A Good Man Is Hard to Find: Positive Masculinity in the Ballads Sung by Scottish Women

Published by

McKeen, Thomas.
The Flowering Thorn: International Ballad Studies.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9249.

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https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9249
This essay looks specifically at the way ballads popular among female singers construct masculinity, focusing on the intersections of gender, class, and power. Since large-scale ballad collection began in the eighteenth century, at least, both men and women have learned and passed on these traditional songs, so we may consider the Scottish ballad tradition to be carried by both sexes. According to the recordings held at the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, however, men and women do not necessarily sing the same songs.¹ The ten songs most often recorded from female singers, for example, have only two titles in common with the ten most often recorded from men. Analysis of the specific ballad narratives that were most popular among female singers in twentieth-century Scotland suggests that certain buried themes may underlie their choice.

The data discussed here regarding gender differences in ballad repertoires comes from the School of Scottish Studies Archives, department of Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh. I spent the summer of 1997 transcribing the catalogs of the school’s archives into a computer database of approximately twenty-six hundred records that detail the recordings made 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 once or five times, unless the catalogs noted two unique, but same-titled, versions). This information reveals, among other things, how many times any one ballad was recorded by male and female singers. Although I have looked at some specific transcribed versions of songs, many recordings remain untranscribed. It is possible that certain recordings may contain variations that change the meaning of the song.

Three vital caveats must be borne in mind. First, it would be foolhardy to imply that any singer would never choose to learn a song whose lyrics did not appeal to him or her. Many other factors play into that decision, such as a pleasing melody or the social context with which the song is associated. Second, this discussion is based primarily on the number of times that a ballad was recorded and on the most common version of each ballad. 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 may 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 means that that singer found it worth learning. Thus, it is
significant that the songs that appear most often in the repertoires of women—
those that significant numbers of women found worth learning—show similar
patterns in their portrayal of gender roles. Moreover, these patterns are espe-
cially noteworthy because they are at odds with patterns in the larger corpus of
traditional ballads in Scotland.

Among the men whom the ballads portray as “attractive”—sympathetic sup-
porting characters as well as the male “love interests”—what are the qualities
their women seem to value? Who are the “good guys?” Furthermore, what may
the men in the ballad world tell us about the interests and lives of the singing
women who kept the stories alive? While Scottish ballads generally take for
granted a society where women function under male control, the most attractive,
sympathetic male characters in the ballads popular among women are all in some
way vulnerable or even victimized. The ballads Scottish women sing may recog-
nize a cultural system of male hegemony, but they do not celebrate it.

This is not the case in the Scottish ballad tradition as a whole, however. The
ballads that most often appear in the repertoires of twentieth-century women
singers are much more critical of men who wield power than most Scottish bal-
lads. Emily Lyle’s collection of ballads, for example, contains forty-seven ex-
amples that include some sort of romantic male figure (1994). Almost three-quarters
of these (thirty-five) show attractive, romantically desirable male characters in
clear positions of power, often simply because of their social position. Close
analysis of any of these narratives may reveal subtleties that make such broad
generalizations dangerous, but the larger pattern is significant. Most of the time,
male lovers are specifically identified as “gentlemen”: lords, knights, earls, or
perhaps squires, with the occasional elfin knight thrown into 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.²

More pertinently, the gentlemen lovers who pervade the tradition are “do-
ers”; they act, and women must live with those actions. In “Burd Ellen” (Child
63), for example, Lord John leaves the pregnant heroine, and she follows his
horse on foot, her tenacity finally rewarded when he marries her. The female protagonist of “Lord Thomas and Fair Annie” (Child 62) supports her well-born lover even when he brings home a wife, cleaning and cooking for the new bride’s arrival. The heroine of “Lord Thomas and Fair Annet” (Child 73) must also deal 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 rich, but homely, “nut-browne bride” who is the ballad’s villain. “The Twa Sisters” (Child 10) fight over the knight who comes courting; “The Shepherd’s Dochter” (Child 110) strives to marry, and teach a lesson to, the knight who has helped himself to her virginity. “The Shepherd’s Son” (Child 112), on the other hand, is too nice for his own good. 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 a “lady fair” whom he finds swimming naked, instead helping 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:

‘But had you done what you should do,
I neer had left you there.’

Rape, a display of male power, would have won him a well-born wife, but his courtesy only provokes ridicule.

These are only a few of the many ballad narratives that show women doing, and accepting, whatever it takes to win men who are individually and socially commanding and condemn men who are not. These narratives do not seem to be the ones that Scottish women have kept alive for generations, however. Of the ten ballads recorded most often by traditional women singers, none show women striving to marry the commanding, high-born men who are so often desired in the tradition as a whole. Rather, the attractive or sympathetic male characters in these ballads—when there are any—are in vulnerable situations; they have either lost their usual authority or never had it. Three of these ballads can be interpreted as cautionary tales which warn of the dangers of becoming romantically involved with men—“The Banks of Red Roses” (18 singers), “I Wish I Were a Maid Again” (21), and “Mary Hamilton” (20). As these three
after-the-fact narratives do not contain any positive male characters, I will put them aside. Three ballads depict dying men or boys—“Barbara Allan” (15), “Lord Randal” (17), and “The Twa Brithers” (14)—characters who are sympathetic because of their vulnerability. Two others show women who suffer for being in love with men who are socially beneath them—“Andrew Lammie” (14) and “The Dowie Dens o’ Yarrow” (28). These men are depicted positively but have no social authority. Only two of these ten ballad narratives show women who marry socially commanding men, and neither of these marriages is really the woman’s desire—“The Laird o’ Drum” (12) and “The Beggar Man” (18). Desirable romantic partners are not the men who wield the most power; on the contrary, well-born and authoritative men are often depicted most positively when they are on their deathbeds.

“Lord Randal” and “Barbara Allan” are both clear examples with male characters who seem attractive because of their powerlessness. Versions of the latter vary widely, but all involve a young man, often noble, dying for the love of a young woman. Though she comes to his deathbed when called, Barbara Allan has the option to decide his fate; the love she withholds has the ability, in the ballad world, to restore her lover’s health. Although reactions to this ballad do, of course, vary—Bertrand Bronson, for example, noted that it has demonstrated a “stronger will-to-live” than its “spineless lover had” (Lyle 1994: 284)—the narrative does make clear which character is in the wrong. The ballad does not celebrate Barbara Allan’s power over her lover but warns of its dangers. The audience’s sympathies are likely to be with the helpless, dying man; Allan is cast as the villain: a selfish, shallow, grudge-bearing girl. That she realizes her fault and dies for her man redeems her only partially, for the ballad’s focus is on the young man’s death, and Barbara Allan dies offstage:

Since my love died for me to-day,
I’ll die for him to-morrow.

“Lord Randal,” collected by Emily Lyle as “Lord Ronald,” also offers a noble, but helpless, male protagonist. The repetitive, suspenseful question-and-answer between the mother and the young lord gradually reveals the fact that 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 not only reveal the narrative situation but also emphasize the lord’s noble position, 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,” identifies him as well born (sport hunting was never a pastime of the 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 is evident when his bloodhounds, noble hunters that represent the lord himself, die. Their fate will soon be the lord’s.

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 tension, focus the narrative on the absent and evil sweetheart, and also draw attention to the material goods left behind. Despite the young man’s wealth and his social authority as a lord, he has been rendered powerless by a woman. However unacceptable this situation is, and however much a singer or listener may condemn the villainous sweetheart, hearing or singing the song must be, to some extent, a meditation on the loss of power and control.

“The Twa Brithers” is yet another meditation on the loss of control, this time involving a boy who has been, perhaps, accidentally fatally stabbed by his brother. A full third to a half of this ballad, too, consists of dialogue involving a dying person; here the murdering boy asks his dying brother, “What will I tell to your father dear,” “sweetheart dear,” and “stepmother dear” (as sung by Belle Stewart: SA1955/36 A3). While the final verse of this ballad generally seems to be condemning the stepmother, who prayed the boy “might never come home” in the accidental stabbing versions, the focus is primarily on the pathos of the boys’ plights. Both boys are sympathetic characters, 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 take the news to his family.

Interestingly, this is the only one of the twelve ballads in the school’s archive recorded by more than ten women that lacks a female main character. Only two men recorded it, and both sang only five-stanza versions (Donald Stewart: SA1955/67 B2; and Jimmy Whyte: SA1954/101 A10). One may only guess at the reasons for this surprising discrepancy. Why did so many women sing this ballad, and why did the few men not sing the whole story? It is not that men do not tend to sing tragic ballads. While many of the songs recorded by male singers are bothy songs, often humorous or bawdy, tragic ballads often appear in their repertoires as well. In fact, the tragic “Dowie Dens o’ Yarrow” is the ballad most often recorded by singers of both sexes. While I must emphasize that
individual singers choose songs for many reasons that may not necessarily
have to do with the lyrics, such a marked discrepancy should be recognized, for
it indicates that women found something appealing in “The Twa Brithers” that
many male singers did not. It is not my aim to guess what this “something” is, but
it is worth noting what this narrative has in common with the other ballads
popular among women singers: the pathos of characters facing an out-of-control
situation, doing the best they can to deal with the consequences.

“The Dowie Dens o’ Yarrow” and “Mill o’ Fifty’s Annie” are also tragic
ballads; both of them tell of young women who die because they cannot marry
lovers who are socially beneath them. In both cases, the male lovers are clearly
appealing but lack social authority. In “Mill o’ Fifty’s Annie,” the young girl’s
love interest is Lord Fyvie’s lowly trumpeter, Andrew Lammie. The ballad makes
clear the young man’s virtues:

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?
(Mrs. Findlater and Mrs. Johnston: SA1966/44 A3)

Of the four male characters in the narrative, however, Andrew has the least
authority. He answers not only to Lord Fyvie, his employer and lord, but also to
Annie’s father and, to a lesser extent, her brother, who must agree to her mar-
riage. Andrew wields even less power in this situation than Annie, who predicts
her own death when he announces his departure for Edinburgh:

Ere you come back I will be laid
In the green church-yard o Fyvie. (SA1966/44 A3)

Upon his return, Andrew even adopts the often-feminine role of declaring his
imminent death, as Barbara Allan does:

My love she died for me to-day;
But I’ll die for her to-morrow. (SA1966/44 A3)
While Andrew is portrayed as the most desirable man in the ballad, Lord Fyvie also comes across sympathetically in many versions. He is moved by Annie’s tears and implores her father to allow the union, but Tifty remains steadfast, maintaining that his daughter must be wed to “some higher match.” Lord Fyvie has less authority over Annie than her father does, and this impotence makes him a more sympathetic figure. The characters with power, Annie’s father and the brother who beats her to death, are the ballad’s villains.

The same is true in “The Dowie Dens o’ Yarrow.” In this case, the woman is courted by “nine noblemen” and a “plooman lad frae Yarrow” (Greig-Duncan Collection, 2: no. 215A). When the nine armed noblemen come to fight him, 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 nobility, wielders of social authority, are not desirable partners; the ballad makes the unacceptability of their aggression clear, as the ploughman twice protests, “it’s nae an equal marrow.” His physical prowess seems to be an admirable trait, but it is clearly not enough. He is first a victim of their insistence on an unfair fight, and then at the mercy of the cruel brother’s cowardly attack. The pathos intensifies when the focus turns to the ploughman’s dead body, as his lover washes the face and combs the hair of the “bloody corpse” and “washed the reed blude [red blood] 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.

Two ballads, “The Laird o’ Drum” and “The Beggar Man,” do not appear, at first glance, to fit this mold of attractive male characters lacking social or personal power. Of the two, the latter is 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). The daughter truly believes, however, that she is running off with a beggar or a Traveller. Indeed, many versions emphasize the desirability of the beggar by focusing on the dialogue between him and the daughter, where she implores him to take her along and he 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 and whom she wishes to follow; it is the social outcast, the poor Gypsy. Many singers even omit this traditional ending; the girl returns with young children, with no mention of the rich gowns that usually indicate the beggar man’s true status. Even when this status is noted, the sight of the now-wealthy daughter is simply a consolation to the parents; the man portrayed 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 seems to be a true anomaly among this group of ballads that women sing. But this is not the “happily ever after” marriage many ballads offer; the ballad refuses to romanticize its Cinderella theme, instead emphasizing the social realities of a marriage that crosses class lines. Both partners are in vulnerable situations. The woman is married against her will, in most versions, to a social superior who may regret his decision. The laird, on the other hand, puts himself in a situation he cannot control when he insists upon marrying a girl who is beneath him socially. The girl has married gentry, but it is a marriage for which she did not ask. The laird is also dissatisfied; the authority of his position means that he can control circumstances to a certain extent and marry the woman he chooses. He cannot, however, have the marriage that he wants, for he cannot make his peers accept the marriage, and the couple are shunned when they arrive home. The final image is again one of death, as the girl asks who “wad ken they dust frae mine” when both are dead and buried (Mrs. Findlater: SA1967/110 A2). Identifying the reasons 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 are in vulnerable situations, and a commanding social position fails to provide the control the laird would like. The ballad’s final burial imagery underscores the poignancy of the couple’s situation.

Such seems to be the fate of the men and women whom Scottish women have kept alive in their songs. The power of upper-class men is recognized and accepted but 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 real heroes are the underdogs, the social outcasts, or aristocrats who have been rendered helpless.
While these characters may not be rewarded in the plots of the songs themselves, they are the ones with whom the songs seem not only to sympathize but also admire and desire.

Notes


2. These are “The Keach i the Creel” (Child 281), “Johny Faa, the Gypsy Laddie” (Child 200), “Bob Norris” (Child 83), “The Shepherd’s Son” (Child 112), “The Dowie Dens o’ Yarrow” (Child 214), and “Bog o’ Gight” (Child 209). Furthermore, closer examination of these narratives reveals that of them, only “The Dowie Dens o’ Yarrow” and “Bog o’ Gight” actually offer romantically desirable heroes who are not nobly born or socially commanding, since “Bob Norris” is a tale of mistaken identity, Johny Faa is king of the Gypsies, and “The Keach i the Creel” is a comic ballad.

3. Of the twelve versions of “Barbara Allan” transcribed by the School of Studies (not all recorded versions have been transcribed), only three, each sung by men, clearly identify the man as Sir John Graham. Four versions do not identify him as titled, calling him 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 supporting my finding that the attractive or sympathetic male characters whom women more often sing about are unlikely to be in positions of personal or social authority.


5. SA numbers refer to tapes in the School of Scottish Studies Archive, department of Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh. Extracts appear with their kind permission.

6. This version was collected about 1893 by James B. Duncan from Mrs. Margaret Harper in Cluny.

7. In most, though not all, of the versions recorded and transcribed by the School of Scottish Studies, the woman’s clearly expressed desire is to stay home, not to marry the laird. Ten transcribed recordings (with six female singers) show the woman telling the laird that she “widnae fancy” him. Seven (with three female singers) have the woman saying she may fancy him but she is of too low a 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.

References
