From Fairy Queens to Ogresses: Female Enchanters in Early Scottish Literature

By Sarah Dunnigan

Once upon a time, according to an anonymous sixteenth-century Scots poem, there was an ogress who lived on the North Berwickshire coast, and she managed to scare even the king of fairies before marrying the devil himself.[1] This comically grotesque poetic fairy tale, found unattributed in the Bannatyne manuscript (a collection of medieval and early modern Lowland Scottish poetry), opens up a seam of striking associations between the feminine and the otherworld.

There are perhaps more familiar links in Scotland's literature and lore. Historically, women are well-known as storytellers and guardians of tradition, like the 'nursemaids' who bequeathed a treasury of stories to nineteenth-century collectors (such as Robert Chambers) and dark fabulists (famously, Robert Louis Stevenson). There are the 'fairy women' of tradition who work industriously at their spinning wheels on fairy hills;[2] and the vulnerable young female protagonists of ballad and folktale (excluding the courageous Janet of 'Tam Lin'), abducted to fairy realms if left alone in the magical 'grene wud' world. Yet the diversity of the otherworld in Scottish tradition and literature means that women are active inhabitants and participants in its manifold enchantments. There are fairies, selkies, mermaids, witches, fairy queens, 'hags', godmothers, stepmothers, too numerous to do justice to here; but, as we shall see first, they have surprising female kindred in the lesser-known imaginative materials of the late medieval and early modern periods.

The Bannatyne ogress springs out of a handful of lyrics in the manuscript, often

known as ‘eldritch‘ (*unearthly, uncanny*) poetry, and explored most fully in Lizanne Henderson and Edward Cowan’s definitive study of Scottish fairy lore.[3] In one, known as the ballad of ‘Kind Kittok’, a widower narrates the story of his former ‘guddame’ whose afterlife is spent in ‘ane ailhouse near hevin’, brewing and baking.[4] This is a posthumous profession enabled by her sojourn near ‘ane elrich well’.[5] There she meets ‘ane ask rydand on ane snail / Scho cryd ourtane fallow hail hail / And raid ane inch behind the tail / Quhill it wes neir Ene’.[6] This bizarre image, as if a cross between paintings by Hieronymus Bosch and the Scottish Victorian fairy artist, Joseph Noel Paton, is wholly characteristic of Bannatyne’s ‘eldritch’ vein — carnivalesque and comic. It is a poem which celebrates profanity and excess by locating both in the idea of female transgression; but has a democracy of spirit, too, since this is an alehouse off the path to heaven, organised by the fairy otherworld as a cheerful refuge for sinners.

Another strange lyric, usually known as ‘Lichtoun’s dreame’,[7] is a first- person demonic fairy vision which involves a trip to the moon, a meadow where ‘thre quhyte quhailis’[8] reside, and an encounter with a little fairy gentleman wearing a coat of ‘antskins’. Though there are no transgressive women in its other world, it is a tale licensed or ‘demanded’ or solicited by a female audience as we learn in the poem’s last line: ‘As wyffis commandis this dreme I will conclude’.[9]

In other Bannatyne ‘eldritch’ lyrics, the feminine is more grotesquely linked to the realm of the senses. In one comically diabolic little fairy tale, the clarsach-playing King Berdok lucklessly courts ‘Mayiola’ for seven years (a typical fairy duration). A ‘bony bird [who] had bot ane E’[10], she is the daughter of the fairy king no less and so a war between the kingdoms breaks out over ‘possession’ of Mayiola until Berdok escapes by being magicked into a ‘bracken bush’ that frightens the otherworldly squadrons; we never learn what befell poor Mayiola.

The gyre-carling is a more formidable (anti)heroine, and far more strongly linked to the forces of anarchic desire, shape-shifting (into ‘ane sow’), and becoming the devil’s bride. Celebrated for her monstrously gargantuan appetite — we learn that she ‘levit vpoun Christiane menis flesche and rewt heidis vnleipit’[11] — her profane carnality recalls vivid medieval emblems of monstrous female sinners. She endures a grotesque and demonic courtship (as if a hellish parody of high-style,

medieval chivalric romance) but, unlike Mayiola, defeats her suitor by delivering 'sic ane blaw'[12] that he bleeds copious amounts of a soup-like substance. And this, as the poem continues to deliver its eldritch vein of comedic horror, is so hilarious a sight to the ogress that she physically expels, almost literally 'births', a geological landscape — specifically 'north Berwick law' (a volcanic hill overlooking the coastal town). This recognisable local topography gives an oddly 'homely' feel to a creature who has other folkloric affinities (there is something 'Baba-yaga'-like about her; according to the folklorist, Ernest Marwick, '[g]iants' wives have been called gyrecarlings in Orkney'[13]; and hers is a 'plesand storye' worth the telling, according to David Lyndsay's poem 'The Dreme' [*c.* 1528], although this may allude to a far different version of her story). And although she may seem utterly unlike fairyland's most famous female inhabitant, in her linking of bodily and creative powers, she provides a bridge to Thomas the Rhymer's iconic captor, the fairy queen herself:

> True Thomas lay on Huntlie bank,
> A ferlie he sied wi' his ee,
> And there he saw a lady bright,
> Come riding down by the Eildon Tree.Her shirt was o the grass-green silk,
> Her mantle o the velvet fine,
> At ilka tett of her horse's mane
> Hang fifty siller bells and nine.[14]

As in the fairy mistress tradition of medieval European romance, the fairy queen in the ballad of Thomas the Rhymer (Child 37, and first transcribed from Anna Brown of Falkland) is a vision of physical beauty, associated with active sensuality and the idea of transgression, as sealed by the kiss which is Thomas's *tiend*. Both idealised and feared, she is vividly associated with ideas and images of the sinful and demonic through the typically compressed but evocative ballad idiom: they 'wade' 'thro red blude to the knee'; she shows Thomas the road 'of wickedness'.

In another, even sparer, version,[15] allusion to the 'rivers' of 'tears' and 'blood' and the 'road' of 'thorns' starkly juxtapose images and ideas of pain which are religiously inflected. Stealthily, then, the ballad unlocks those darker associations in traditional belief between hell and fairyland.

The conjunction between fairy and diabolic magic may be comically mined in a Bannatyne 'eldritch' lyric (King Berdok's mother 'was ane Farie Quene, Gottin be

sossery […]'); but it has more poignant consequence in Henryson's version of the Orpheus myth when Eurydice is taken to an imaginative fusion of classical and fairy realms. And it becomes the stuff of satirical cursing and profanity in early modern material such as the drama, *Philotus* ('Gang hence to Hell or to the Farie / With me thow may no longer tarie'; 'I coniure the be Sanct Marie / Be alrisch king and Quene of Farie'), or in Robert Sempill's early modern polemical broadsides on behalf of the Reformed cause where allusion to the 'Quene of Phareis' is a term of abuse.

The world of fairy, then, becomes ideologically charged, and tragically so in the case of the Scottish witchcraft trials in which accounts of fairy communion, through their perceived associations with witchcraft, were essentially punishable by death.

Back in the world of the ballad, the fairy queen metamorphosizes into, and shifts through, other feminine typologies. Eve-like, she plucks 'an apple from a branch / As she went riding by', at once a curse and a gift, for through her Thomas acquires the prophetic power of truth ('a tongue that will never lie'). But this incarnation of the fairy queen remains so powerful an emblem of female otherworldliness because she embodies these simultaneous binaries and oppositions: vestiges of both Eve and the Virgin Mary in one version, and therefore a source of simultaneous redemption and damnation. And perhaps most powerfully of all, she is a purveyor of secret visions and sights, and the giver (and keeper) of his truth-telling powers; we never know what Thomas witnesses in the otherworldly voyage on which she takes him. Like the ballad's winding road to the distinctly 'bonny' 'Elfyn land', the representation of the fairy queen is threaded through with interlinking associations between creativity and desire, beauty and transgression, sin and redemption.

The supernatural feminine, as here portrayed in these late medieval, early modern, and traditional incarnations of the fairy world, positions men as both the victims and beneficiaries of its powers. It is worth observing that this is a pattern well-etched into other story types and variations. The ballad of 'Allison Gross' (Child 35) is an account of the attempted seduction of a young man by the titular protagonist — the 'ugliest witch in the north country'. Having refused her gifts of material wealth and beauty, he is turned into 'an ugly worm', made to 'toddle about the tree', but restored to human form again by the intercession of the fairy queen, riding by on All Hallow's Eve with her 'seely (*happy, blessed*) court'.

The fairy queen also has a watery, more malevolent counterpart in the figure of the mermaid. A symbol of sensuality and corruption in Scottish medieval and early modern love poetry (like her mythic predecessor, the siren), she grows in her associations with death (much like other female water-spirits, such as the *Bean-Nighe* of Gaelic tradition). Cromek and Cunningham's 'Mermaid of Galloway', dressed in 'sea green silk', exemplifies all 'the witcheries of love', stealing the husband-to-be of an earthly bride. She, too, has simultaneously destructive and creative powers: Orpheus-like, her songs enchant birds and animals whilst the new moon turns red and 'the stars drapped blude'.[16] There may be a hint of Gothic vampirism to this Romantic-period creature but mermaids and fairies are also aligned in popular tradition too through their proclivity for stealing, or harming, human children.

This is one of the very particular ways in which supernatural and mortal women encounter and become bound to one another: stories of abducted children, changelings, and fairy midwives articulate a different set of emotional desires and longings from the more central erotic dynamic of the archetypal fairy ballad narrative. In these, we see fairy women covetously desiring a child of their own, and their human counterparts grieving for the loss of a child who may or may not be miraculously restored to them again. The repercussions of these gains and losses are enacted time and again in this cohesive but still varied body of story and folklore. The ballad of 'The Queen of Elfan's Nourice' (Child 40) poignantly substitutes an all too human mother, missing her own child whilst being nursemaid to the fairies. In the folk narrative, 'Whuppity-Stoorie', 'an auld woman […] buskit in green […] a steeple-crowned beaver hat on her head' and with 'a lang walking-staff' (as if she had stepped out an Arthur Rackham illustration to a Grimm fairy tale) heals cattle for a farmer's wife but demands her 'lad bairn' in return, unless the woman can guess her name. Happily, she discovers it by virtue of Whuppity Stoorie's unguarded singing at her spinning wheel. The child remains safe whilst the green-clad fairy has a splendid fit of rage: 'Gin a fluff o' gunpowder had come out o' the grund, it couldnae hae gart the fairy loup heicher nor she did […]. Whurlin' round, she ran down the brae, scraichin' for rage, like a houlet chased wi' the witches'.[17]

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These stories of female supernatural agency obviously belong to rather different folkloric and imaginative worlds than the darkly comic visions of the Bannatyne poems and the erotic and symbolic complexities of the fairy queen and mermaid narratives. Importantly, though, they show other female protagonists of Scottish folk and fairy tale tradition acting in recognisably ordinary, quotidian ways; relationships of solidarity as well as conflict between women; and the tender pinpoints of emotion which are spun out of these tales of both life-giving and life-destroying powers.

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(c) The Bottle Imp