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Author(s): Lynn Wollstadt

Source: *Western Folklore*, Vol. 61, No. 3/4 (Autumn, 2002), pp. 295-317

Published by: [Western States Folklore Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1500424>

Accessed: 09/04/2013 10:20

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Controlling Women

Reading Gender in the Ballads

Scottish Women Sang

LYNN WOLLSTADT

The Scottish ballad tradition has always been a tradition of both sexes; since ballads started to be collected in the eighteenth century, at least, both men and women have learned and passed on these traditional songs.¹ According to the recordings made of traditional singers by the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh, however, men and women do not necessarily sing the same songs. The ten songs in the School's sound archives most often recorded from female singers between 1951 and 1997, for example, have only two titles in common with the ten songs most often recorded from men.² Analysis of the specific ballad narratives that were most popular among female singers in twentieth-century Scotland suggests certain buried themes that may underlie that popularity; these particular themes may have appealed more than others to many women singers.

I must preface this study with three vital caveats. First, it would certainly be foolhardy to imply that any singer would never choose to learn a song whose lyrics did not appeal to him or her. Certainly many other factors play into that decision, such as a pleasing melody or the social context with which the song is associated.³ Second, this discussion is based primarily on the number of times that a ballad was recorded and the most common version of each ballad.⁴ Although this essay does look at specific versions of songs that the School of Scottish Studies has transcribed, many recordings remain untranscribed, and it is possible that certain recordings may contain variations that change the meaning of the song. Finally, it must be noted that the traditional songs that are most often recorded from any particular group of people are not necessarily the most popular among that group or even the favorites of individual singers. Fieldworkers may request certain songs more than others, or singers might sing songs they think the fieldworker wants to hear.

Nevertheless, the decision to learn and remember a song does require that a singer find the song appealing or meaningful in some way; the fact that a song *has* been learned by a particular singer means that that singer found the song worth learning. Thus, it is significant that the songs that appear most often in the repertoires of women—the songs that significant numbers of women found worth learning—show similar patterns in their portrayal of gender roles. These patterns are especially noteworthy because they are at odds with patterns in the larger corpus of traditional ballads in Scotland.

This essay looks specifically at the way the ballads popular among twentieth-century women singers construct both male and female gender roles. What sort of women people these ballads, and what type of men? Though on the surface these ballad narratives seem to describe women who are either pathetic victims or heartless hussies, many can be seen as addressing issues of female power. These narratives not only deal with a woman's lack of control over her own life, but they demonstrate by example ways of circumventing that lack. At the same time, issues of control also appear central to the ideals of masculinity offered by many of these ballads. Interestingly, the men whom the ballads portray as "attractive"—sympathetic supporting characters as well as the male "love interests"—are those who lack power. While Scottish ballads generally take for granted a society in which women function under male control, the most attractive, sympathetic male characters in the ballads popular among women are themselves generally vulnerable, or even victimized. The plights of the female characters in the ballads Scottish women sang show that these songs recognize a cultural system of male hegemony, but the fact that the most positively represented male characters are also vulnerable shows that these ballads do not celebrate that system.

This appreciation of male vulnerability, however, is not typical of the Scottish ballad tradition as a whole. The ballads that most often appear in women's repertoires are much more critical of men who wield power than are most Scottish ballads. Emily Lyle's collection of Scottish ballads, for example, contains forty-seven ballads that include some sort of romantic male figure. Almost three-quarters of these (thirty-five) show attractive, romantically desirable male characters who are in clear positions of power, often simply because of their social position. Of course, close analysis of any of these narratives may reveal subtleties that make such broad generalizations dangerous, but the larger pattern here is significant. Most of the time, male lovers in these ballads are specifically

identified as “gentlemen”: lords, knights, earls, or perhaps squires, with the occasional elfin knight thrown in the mix. Of the twelve ballads that do not identify their male protagonists as noble, half omit any mention of the man’s social class. Only six of these forty-seven ballads depict male protagonists who are clearly not of high social standing: “The Keach i the Creel” (Child 281), “Johny Faa, the Gypsy Laddie” (Child 200: “The Gypsy Laddie”), and “Bob Norris” (Child 83: “Child Maurice”), “The Shepherd’s Son” (Child 112: “The Baffled Knight”), “The Dowie Dens o Yarrow” (Child 214: “The Braes o Yarrow”), and “Bog o’ Gight” (Child 209: “Geordie”).

Even more pertinently, those “gentlemen” lovers who pervade the ballad tradition are “doers”: these men *act*, and women must deal with their actions. As a tool for considering how successfully the women in these ballads fare in that task, I have found useful Polly Stewart’s essay, “Wishful Wilful Wily Women: Lessons for Female Success in the Child Ballads” (Stewart 1993). Stewart’s essay categorizes orally derived Child ballads that contain female characters that are in agonistic situations with men. She evaluates the success of the cultural and personal goals of the women in these narratives, defining “cultural success” as meeting male expectations and “personal success” as averting harm or reaching a personal goal. Each ballad that Stewart evaluates can thus have one of four possible outcomes: personal and cultural success, personal success but cultural failure, personal failure but cultural success, or personal and cultural failure. Although this system of categorization can be clumsy, and Stewart’s assessments are at times debatable, it is a useful place to begin a discussion of what happens to the women in ballads.

The ballad “Burd Ellen” (Child 63: “Child Waters”), for example, is a variation on a common plot in Lyle’s collection, and Stewart labels it as one of both personal and cultural success. Lord John leaves the narrative’s pregnant heroine. She dresses as a page and follows his horse on foot, telling her about-to-be-born baby, “Your father rides on high horse-back, / Cares little for us twae.” Even after the lord acknowledges her and takes her home, he insists there is no hope for a marriage and tells her that his dogs and horses will fare better than she: “O my dogs sal eat the good white bread, / An ye sal eat the bran . . . O my horse sal eat the good white meal, / An ye sal eat the corn.” Her perseverance is finally rewarded when his mother intervenes on her behalf and he marries her. According to Stewart’s classification system, she has achieved cultural success because she becomes safely married and avoids the social disgrace

of a bastard child, and she has achieved personal success because this is clearly her own goal as well. While the heroine in this ballad demonstrates tremendous tenacity and manipulates her situation so that she gets what she needs, she is clearly working against her lover, and against the patriarchal system he represents.

We see a similar situation in another ballad not collected by the School of Scottish Studies, "Lord Thomas and Fair Annet" (Child 73). Fair Annet is also faced with a romantic partner who chooses to marry a wealthier woman, and again the ballad does not condemn the lord for this decision. Lord Thomas remains a desirable figure; it is the homely "nut-browne bride" who is the ballad's villain and stabs the beautiful Annet when she appears at the wedding. Though this ballad ends tragically, with the murder of Annet and suicide of Lord Thomas, it reaffirms the theme of young women having to cope with the actions of the powerful men they want to marry. Stewart categorizes this ballad as one of both personal and cultural failure, but I would argue that Annet's death does not necessarily mean that Annet has not met cultural expectations. The ballad world seems to approve of her crashing of the wedding, as she is accompanied by twenty-four knights and the same number of ladies, "As gin she had bin a bride." Though she and her lover do not marry, they are finally united by the intertwining of the birch and the briar that grow on their respective graves, proving that they "were twa luvvers deare."

The female protagonist of "Lord Thomas and Fair Annie" (Child 62: "Fair Annie"), a ballad the School of Scottish Studies collected from only four different singers, experiences a similar struggle. Her highborn lover and the father of her seven children brings home a wealthy wife, casting Annie aside. Annie is at the mercy of Lord Thomas's decision, and although she is clearly unhappy she welcomes the new wife. She is saved from abandonment only when the other woman realizes they are sisters. Annie's goal, finally realized when her sister leaves Annie her own gold, is marriage to the heartless lord. The ballad "The Shepherd's Tochter" (Child 110: "The Knight and Shepherd's Daughter") similarly shows a young woman very directly contending with male hegemony, and again the ballad ultimately confirms the romantic desirability of the highborn, powerful hero, while at the same time condemning his actions. The "shepherd's dochter" is clearly a plucky heroine, as she insists on holding accountable the "gay braw gentleman" who has helped himself to her virginity, following him to court and telling the

king of her rape. Even after he tries to squirm out of the king's order to marry her by offering her gold and repeatedly insults her, the young woman still insists on the marriage. The punch line of the tale is in the final stanza, however, when she reveals that she is actually of noble blood herself. Thus the gentleman is tortured for a while with the belief that he must marry a shepherd's daughter, but he is ultimately rewarded with a well-born wife for his rape of a seeming commoner. Though Stewart classifies this ballad as one of cultural success but personal failure because of the rape, the young woman seems to be pleased enough to marry her attacker, telling him they make a fine couple: "But yet I think a fitter match / Could scarcely gang thegither." This ballad was collected from eleven singers by the School of Scottish Studies—nine men and only two women—and most sang a differently titled version.⁵ Interestingly, the unsuitability of "The Shepherd's Daughter" to late-twentieth-century sensibilities, at least, was illustrated to me in the summer of 1999, when I spoke with a professional folk singer who had recently begun learning "The Shepherd's Daughter" to add to his repertoire, but whose wife so disliked the ballad's ending that she convinced him not to perform it.⁶

These four ballads are just a brief example of the type of men who seem to be most prevalent in the Scottish ballad world. Although the path to the altar is seldom smooth and women must often use their wits or their beauty to get their man, desirable romantic partners are nearly always commanding and authoritative. Even the few ballads in the larger Scottish ballad corpus whose male protagonists are not particularly powerful or nobly born tend to confirm this message. For example, the title character in "The Shepherd's Son" is too nice for his own good; he is a wimp. The ballad condemns his compassion, mocking the lack of personal power that this version seems to associate with his low social status. Because he does not force himself on the "lady fair" he finds swimming naked but instead helps her to the safety of her father's house, she taunts him: "'Pough! You're a fool without,' she says, / 'And I'm a maid within.'" The lady's message is explicit; she explains "had you done what you should do, / I neer had left you there." Rape, a display of male power, would have won him a highborn wife, but courtesy brings only ridicule.

On the other hand, the male protagonist in "Johnny Faa, the Gypsy Laddie," is not well born, but he is certainly powerful. Though the many versions of this ballad lend themselves to several interpretations, and

many end with the gypsies' hanging, the outlaw for whom the "fair lady" leaves her lord is always a commanding figure. Popular tradition connects him with the king of the gypsies, or "Lord and Earl of Little Egypt," as a 1540 document identifies a Rom named Johnne Faw.⁷ He is clearly charismatic as well, though his personal power over the lady is often explained as magic, the casting of a glamor. Though he is outside proper noble society, therefore, the "gypsy laddie" is by no means a humble character. Neither does the ballad "Bob Norris" actually give us a low-born hero; this narrative is actually a tragic tale of mistaken identity. Lord Barnard beheads the humble Bob Norris in a jealous rage, only to discover that Bob Norris is actually the illegitimate son of Lady Barnard. Thus Bob Norris, the most attractive and sympathetic male character in this ballad, does lack social authority, but he is still of noble blood. "The Keach i the Creel," on the other hand, is a comic ballad. As a "bonnie clerk," its protagonist is neither personally nor socially commanding, but neither does the ballad portray him as a particularly appealing lover. The ballad's focus is not actually on a romantic union between lovers, but on the mishaps that ensue when the clerk tries to sneak into a young maid's family home. After a closer look, therefore, it seems that of the forty-seven ballads in Lyle's collection that involve a male romantic figure, only two, "Bog o' Gight" and "The Dowie Dens o' Yarrow," offer men who are not socially commanding as desirable romantic partners.

These narratives of male authority do not seem to be the ones that Scottish women kept alive for generations, however. Of the ten ballads that the School of Scottish Studies recorded most often from traditional women singers, none shows women striving to marry the commanding, nobly born men who are desired so often in the tradition as a whole. At the heart of these narratives are indeed issues of authority, but the gender roles they portray do not seem to follow quite the same pattern as the majority of those in the larger Scottish corpus. Most of the female characters in these ballads do deal with a lack of control over their own lives, as is typical in Scottish ballads, but though the heroines in these ten are often less successful both personally and culturally, they actually model ways of gaining control in apparently hopeless situations.⁸ A larger difference, though, is that the attractive or sympathetic male characters in these ballads—when there are any—are also in vulnerable situations, either having lost their usual authority or never having had it. Desirable romantic partners are not the men who wield the most power; on the contrary, well-born and authoritative men are depicted most positively when they are on their deathbeds.

Thematically, the ten ballads most often recorded by women singers fall into four broad categories. Three ballads depict dying men or boys ("Barbara Allan," "Lord Randal," and "The Twa Brithers"). Two others show women who suffer for being in love with men who are socially beneath them ("Mill o' Tifty's Annie" and "The Dowie Dens of Yarrow"). Three can be interpreted as cautionary tales warning of the dangers of women becoming romantically involved with men at all ("Banks of Red Roses," "I Wish I Were a Maid Again," and "Mary Hamilton"); as noted above, I shall discuss "Mary Hamilton." Only two of these ten ballad narratives ("The Laird o' Drum" and "The Beggar Man") show women who marry socially-commanding men, as so often happens in the tradition as a whole, and, as I will show, neither of these marriages is really the woman's personal goal. Of course, any one ballad can lend itself to several interpretations, and one ballad may be sung in variations that can further change the meaning of the ballad. My goal here is to show what these particular ballads sung by Scottish women might have in common, as part of a larger effort to understand the relationship between women singers and the Scottish ballad tradition. I suggest only that the lack of control faced by women in these ballads, and the distrust of the ballad world's powerful men, may have spoken at some conscious or unconscious level to the women who found these songs appealing enough to learn and remember.

"Mill o' Tifty's Annie" (Child 233: "Andrew Lammie") and "The Dowie Dens of Yarrow" (Child 214: "Braes of Yarrow") are emblematic of those themes. Both ballads tell of young women who ultimately die because they are not allowed to marry lovers who are socially beneath them. Both of these heroines suffer from an obvious lack of control over their own lives, both seem to be the pathetic victims of male power, and both emphasize the desirability of the social underdog. At the same time, however, both women take control of their situations in their own ways.

At first, the "personal and cultural failure" of the protagonist of "Mill o' Tifty's Annie" that Stewart sees hardly appears to be debatable. Annie falls in love with the Lord Fyvie's trumpeter, Andrew Lammie. Although the match is disapproved of by both Annie's father and Lord Fyvie, Annie and Andrew declare their love, and Andrew leaves for Edinburgh, promising to marry Annie when he returns. Lord Fyvie takes pity on Annie, but her father still refuses the match. Annie remains steadfast, even while being beaten to death by her father, mother, and brother. Annie's death means that neither her own nor any of the male goals for

her are realized. Closer examination of the ballad shows, however, that redefining Annie's "goals" makes it possible to read this ballad as one of personal and cultural success. An interpretation of cultural success should be not too difficult to see, for Annie is ultimately "approved of" by most of the male authority figures in her life. After her death, Annie's father "sorely now laments" and "wishes he had given consent" to Annie; Lord Tiftie calls Annie the "fairest flower . . . that e'er's come up in Fyvie" and says he would have given the couple land to live on (Mrs. Findlater and Mrs. Johnston, SA1966/44/A3).⁹ The moral of the story is clearly stated: a warning to parents "who children have, / In crossing them be cannie, / Lest when too late you shall repent." Cultural mores are thus clearly on Annie's side. Annie's personal success, on the other hand, becomes a possibility when Annie's goal is identified not as marriage to Andrew Lammie, but as the approval of these male authority figures. This approval must come, however, on her own terms. The ballad shows Annie taking what control over herself she can in a difficult situation.

That Annie's true goal is not marriage is supported by the fact that she foretells her own death long before she ever warns Andrew. In a four-stanza passage toward the beginning of the ballad that is cast from Annie's point of view, we learn of this prophecy as Annie lies awake lamenting her plight:

Love comes in at my bedside
 And love lies down beside me.
 Love has possesst my tender breast,
 And love will waste my body.

She also answers the trumpeter's promise of marriage with a warning that she will not live to see it, saying that her "bridal bed will then be made / In the green church-yard o Fyvie." Then, once Annie's father learns of the love affair and Andrew's trumpeting can be heard in the distance, Annie has a conversation with her father in which she expresses other specific desires. She requests his approbation, insists on the inflexibility of her own position, and also reminds him of the ways she can act for male approval:

"My father dear, I pray forbear
 And reproach no more your Annie,
 I'd rather hear that cow to low
 Than a' the kye in Fyvie.

"I would not for my brow new goon,
 And a' your gifts so many,
 That it was told in Kennedy's (?) land [sic]
 How cruel you're to Annie.

"But if you strike me I will cry,
 And gentlemen will hear me.
 Lord Fyvie he'll be riding by
 And he'll come in and see me."

Here, Annie makes clear her desire for male approval but also her unwillingness to compromise her feelings. In standing up for herself, however, she cannily reminds her father that he too is subject to a higher male authority, one who, she correctly predicts, will feel sorry for her and take her side against her father. Lord Fyvie does just that and entreats Annie's father to approve her marriage to the trumpeter, but her father still insists on "some higher match." Annie then indirectly insults Lord Fyvie by telling the two men that she would not marry anyone else even for all of Fyvie's lands (even, by implication, the laird himself). This is the declaration that actually instigates the beatings that she dies of, the beatings that eventually lead to the father's repentance and approval. Thus, it is these words by which she achieves a kind of personal success, controlling the final action in the ballad and fulfilling her own prophecy.

I do not wish to imply that this ballad should be understood to have some coded feminist message, or that it is in any way a celebration of female power or strength. Any personal victory achieved only through death is clearly a hollow one. Annie's behavior is also consistently passive; she even falls in love in the first place only through Andrew's actions: "He had the art to gain the heart / O' Mill o' Tifty's Annie." Her manipulation of the final action can also be seen as passive-aggressive behavior, as she seems consciously to goad all sources of authority into anger. Nevertheless, "Mill o' Tifty's Annie" does tell the story of a young woman who submits to male authority externally but not internally, and who eventually manages to convince that authority that they are wrong and she is right. Of course, that this convincing only occurs at the cost of her own life is possibly what made this ballad appealing to many male singers as well as female singers. Annie is not given the chance actually to act against the mores of the dominant culture, but only to protest them in theory.

This ballad's portrayal of masculinity is also emblematic of these ten ballad narratives. "Mill o' Tifty's Annie" clearly portrays Andrew Lammie as romantically desirable: "Proper he was, both young and gay, / His like was not in Fyvie." Even Annie's mother asks her, "Did you ever see a prettier man / Than the trumpeter o Fyvie?" Of the four male characters in the narrative, however, Andrew has the least authority. He answers both to Lord Fyvie, who is his employer and lord, and to Annie's father (and even, to a lesser extent, her brother), who must agree to her marriage. Andrew even shows himself to wield less power in this situation than Annie, who predicts her own death. Upon his return, Andrew adopts the often-feminine role of declaring his death, as he promises, "My love she died for me to-day; / But I'll die for her to-morrow." The characters with power, Annie's father and the brother who beats her to death, are the ballad's bad guys.

Similar themes are found in "The Dowie Dens o' Yarrow." Again a young woman is in love with a man socially beneath her, in this case a "plooman lad."¹⁰ She is also being courted, however, by "nine noblemen" who come *en masse* to fight him in competition for her. The ploughman beats them all, but he is fatally stabbed in the back by the woman's brother. The eleven figures of male authority in the story (the nine "gentlemen" suitors, her brother, and her father) all disapprove of the young woman's choice of lover, even though the young man proves himself valiantly. The young woman again dies at the end of the ballad, not realizing her goal of union with her lover. Her death, like Annie's, is brought about by her brother, though indirectly this time. While there are certain key differences between the two stories, the most obvious being that this young woman lacks Annie's antagonism toward the men who oppose her, this woman also deliberately uses death to avoid something she does not want: an alternate marriage. And like Annie, she verbally stands up to her father before she dies, refusing to allow him to take control of the situation with his offer to find her "some prettier man" to marry. "O ye may tak' your seven sons," she tells him, "An' wed them all tomorrow / But a fairer flower ne'er sprang in June / Than the lad I lost in Yarrow." In this way, "The Dowie Dens o' Yarrow" can be read as another instance of limited female success. The woman controls the outcome of the story, even if she cannot control the events that lead up to that outcome. That these women can only control their own lives through their deaths makes a dramatic statement, of course, about the patriarchal power structure of the culture that kept these ballads alive for so many generations.

The most attractive male character in "The Dowie Dens o' Yarrow" is, again, as in "Mill o Tifty's Annie," the one with the least amount of real power. When the nine armed noblemen come to fight the "plooman lad," the ploughman lad wins ("Three he slew, and three withdrew / And three lay deadly wounded"), only to be stabbed in the back by the girl's brother. The wielders of social authority, the noblemen, are not desirable partners; the ballad makes clear the unacceptability of their aggression, as the ploughman twice protests, "it's nae an equal marrow." His physical prowess does seem to be an admirable trait, but it is clearly not enough. He is first at the mercy of the noblemen's insistence on an unfair fight, and then vulnerable to the cruel brother's cowardly attack. The ballad then increases the pathos of the situation by focusing on the ploughman's dead body, as his lover combs the hair of the "bloody corpse" and "washed the reed blude frae his wounds." While the ploughman's heroic fighting is summed up in two lines, his helpless dead body is the focus of three stanzas, underscoring the tragic subjugation of both the woman and her lover at the hands of more socially powerful men.

The women in "Mill o' Tifty's Annie" and "The Dowie Dens of Yarrow" demand the audience's sympathy in a way that many of the women in other Scottish popular ballads do not. After all, the "crime" for which they are rejected by the men in their lives is simply being in love with a man of the wrong class, and both of these ballads make a point of giving these socially powerless men clear virtues over the other men in the narratives. Being in love seems to be an appropriate and acceptable state for a young woman; the twentieth century, at least, generally expects it at a certain point in a woman's life. The idea of romantic love, after all, has long been relied upon to support the patriarchal family structure at the heart of western European culture, even during times when most marriages among the well-to-do were arranged. Failing to return a worthy man's love was a far worse crime for a young girl in the ballad world, for such capricious female independence threatens cultural stability, a phenomenon that we see in "Barbara Allan." Though issues of control are again central to this well-known ballad, "Barbara Allan" reverses traditional "masculine" and "feminine" roles. Versions of this narrative vary widely, but all involve a young man dying for the love of a young woman. Though she comes to his deathbed when called, Barbara Allan refuses him the love that will, in this ballad world, cure him. The man is the desirer and the woman is the desired, and she has the option to choose whether to fulfill this desire: the "love" that she withholds has the supposed ability to restore her lover's health.

Although reactions to this ballad do, of course, vary—Bertrand Bronson, for example, noted that the ballad had demonstrated a “stronger will-to-live” than its “spineless lover had” (quoted in Lyle 1994:284)—the narrative makes clear which character is in the wrong.¹¹ This ballad does not celebrate Barbara Allan’s power over her lover, but warns of its dangers. The audience’s sympathies should be with the helpless, dying man; Barbara Allan is the villain, a selfish, shallow, grudge-bearing girl. That she realizes her fault and dies for her man redeems her only partially. The ballad’s focus is on the young man’s death; Barbara Allan dies offstage: “Since my love died for me to-day, / I’ll die for him to-morrow.”

What might twentieth-century women singers have found appealing in this ballad? The message in “Barbara Allan” is not subtle, but as Barre Toelken has pointed out, the ballad still can be understood in many different ways. “Was ‘Barbara Allen’ understood to be a case of ironic tragedy or selfish stupidity?” he asks in “Context and Meaning in the Anglo-American Ballad.” “Or a cruelly jealous woman getting her just desserts? Or an unbelievably naive man betrayed?” (Toelken 1986:32). Certainly, individual women may have seen any of these possibilities. One interesting fact about the variations of this ballad, though, is the extent to which they emphasize (or fail to emphasize) the reasons behind Barbara Allan’s refusal to love this man. The version of this ballad that Child designated his “A” text contains one stanza in which Barbara Allan reminds the young man of an occasion where he slighted her:

“O dinna ye mind, young man,” said she,
 “When ye was in the tavern a drinking,
 That ye made the healths gae round and round,
 And slighted Barbara Allan?”¹²

Of the thirteen versions transcribed by the School of Scottish Studies, however, eight (including one two-verse fragment) contain no mention of the slighting at all; Barbara Allan’s hard-heartedness is left unexplained. Three versions contain one stanza explaining her attitude, and two versions include two stanzas that tell of two different occasions when the young man slighted her. These latter versions, of course, leave more room for sympathy with the female character, offering an opportunity for momentary identification with Barbara Allan, or more insight into her character. Whether a singer or listener identifies with Barbara Allan,

sympathizes with her, or thoroughly condemns her, however, at the core of the ballad is her assertion of power over a man. A woman has the power to defy male desire in this situation, she does defy this desire, and the results prove potent.

Another interesting note about this text is the social rank of the dying man. Child's "A" text identifies him as a nobleman, "Sir John Graeme"; it thus appears that here we have a sympathetically portrayed nobleman, albeit a helpless one. However, this version does not appear to be the most popular among twentieth-century Scottish singers. Of the twelve versions of "Barbara Allan" that were transcribed by the School of Studies (not all recorded versions have been transcribed), only three versions, each sung by men, clearly identify him as Sir John Graham. Four versions do not identify him as titled, calling him either Jemmie Grove, Sweet William, or "a young man"; these were recorded by three women and one man. The five remaining versions, sung by four women and one man, all adopt a first-person narration and do not specifically identify the young man as a nobleman. In this small sample, it appears that women are less likely than men to sing versions of the ballad that identify the man as well-born, thus further supporting my finding that the attractive or sympathetic male characters women more often sang about are unlikely to be in positions of personal or social authority.

"Lord Randal," also known in Scotland as "Lord Ronald," is another ballad that offers a helpless male protagonist while also addressing issues of female power. The repetitive, suspenseful dialogue between the young lord and his mother gradually reveals the fact that Lord Randal has been poisoned by his sweetheart. Thematically, the ballad is framed by the tension between the lord's normally commanding position and his current incapacity. The series of questions asked by the mother and answered by the lord not only reveal the narrative situation, they emphasize the mother's helplessness, the lord's noble position and its accompanying power, and the gradual loss of that power as he weakens. The last line of every stanza, "For I'm weary o huntin an fain wad lie doon,"¹³ identifies him as highborn (sport hunting was never a pastime of the Scottish poor) and associates him with the ultimate position of authority, that of predator. At the same time, though, it focuses on his weakening and vulnerability. The proof of the poisoning he sees in his bloodhounds, noble hunters that can represent the lord himself. Their fate, the ballad implies, will soon be the lord's fate. Some versions end when the lord tells his mother that he has been poisoned, but many draw out

the death scene further, as the mother asks what he will leave to his father, brother, and sweetheart. These last three verses heighten the suspense of the ballad, focus the narrative on the absent and evil sweetheart, and also draw attention to the material goods the lord is leaving behind. Despite the young man's wealth and his social authority as a lord, however, he has been rendered powerless by a woman. However unacceptable this situation is, and however much a singer or listener of this ballad might condemn the villainous sweetheart, to hear or sing this ballad must be to some extent a meditation on lack of control. Clearly, the ballad continually contrasts Lord Randal's former authority with his current incapacity, focusing on the loss of male power. Also powerless and equally visible in the narrative, however, is the lord's mother. Women singers may have particularly empathized with this character, who is not only helpless as she questions her son and slowly realizes that he is dying but who also occupies a secondary position in both the household, as evidenced by her subservience to her son, and in the narrative.¹⁴

While both Lord Randal's murderous sweetheart and Barbara Allan are not sympathetic characters, "Mary Hamilton" introduces an equally guilty woman who is sympathetic. This ballad also shows a woman taking control in an inappropriate way, having given birth to and then murdered an illegitimate baby fathered by Lord Darnley, the husband of Mary, Queen of Scots. Though it is clearly the song of a female villain (no version transcribed by the School of Scottish Studies denies Mary Hamilton's guilt) and therefore in some respects a cautionary tale, the ballad seems overall to be more sympathetic than condemning. Some portion of the ballad, either several verses or the entire song, is always told from Mary's first-person point of view, thus demanding some measure of the singer's identification and empathy. And though most anthologized versions of the ballad contain verses narrating the actual murder, only three of the ten versions actually transcribed by the School of Scottish Studies make any direct reference to the murder at all, instead following the progression of events and Mary's reflections after the fact, as she faces death.¹⁵ The standard chorus is emblematic of the poignancy of these reflections:

Yestreen the Queen had four Marys;
This nicht she'll hae but three.
There's Mary Beaton an Mary Seton,

An Mary Carmichael an me.
(Mrs. Nicholson SA1952/90/B21)

Other verses that usually appear in the second half of the ballad are even more sympathetic toward Mary Hamilton. They are nearly always from Mary's point of view, and they look forward toward her death rather than back on her crime. In many versions she reflects on her service to the queen, "Oh, often hae I dressed my queen, / An put gowd on her hair," wondering that as her "reward" she should have "the gallows tae be my share" (*ibid.*). Mary's reflections also usually include worry about or consideration for her parents, who are generally far away and whom she does not want to be told about her hanging. She also commonly laments her beauty, saying "happy happy is the maid / That's born o beauty free," explaining that "it was my dimpling rosy cheeks / That's been the ruin o me" (*ibid.*).

The implications of this verse are interesting, for while they do not absolve Mary Hamilton of her guilt, they make her actions the result of a situation that the young woman did not or could not control. Moreover, this idea seems to be central to the narrative, as seven out of the ten versions transcribed by the School of Scottish Studies contain it, even when only a fragment of the ballad is remembered.¹⁶ This verse puts Mary in the role of either the seduced or raped; her beauty is the cause and an unwanted bastard child the effect. Like the women of the other ballads discussed here, the part of the action that Mary Hamilton is able to control is a very small part of her total situation. She is required to take control at the birth of her baby, a situation that would have offered very limited options, given that the child's father was married and of a higher social status than she. Mary can also control her own actions in the face of dying, trying to take what little control she can when she begs that no one tell her parents of her dishonorable death.

While this ballad does thus clearly fall into Polly Stewart's category of both personal and cultural failure, Mary Hamilton does not seem quite the villain that Barbara Allan is, for she also occupies the role of victim. Perhaps the reason that Mary Hamilton comes across so sympathetically, despite the heinousness of her crime, is that her character does not threaten male hegemony in the way that Barbara Allan does. After all, she is outside the constructs of social regulations from the beginning; as soon as the child is born, which is where the ballad begins, Mary Hamilton has no socially condoned options. Marriage to the child's

father, which is the happy solution to many instances of illegitimacy in ballads, is clearly not an option in this case. Even if the adultery had not been made so much more serious by the involvement of royalty, an unmarried woman who gave birth to a married man's child would have been out of luck. There is nothing that Mary Hamilton could have done after the birth that would have pleased society; therefore, since she is about to die anyway, society can safely pity her.

"The Twa Brithers" is yet another meditation on the loss of control, this time involving a boy who has been accidentally but fatally stabbed by his brother. A full third to half of this ballad, too, is given to dialogue involving a dying person; here, the murdering boy asks his dying brother, "What will I tell to your father dear," "sweetheart dear," and "step-mother dear" (Mrs. Belle Stewart SA1955/36/A3). While the "punch line" of this ballad generally seems to be "getting" the stepmother, who prayed the boy "might never come home," the focus is on the pathos of the boys' plights. Both boys are sympathetic characters; both are presented as victims of a situation that got out of control. Not only is the stabbed boy dying—an obvious situation of powerlessness—but the questions his brother asks force him to imagine how his loved ones will deal with his death. The stabber, on the other hand, must bear the burden of his accidental fratricide and bring the dreadful news to his family.

Interestingly, the School of Scottish Studies recorded this song—the only one of the twelve ballads recorded by more than ten women that lacks a female main character—from fourteen different women but only two men, and both men sang only five-stanza fragments (Donald Stewart SA1955/67/B2, Jimmy Whyte SA1954/101/A10). The reasons for this surprising discrepancy can only be guessed at. Why did so many women sing this ballad, and why did the few men not sing all of it? It is not that men did not tend to sing "tragic" ballads; while it is true that many of the folk songs recorded by male singers were bothy songs, tending toward the humorous or bawdy, tragic ballads often appear in men's repertoires as well.¹⁷ While I must repeat here that individual singers choose to learn some ballads but not others for many reasons that do not necessarily have to do with the lyrics, such a marked discrepancy should be recognized, for it does indicate that women found something appealing in "The Twa Brithers" that many male singers did not. It is not my aim here to guess what this "something" is; certainly different women might have found different aspects of the song appealing. It is worth noting, however, what this narrative has in common with the other bal-

lads popular among women singers: the pathos of characters who are facing a situation that has gotten out of control, and who are doing the best they can to deal with the consequences.

"The Laird o' Drum" and "The Beggar Man" are the two ballads that might appear to send messages that seem incongruent with those ballads previously discussed. Instead of male love interests who are lower class, weak, or powerless, these two offer healthy gentlemen; instead of thwarted desire and death, these end with a girl marrying above her station. However, both are complex narratives with many possible interpretations, and a closer look at these narratives shows that the central themes are not so different from the others as it may first appear. Of the two, "The Beggar Man" seems the easier fit. Though it exists in widely varying versions, its central plot tells of a farmer's daughter who runs away with a beggar man whom the family has lodged for the night. The couple's return some time later reveals the apparent beggar's true identity as a wealthy gentleman (often associated with James V).¹⁸ The daughter truly believes, however, that she is running off with a begging traveler. Indeed, many versions emphasize the desirability of the beggar by focusing on the dialogue between him and the daughter, in which the daughter implores the beggar to take her with him, while the beggar himself rebukes her: "But lassie, lassie, ye're far too young; / Ye hanae got the cant o' the beggin' tongue . . . wi' me ye cannae gyaun'" (Auld Kirstie SA1955/65/B18). It is not the aristocrat to whom the girl is attracted, whom she is desperate to follow; it is the social outcast, the poor gypsy. Many singers of this ballad even leave off this traditional ending; the girl returns with her young children but with no mention of the rich gowns that usually indicate the beggar man's true status. Even when this status is addressed, the sight of their now-wealthy daughter is simply a consolation to the parents; the man that the ballad portrays as sexually desirable is still the beggar persona.

"The Laird o' Drum," on the other hand, explicitly tells of the marriage of a poor girl to a wealthy aristocrat, and thus the narrative seems to be even more of an anomaly among this group of ballads women sang. But despite Polly Stewart's classification of this narrative as one of personal and cultural success for its female protagonist, this is not the "happily ever after" marriage many ballads offer; this ballad refuses to romanticize its Cinderella theme and instead emphasizes the social realities of a marriage that crosses class lines.¹⁹ The Laird of Drum asks a beautiful shepherd's daughter to "fancy" him, but the maid refuses, saying

that the Laird of Drum is “owre high” for her: “His lady I’m no fit for to be / An’ his mistress I scorn to be, oh” (Mrs. Findlater and Mrs. Johnstone, SA1966/44/B2).²⁰ Nevertheless, she points out her old father and says she will do whatever he wills. The Laird and the shepherd negotiate for the girl, cataloging her working skills, and the deal is made. The Laird then wonders, “what will welcome my lady hame,” and the maid answers that that she cannot say. He takes her home anyway, where they are met by twenty-four young gentlemen, and, as she predicted, not one offers a welcome. The Laird welcomes her himself, but immediately begins to show remorse. She quickly reminds him that she “tellt ye that aa before . . . But noo that we’re wed an we’re laid in one bed, / Ye maun be contented wi me – oh.” Different versions then diverge, with some versions showing the Laird defending his choice of a wife who works and some versions with a remorseful laird. The final stanza seldom varies much, however, from the woman’s statement of class—and gender—equality:

“If you were dead, an’ I were dead
 An’ laid beneath the grund – oh;
 I’m sure they wad look wi’ a very clear e’e,
 That wad ken they dust frae mine – oh.”

Despite Stewart’s optimistic categorization of this ballad, we again see a female protagonist who struggles against male authority. The woman (in most versions) is married against her will to a social superior who may regret his decision. In the majority of the versions recorded and transcribed by the School of Scottish Studies, the woman’s clearly expressed desire is to stay home.²¹ She does not want to marry the laird, and she is transferred by her father to the laird like the piece of property she would have legally been. When she has the chance, though, she does speak her mind to the laird, first admonishing him for choosing her and then finally insisting on their ultimate equality. The laird, on the other hand, might be seen as an unattractive, unsympathetic character, since the shepherd’s daughter does not see him as a desirable romantic partner, or he might be seen as sympathetic because he is also vulnerable. He puts himself in a situation that he cannot control when he insists on marrying a girl who is socially beneath him. The authority of his position means that he can control circumstances to a certain extent: he can marry the woman whom he chooses. He cannot, however, have the marriage that he wants, for he cannot make his peers accept the marriage,

and the couple is shunned when they arrive home. Identifying the reasons that this ballad may have appealed to its many individual singers is of course guesswork, but despite its obvious differences the narrative does contain elements of the themes found in the other songs popular among women singers. Both partners have landed in vulnerable situations; neither has the control he or she would like. While the marriage may seem romantic to modern audiences, it is not one to be celebrated. The ballad's final grave imagery underscores the poignancy of the couple's circumstance.

Such seems to be the fate of the men and women whom Scottish women kept alive in their songs. The power of upper-class men is recognized and accepted, but it is not celebrated. The narratives of the ballads most often recorded from women do not reward male hegemony, as so many other ballads do; good things do not happen to the men who rule society. The "good guys," instead, are the underdogs, the social outcasts, the aristocrats who have been rendered helpless. The women, on the other hand, may be pawns or helpless lovers; they may be criminals or may be simply cruel. But they recognize their lack of power, and they struggle to maintain control in whatever way they can. To exercise authority, even over herself, is a formidable task for a woman in the ballad world. The desire to do so, however, is often at the heart of these ballads, and this desire may have spoken to the women who sang them.

*University of California
Davis*

NOTES

1. Though men have been until recently the primary collectors, their sources have been largely women. The oldest and most famous recorded repertoire of one singer is that of Anna Gordon Brown (1747-1810), commonly known as "Mrs. Brown." The daughter of Thomas Gordon, a professor at King's College, Aberdeen, Mrs. Brown was herself educated (at least literate) and learned most of her ballads at an early age. All of her sources were women: her mother, a maidservant, and primarily her maternal aunt, Anne Forbes (Mrs. Farquherson). Mrs. Farquherson also had female sources: "the nurses and old women . . . in that neighborhood" (letter from Thomas Gordon to Alexander Fraser Tytler, quoted in Buchan 1972:63). David Buchan lists several other sources for Scottish ballads, most a little later than Mrs. Brown but all women: Margaret Paterson (Widow Michael), Mrs. Amelia Harris, who

learned her ballads from “an old nurse Jannie Scott,” Mary Barr, and Mrs. Gibb (ibid.:66-67). There were male sources from this period as well, but Buchan claims “certainly women outnumber men as recorded sources in the transitional period between general orality and general literacy” (ibid.:76). Also see Brown 1997 for a more recent synthesis of these early women singers.

Collection in the twentieth century, on the other hand, has focused on singers of both sexes. Of 6,494 recordings made by fieldworkers from the University of Edinburgh’s School of Scottish Studies between 1951 and 1997, 2,718 recordings were made from female singers and 3,768 by male singers (numbers do not add up because of a few anonymous singers whose gender was not recorded in the catalogs). Note that this is the number of songs recorded, not the number of singers.

2. The ten most-recorded songs from male singers: “The Dowie Dens o’ Yarrow” (41 different singers), “Bogie’s Bonny Belle” (27 singers), “The Barnyard of Delgaty” (24 singers), “Jamie Raeburn” (23 singers), “The Ball o’ Kirriemuir” (23 singers), “The Beggar Man” (23 singers), “Erin Go Braugh” (20 singers), “The Road and Miles to Dundee” (20 singers), “The Bonnie Lass o’ Fyvie” (19 singers), and “Jamie Foyers” (18 singers).

The ten most-recorded songs from female singers: “The Dowie Dens o’ Yarrow” (28 singers), “I Wish I Were A Maid Again” (21 singers), “Mary Hamilton” (20 singers), “Banks o’ Red Roses” (18 singers), “The Beggar Man” (18 singers), “Lord Randall” (17 singers), “Barbara Allan” (15 singers), “The Twa Brithers” (14 singers), “Mill o’ Tifty’s Annie” (14 singers), and “The Laird o’ Drum” (12 singers).

3. For discussions of the importance of context to ballad interpretation, see Toelken 1986, Anderson 1991, and Porter 1986.
4. My data regarding gender differences in ballad repertoires comes from the sound archives at the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh. I spent the summer of 1997 transcribing the catalogs of the School’s archives into a computer database of approximately 2,600 records that detail the recordings fieldworkers made of traditional singers between 1951 and 1997. I allowed only one instance of each ballad per singer (in other words, only one entry was made whether a singer recorded a particular song one time or five times, unless the catalogs noted two unique but same-titled versions). This information reveals, among other things, how many times the School recorded any one ballad by male and by female singers.
5. Two singers sang a version titled “Earl Richard’s Wedding,” seven sang “I Am the Forester o This Land,” and two sang “The Shepherd’s Daughter.” All were identified as Child 110 in the archive records.
6. I spoke with Dr. Vic Gammon in Aberdeen, August 1999.
7. For the history of the text and the narrative, see Rieuwerts 1991.
8. In fact, of the six of these ballads that Stewart categorizes, four she calls narratives of personal and cultural failure for their female protagonists. “The Beggar Laddie” she classifies as one of personal failure but cultural success,

and "The Laird o Drum" as one of personal and cultural success. I take issue with both categorizations further on in this essay. (Stewart does not consider "The Twa Brithers" and "Lord Randal" because both lack agonistic situations between males and females. Neither Stewart nor I discuss "I Wish I Were a Maid Again" and "Banks o Red Roses." Stewart leaves them out because neither is a Child ballad; I omit them from my study because they are too short to be considered ballads and because different versions vary widely.)

9. The different versions recorded by the School of Scottish Studies seldom mention her brother repenting, however. The version quoted above, that of Mrs. Findlater and Mrs. Johnston, is the only one that does mention the brother, and it says merely, "Surely her brother'll mourn an greet / For the cruel death he gave her" (SA1966/44/A3). While the reactions of the father, mother, and sister are in the present tense in this version, the brother's reaction is in the future conditional, clearly implying that though he *ought* to be sorry, he might not be.
10. Unfortunately, the School of Scottish Studies has not transcribed the different recorded versions of this very popular ballad. All references come from the version published by Emily Lyle published in her collection. This version was collected about 1893 by James B. Duncan from Mrs. Margaret Harper in Cluny and first appeared in *The Greig-Duncan Folk Song Collection* (Shuldham-Shaw et al. 1981); for details see Lyle 1994:280.
11. Though perhaps not surprising, Bronson's impatience with the dying man is notable given the context of women who routinely die in ballads because they cannot fulfill a desired romantic union.
12. Child 84, "Bonny Barbara Allan" A version, taken from Ramsay 1763 (Child 1882-1898:277).
13. Quotations are from Lyle's version, which she recorded for the School of Scottish Studies in 1974 from Mrs. Minnie Haman (nee Duncan), who "got it from her mother who came from Perthshire" (Lyle 1994:284).
14. When I taught this ballad to a class of undergraduates, using a tape of a woman singing (Catherine Grant SA1953/246/A1), it was the mother and not Lord Randal that students empathized and sympathized with. Both male and female students felt the mother was the ballad's primary character and were moved by her concern for her son and inability to help him, though they all also noted her subservience to her son.
15. Charlotte Higgins recorded a spoken fragment of the ballad in which she recalled two different verses referring to the death. In one verse the "dear wee wean" is found under the bed, "Lyin in a pool o blood," and another verse where she goes to the seaside and says, "Sink ye or swim ye; ye'll get nae mair frae me" (SA1958/64/B4). Willie Mathieson sang a version in which the babe is found strangled underneath Mary Hamilton's bedsheets (SA1952/2/B50), and Jeannie Robertson sang a version similar to that of Charlotte Higgins, where the baby is found in a pool of blood (SA1953/196/B10). Clearly, the more of the ballad that focuses on the mur-

- der and Mary's attempts to cover it up, the less sympathetic Mary's character.
16. Lucy Stewart's version, for example, contains only two verses and the chorus, making no mention of the murder but containing the "happy, happy is the maid" verse (SA1960/144/B5). The same is true of Mrs. Nicholson's four-verse-plus-chorus version (SA1952/90/B21) and both Mrs. Low's and Kathleen Campbell's three-verse-plus-chorus versions (SA1952/83/A6, SA1951/45/A8).
 17. In fact, the tragic "Dowie Dens o' Yarrow" is the ballad most often recorded by both male [41] and female [28] singers.
 18. Some versions emphasize the way the daughter begs the beggar to be allowed to follow him (e.g. Jessie MacDonald SA1967/141/B11); some adopt the point of view of the parents, who wake to find their daughter gone (e.g. Elizabeth Ireland SA1963/27/A12); some bawdier versions show the beggar stripping naked and taking the daughter's virginity ("Oh, he took her round the middle an he laid her on the floor, / An he played to her a new tune she never heard before"; Donald MacMartin SA1965/159/B11).

Twelve different versions were transcribed from recordings by female singers. Of these, six included verses in which the daughter persuades the beggar to take her with him. Only one transcription includes the bawdy "let his duddies fall" verse (and this is from Jeannie Robertson, who has four versions transcribed.) Only four of the twelve include the mention of "silks and satins" that imply wealth at the end of the ballad. (For comparison, of the thirteen versions transcribed from the recordings of male singers, four include the girl's begging to join the beggar, six include a definitive statement of the beggar's wealth or position, and three include the bawdy bits about fallin' duddies.)

19. This ballad is indeed historically based. After his first wife, Lady Mary Gordon, died, the sixty-two-year-old Alexander Irvine of Drum married the young Margaret (Peggy) Coutts in 1681 or 1682 (Lyle 1994:277). The marriage was never accepted by the family. This is evident even today, as the couple's portraits are absent from the extensive portrait gallery of Castle Drum. According to Stanley Robertson, nephew of noted ballad singer Jeannie Robertson, only one miniature portrait, which is now missing but was seen by his aunt, was ever made of Peggy Coutts (conversation in August 1999, at the Castle Drum in Aberdeenshire).
20. All following quotations taken from this text.
21. Ten recordings transcribed (with six female singers) show the woman telling the laird that she "widnae fancy" him. Seven (with three female singers) show the woman saying she might fancy him, but that she is of too low degree to take his offer seriously. One male singer sings a version where she refuses to answer on the grounds that the question should not be asked because their classes are so disparate.

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