlin" the legend of King Arthur as a Celtic King of a unified (and never-existing) country to which England, Wales, and Scotland once supposedly belonged. The gothic ballad as popularized by Percy, Scott, Hogg, Leyden, and Lewis ambivalently participates in the construction of the nation as, in

Benedict Anderson's words, an "imagined community." Anderson claims that nationality fills in the psychic gaps when the coherence of a religious system is threatened, when language is no longer sacred, and when dynastic power is limited (6; 36). The growth of print-culture facilitates this new movement toward redefining the community in imaginary ways, but in Britain the ballad arose largely as a reactionary attempt to recapture the sacred status of the bard, the value of nativism, primitivism and an oral-based culture, and the ethnically-based power of monarchs and religious leaders. In short, the ballad as a nationalistic literary tool (anti-Augustan and therefore anti-French) is generically at odds with the larger culture's movement toward individualism, nationalism, and capitalism. As Leith Davis notes, literary representations of nationality "struggle with finding a way in which to simultaneously acknowledge and . . . downplay internal difference" (4) in Britain. Bannerman was no exception. At times her ballads appear to advance what Newman labels "nationalist aesthetics"—"oracular, subjectivist, primitivistic, loco-descriptive, populist, and anti-French" (240)—while at other times her work presents a sophisticated cosmopolitanism, an irreligious tendency and progressive moral and social ideologies. Her works can be alternately Whiggish or Tory, keenly concerned with civil and individual rights and then decidedly conservative, nostalgic evocations of a Britain that never existed and yet which was at that very time struggling to come into existence.

Secondly, the vehement anti-Catholicism Bannerman expresses in her poem "The Nun" as well as other works suggests a nationalistic agenda again: she is attempting to persuade her readers of their mutual religious identity and superiority in a nationalized and rational Protestantism.

Finally, and importantly, Bannerman's ballads introduce a new perspective into the traditional construction of the female representation in the ballad genre. Bannerman genders the ballad in a way that her male contemporaries did not. Scott and Percy, Wordsworth and Coleridge certainly

presented women as victims of male systems of privilege, but Bannerman goes one step further: she represents women who cannot be exterminated, who keep coming back from the dead to avenge themselves on their oppressors. She presents the woman as a vampiric, powerful, angry, vengeful force of nature, uncontrolled and uncontrollable by any religious or political system.

Bannerman was writing when what is now recognized as the loyalty gothic tradition was codified, works whose explicit purpose was to construct a unified and harmonious British nation committed to anti-French, anti-Catholic, and anti-republican sentiments. Inherent in this tradition was a nostalgic conservatism that cloaked itself in a variety of medieval and chivalric poses and props—King Arthur and his round table, damsels in distress, and mad monks, either lecherous or gluttonous or both. That Bannerman was both attracted to and repelled by the poses and props is revealed in her ballads.

But the larger issue in these long-lost works is, I think, cultural. Bannerman, along with Janet Little, Caroline Nairne, and Anne Grant, is one of those Scottish Romantic women poets whose works have been so completely effaced that discovering information about any of them is difficult at best. One can, then, read the poetry for its own sake, with little biography, or one can attempt to read the poetry for clues about the cultural, historical, religious and political landscapes in which they were written. By rediscovering and attempting to interpret these lost women poets, one can enrich and complicate what is understood and codified as Romanticism.

Let me begin, however, with a few general observations about Scotland's literary productions as forms of nationalistic sublimation. Murray Pittock has observed that the crucial myth in Scotland is the Jacobite legacy, noting that "the lustre of depoliticized sentiment casts a glow over political defeat symbolised by images torn out of history to grace the niches of romantic veneration and its commercial pastiche" (136). The gothic ballad, of course, is just one such niche, enshrining the apparently necessary impulse to distort history—that is, as a dynastic power struggle rewritten as family romance. If Scotland could not resurrect the literal Bonny Prince Charley, then its literature would replay displaced dynastic struggles so that the underdog triumphed and political assimilation was forestalled. Reminiscences of a feudal, aristocratic past apparently die hard.

In addition to the need to rewrite history as a royalist fantasy-formation, Scottish writers have been particularly prone to bifurcation, or positing two types of Scots with two divergent national destinies. Gregory Smith called this phenomenon "Caledonian antisyzygy" in Scottish literature, a fissure between the realms of fantasy and reality (19). Christopher Harvie expands on this notion, and argues that there is a "schizophrenia" in Scotland, a radical difference

between the values of "the simplicity and purity (real or imagined) of nativism" and the "cosmopolitan sophistication" and dissatisfaction with Scotland evidenced by so many of her intellectuals. This rupture is further evidence of what Harvie labels a "split personality [in the country that] has taken a social form between the 'red' Scots—those who leave in search of new opportunities, the outward-bound strain of 'Scots on the make,' unspeakable or otherwise—and the 'black' Scots—those who stay to nourish the home culture, the Kailyard and the tartan monsters" (112). Certainly the works of Hogg and Stevenson make manifest this tendency toward bifurcation and division, this myth of the failed escape and the hopelessness of either remaining at home or accepting exile.

Finally, Scottish literary works tend to be enamored of the past as past, as the cultural site of displaced enabling myths and legends. In his *Understanding Scotland*, David McCrone has identified what he calls two "dominant modes" of understanding Scotland: the historical and the cultural, but as he notes, "both [are] focused upon Scotland as 'past.' This is not difficult to comprehend because 'Scotland' as an object of study seems to belong there . . . many argue that Scotland is particularly prone to myths and legends about itself, because it lacks the formal political institutions of state autonomy" (3; 17). When one places this statement alongside Tom Nairn's comment that Scotland can "only be 'sub-nationalist,' in the sense of venting its national content in various crooked ways—neurotically, so to speak, rather than directly" (156), one can, I think, appreciate Bannerman's bifurcated artistic achievement.

In the Prologue that Bannerman attached to the reprinted version of her *Tales* in 1807, she specifically implores her readers to "Turn from the path; if search of gay delight / Lead thy vain footsteps back to ages past!" Instead she invites her readers to join her in plundering "the dim regions of monastic night," the "dark recesses, [where] dwells / The long-lost Spirit of forgotten time, / Whose voice prophetic reach'd to distant climes, / And rul'd the nations from his witch'd cells" (138). The references to the "voice prophetic" and ruling the nations situates these ballads into the nationalistic tradition that Katie Trumpener has labelled "Bardic Nationalism": "English literature, so-called, constitutes itself in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries through the systematic imitation, appropriation, and political neutralization of antiquarian and nationalist literary developments in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales" (xi). Uniquely, Bannerman's ballads specifically gender the nationalistic enterprise outlined by Trumpener, Newman, and others. Bannerman's ballads force her readers to ask, what role and identity women have in the newly emerging nation of "Great Britain." Are women still to be the pawns of men who exchange them for property or, worse, are women to be warehoused in convents or brothels because they have failed to produce and successfully mother sons and heirs? Bannerman's poetry turns the gothic ballad tradition on its head

by revealing that the tradition itself is predicated on the dehumanization and objectification of women as victims of a patriarchal system that has relegated them to the status of perjured nuns, mad oracles, or murdered mutilated mermaids, floating around on the periphery of a country in which they can never have a home, let alone full citizenship. For Bannerman, there can be no newly nationalistic Britain if its literary productions continue to accept and promulgate the corrupt tropes that have represented women. Bannerman, then, rewrites the gothic ballad in order to critique its European—Catholic, French, and aristocratic—lineage.

Bannerman's works in the *Tales* can be grouped around three dominant themes: the castrating, avenging femme fatale wreaking havoc on a male system of privilege; a displaced male mourning the loss of his home and property; and a king or knight fighting to stave off political dissolution brought about through corrupt internal forces. In addition to these political and social concerns, the ballads oddly repeat certain uncanny imagery patterns: the veiled woman, the atrophied or amputated arm, the voice from the dead that continues to tell its narrative of abuse, and an obsessive focus on the eyes, either blinded or preternaturally powerful. In short, it is the realm of castration symbolism, more typical of Coleridge than of the best-known female poets of the day, say Tighe or Robinson or Smith.

Bannerman's best known ballad, "The Dark Ladie," written in response to Coleridge's ballad by the same title, embodies the first strain of Bannerman's gothic agenda: the silent (read: decapitated) woman returned to avenge herself on her demon lover, Sir Guyon, for whose sake she had deserted her husband and baby. The demon lover was, of course, a stock German topoi imported by Matthew Lewis and adapted by Walter Scott, as well as Coleridge and later Keats. In Bannerman's version, however, we see an active woman who promises all of the knights that she will haunt them in their dreams and then destroy them: "And in a tone, so deadly deep, / She pledg'd them all around, / That in their hearts, and thro' their limbs, / No pulses could be found" (7). In addition to her power to strike men dumb, she further can hold them in a trance-like grip through the power of her eyes, "a light was seen to dart from [her] eyes / That mortal never own'd" (5). Her face is never seen; her voice is strangely deep; and her black veil can never be removed. One needn't ponder too long before one realizes that the woman is death, the spurned presence of love come back to avenge herself on her faithless, unchivalrous lover Sir Guyon, corruptor of her marriage vows and destroyer of her maternal identity. Unlike Coleridge in *Christabel* and the "Dark Ladie" sonnet, Bannerman critiques the language and tropes of chivalry (and along with it sublimity and Burkean aesthetic principles) in the realm of public discourse. Instead of idealizing the chivalric code and postures that positioned men of rank as protectors of weak women and therefore justifying a class-based society, Bannerman exposed the corruption, selfishness, and greed at the core of the masculine chivalric sys-

tem. Her knights are not protectors of women, but abusers and betrayers.

A slightly different story appears in "The Perjured Nun," where Lord Henrie has to confess to his beloved Geraldine that he may be absent for a long time; he suspects that he will soon be murdered by his scorned lover, who has recently returned from the dead to avenge her betrayal. The phantom woman, again veiled and speaking in a "hollow" voice, tells her narrative of abuse, betrayal, and sexual humiliation to Geraldine: "For him! for him, I resign'd my vows, / And the guilt is on my head. . . / For him! for him! I forsook my God, / And his soul unblest shall be!" (27). Again, the veiled woman with the deep voice is dead, her uncanniness suggested by the black veil and a voice that emerges from the grave. The fact that the woman is once again the avenger, the destroyer of the male system of privilege and plunder, reinforces Bannerman's gendered critique of the gothic ballad's representation of women as passive victims of masculine sexual violence.

Yet another avenging woman appears in "The Penitent's Confession," which recounts the confession given on St. Peter's eve of a man who had killed his beloved Ellinor for no reason at all. The ghost of Ellinor not only comes back to haunt him, but she leads him by the arm to the edge of the "sandy sea" (59). The ocean would appear to be woman's natural habitat in Bannerman's poetry, suggesting that women are pushed off the continent to drown while men usurp land and estates for themselves. This poem ties the dispossession of women to a fixation on the dead woman's "ghastly arm" (58). To prove his story true to the confessor, the murderer pulls up his sleeve to reveal that after touching the woman he too now has an arm that is "a dry and wither'd bone" (59). Again here is the terrain of a masculine psychic economy in which the castrating woman possesses an uncanny, unclean body whose very touch is deadly.

"The Prophetess of the Oracle of Seam" again presents a veiled woman hidden in an island cave involved in ritual pagan sacrifices, an object of the obsessive male gaze that positions her as a dreaded, death-dealing force. Women's bodies are fearsome and freakish, hidden from view because gazing on them only strengthens their already supernatural powers. One does not generally see this sort of dread of woman presented in a woman's poetry, and it suggests either that Bannerman was consciously aping male conventions, objectifying women the way that male authors like Coleridge and Lewis do, or she was attempting something else. I would suggest that she was critiquing the gothic ballad tradition itself, and in particular, I think her attack was focused on the representation of women as marginalized, abused, scorned, left with no role to play but that of avenger. Like her victimized heroines, Bannerman was eventually marginalized by the Edinburgh literary patrons who could have supported her and her work. Her ballads can be read as fantasies of

revenge, as well as fantasies of female power and freakishness.

Moving to the second issue in Bannerman's agenda, we can see her complicity in embroidering the King Arthur legend for the early nineteenth-century nationalistic movement by examining the final work in her *Tales*, "The Prophecy of Merlin." One of the earliest subjects of nationalistic ballads, Arthur's legend actually began in Celtic Britain but was first put into written form in Brittany (Johnston 58). According to Brewer, these written records were then imported to British shores through the Vulgate Romances and finally adapted by Malory in the fifteenth century (264-76). That Bannerman should write a poem celebrating Arthur rather than King Alfred is significant. As Watt has noted, Alfred had become the ancestral hero embraced by the Whig cause and celebrated in Henry Pye's *Alfred; an Epic Poem* (1801) and Joseph Cottle's *Alfred, an Epic Poem* (1800). Alfred's status grew enormously after the British defeat by the American colonies, and specifically, it was Alfred's ability to repel foreign invaders that was particularly celebrated. In contrast, Arthur had not been the subject of literary panegyric since Richard Hole's *Arthur; or, The Northern Enchantment, A Poetical Romance* (1789). Arthur, it would appear, was more congenial to the Tory faction, which objected to Alfred's fame as "the founder of jurisprudence, and the improver of the Constitution" (50-3).

Bannerman's rendition of the familiar tale—Arthur's mysterious wounding by his bastard son Modred—is told yet once again, with a series of female goddesses leading Arthur to his final resting place, from which he will return one day to rule. What is most significant about Bannerman's ballad is her heavy and self-conscious use of antiquarian footnotes to buttress the poem. The first important note is drawn from Evans's *Specimens of Welsh Poetry* (1764): "King Arthur, according to our ancient historians, slew Modred with his own hand; but received his death-wound himself, and retired to Ynys Ofallon, or Glastenbury, where he soon afterwards died. His death was politically concealed, lest it should dispirit the Britons. Hence arose so many fabulous stories about it" (143). Bannerman's poem concludes by having the Queen of Beauty place Arthur to sleep in a cave. There Arthur is greeted by "the mighty form of Urien," and in another Evans note Bannerman explains that "Urien Regen [was] King of Cambria and a great part of Scotland, as far as the river Clyde" (144). In the final note to the poem, derived from Drayton's *Polyolbion* song three, she writes that Arthur was wounded in the battle of Camlan. Her notes, in other words, string together a Celtic king who fought in Cornwall, was buried in Wales, and then was acknowledged as the rightful ruler by Urien, one of the earliest rulers of Scotland. Her notes—supporting her own claim to be taken seriously as a scholar, classicist, and antiquarian balladeer—supplement the poem's content and construct Arthur as a pan-nationalist ruler of "the Britons."

The third component of Bannerman's nationalism concerns her anti-Catholicism and her attempt to put forward a form of rational Protestantism as a superior and unifying force for the country. Anti-Catholicism was rife in Scotland, as evidenced by the anti-Catholic riots that broke out in the Scottish Lowlands in 1778. As Colley observes, "Intolerant Protestantism . . . served as a powerful cement between the English, the Welsh and the Scots, particularly lower down the social scale. It was no accident that the first major protest in which English and Scottish artisans openly collaborated was the anti-Catholic campaign culminating in the Gordon Riots, named, of course, after a Scottish figurehead, Lord George Gordon" (23). The most obvious example of this tendency in Bannerman is her poem "The Nun," in her first volume of *Poems* (1800), based on Madame de Genlis's drama *Cecile; Ou, Le Sacrifice de l'Amitié*. Whereas de Genlis's version ends with the young woman escaping the convent to marry, Bannerman's nun is "Immur'd for ever in this living tomb, / How my soul sickens at her hated doom!" (77). The poem is a long lament from a woman separated from human companionship and isolated from nature. It is also, however, an attack on Roman Catholicism as a religion that "insults God" (77), and "binds in endless slavery the reluctant mind" (80). Its priests are "ministers, with cruel art" (83), whose victims are driven to distraction by "sick reason" (83). Catholicism is condemned for "bind[ing] mercy" and "pour[ing] the blood of thousands on th' insatiate sword: / And now, ev'n now, upon a sister shore" (89). Bannerman is referring here I think to the murder and expulsion of the Huguenots from France in 1685, while later in the poem she refers to the Spanish Inquisition as still in operation. Her most blatant attack occurs when she assumes a panoramic view of "Europe's plains," and there she can see how:

. . . [R]eligion rears the mimic tomb,
And shrouds the sufferer in a dungeon's gloom;
Enwrapt in superstition's iron chains, . . .
Mistrust and guile; in every frightful cell,
Usurp the place, where piety should dwell. . .
How long, humanity! shalt thou deplore
That dread Tribunal, horror's darkest cave,
Where ruthless murder heaps the midnight grave! (88-9)

Bannerman sounds uncannily like both Radcliffe and Blake, and the Protestantism she advocates would appear to be just as nationalistic as theirs. In contrast to Catholicism, she depicts true worshippers of "Heaven's immortal light" who are filled with "Piety" because their "lips ne'er utter what their hearts oppose" (80-1).

I would like to conclude by suggesting some of the critical questions and possible answers that remain about Bannerman and her work. The first issue is the gothic ballad tradition itself and its inherently anachronistic status even during its popularity. In a society that had moved quickly away from an oral-based culture to one being nationalized on the basis of written and codified discourse systems, the ballad

could be viewed either as quaint and amusing or threatening and an abhorrent reminder of the sort of chaos that could come again if priests were in control of all means of communication. It is, however, one thing for the well-positioned Tory Walter Scott to produce a volume of ballads, while it is altogether another thing for an obscure, penniless, and unprotected woman to do so. While Scott's ballads—and his *Marmion* (1808), a poem obviously indebted to Bannerman's "The Nun"—were lauded, Bannerman's were not.

The second issue is how to read poetry when one knows little about the author. Is it fair to impose late twentieth-century critical approaches on her work, speculating about her personal life when there is no basis for that speculation? How far can one conjecture about an author's life to fit one's own procrustean bed of criticism? I pose this question because of my reactions to the only two extant discussions of Bannerman's poetry. For instance, Adriana Craciun would like to read her as an early poetic deconstructionist: "Bannerman offers us a historically specific, grounded, and implicitly political feminist critique of Western metaphysics, specifically Romanticism, and its violent exclusion of women. Yet, and this is crucial, Bannerman simultaneously celebrates this same poststructuralist poetics, descending again and again to that point where poetry 'escapes every grasp and all ends' [Blanchot], even feminist ones" (173). Trying to position Bannerman's ballads in the context of the nihilistic/skeptical theories of Nietzsche, Blanchot, Bataille may be intellectually interesting, but it finally distorts the historical, cultural, and political issues with which Bannerman was obviously dealing.

Andrew Elfenbein's approach is even more far-afield. For him, the accidental brush in the hallway between the dead nun and the beloved in "The Perjured Nun" should be read with Terry Castle's theories in mind: "Castle's analysis suggests how the apparitional quality of lesbian representation in Bannerman's work was itself a condition of her authorial stance as a female genius" (146). For Elfenbein, Bannerman's poetry "continually avoids heteronormativity" (146), while the fact that she never married suggests that she was a lesbian (132). Trying to overly-complicate or "out" every female author whoever put pen to paper will not help to elucidate the cultural and historical situations of these writers, nor do either of these approaches deepen one's understanding of Bannerman's texts.

One fact that is known about Bannerman: she taught herself Italian in a futile attempt to make her living as a translator rather than as a governess, which is how she ended her days. Buried in a pauper's grave outside of Edinburgh, she and her two books of poetry were almost completely forgotten, until a computer-assisted recovery process suddenly resurrected her, her mermaids and nuns, her knights and Kings, staring out at us from a dark screen, asking us to hear their voices—not our own.

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