The Lore of the People: Language, Legends and Superstitions in the 'Corpus of Modern Scottish Writing' and Beyond

By Marina Dossena

Over the last couple of years, readers of fiction and international TV audiences have become increasingly familiar with the magic of Scottish landscapes thanks to the adventures of a dashing Highlander and his time-travelling spouse from southern England, affectionately called 'Sassenach'. While the endearing quality of the nickname may be questioned,[1] especially when one considers that the events are set at the time of the Forty-five, perhaps one of the most divisive episodes in Scottish history, what is striking is the persistent way in which language can be made to play such an unobtrusive and yet powerful role in the definition of both characters and stories.

As a matter of fact, this is far from a new strategy: already in Alexander MacKenzie's account of the Highland Clearances, occasional sentences in Gaelic, typically interjections of woe or cries for mercy, promptly translated by the editor, were powerful authenticating devices.[2] However, when certain lexical items are employed in a context where folklore and magic are concerned, the situation can be slightly different, as in such contexts accuracy is fundamental, even when this may lead to the paradox of calling fairies 'the good people', i.e. using a vague label, so as to avoid offence and thus meet the pragmatic requirements of interactions with the occult. Although translations may exist, such as in the case of *kelpie*, water horse, the original lexeme has a more specific semantic value; on the other hand, nicknames meant to prevent potentially taboo uses, such as *Auld Nick* and *Auld Clootie*, are undoubtedly transparent on account of their well-established usage both in popular and in literary works.

Indeed, the very close connection existing in Scottish culture between popular tradition and literature is well exemplified in a great number of authors, the most

famous names being of course those of Robert Burns, Walter Scott, James Hogg, and — last but not least — Robert Louis Stevenson, to whom we are indebted for the story that gave its name to the pages you are reading at this very moment. 'The Bottle Imp' derived from Stevenson's interest in the cultures of the South Seas, but this — in turn — originated from the interest he had developed in popular culture as a young boy, when the stories, legends and traditions he learnt from Alison Cunningham formed the basis of his competence in Scottish popular lore and even his command of Scots.

The exotic quality of Scotland in general and of the Highlands in particular owed much to the romanticization of its past and its geography that began with Ossian; at the same time, popular culture developed and maintained its knowledge of myths, legends and folk tales, relying on very widespread networks by means of which such contents could be conveyed thanks to texts that were spoken, recited or indeed sung. The National Library of Scotland hosts an online collection of nearly 1,800 broadsides dating from between 1650 and 1910, *The Word on the Street*, and many of them deal with the supernatural. Of course some of these ballads are not exclusively Scottish in contents or circulation: Merlin's prophecies, for instance, fall into this category. However, what is *spooky*, or indeed *fey*, appears to have played an interesting role in the history of Scots and Scottish English, beyond the huge success of Gothic novels in Pre-Romantic times and later, even to this day.

A project recently launched at the University of Glasgow, *Mapping Metaphor*, has drawn up a map of the metaphorical links existing between different semantic areas relying on the *Historical Thesaurus of English*, published in 2009 by Oxford University Press. Spanning *c*. thirteen centuries in the history of the English language, from Anglo-Saxon times to the present day, the connections that appear to be stronger or weaker can be striking and enlightening at the same time. Category 1Q, 'The Supernatural', is shown to have very strong links with 2D, 'Emotion', and related categories like 'Judgement' (2B), 'Morality' (3F), 'Authority' (3D) and 'Goodness and Badness' (2C). It also relates to 'Action' (1O), 'The Earth' (1A), 'Physical Sensation' (1I), and indeed both 'People' and 'Animals' (1D and 1E respectively). The supernatural thus bridges real life with the world of the soul and its prerogatives: the visions of Hogg's 'justified sinner' concern his evaluations of what is right and what is wrong, but it is the humble keystone of a bridge that saves Tam O'Shanter: great moral depth and almost mundane objects

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This is seen also in the *Historical Thesaurus of Scots*, another project based at the University of Glasgow, the pilot site of which was launched in late 2015: here a search for 'supernatural' shows the link between that and nature in the entry for 'Maids-o'-mist', which the *Scottish National Dictionary* defines as 'Drifting wisps of mist, believed to be supernatural beings.' As a matter of fact, natural phenomena have often been interpreted as extraordinary, supernatural or magic: a will-o'-the-wisp is another 'atmospheric ghost', and the symbolic value of rainbows is such that it is even found in the Scriptures. However, it is what cannot be explained that exerts greater fascination and features very prominently in story-telling, whether in literature or in spoken language: indeed, in literature stories can be presented or interpolated as imitations of spoken performances — it is the case, for example, of very well-known pieces like 'Thrawn Janet', 'The Tale of Tod Lapraik' or 'Wandering Willie's Tale'. Similarly, stories of apparitions, ghosts, strange phenomena and legends can feature in (auto)biographies and travelogues, as they contribute to the flavour of both authenticity and exotic distance associated with depictions of unfamiliar but appealing places. In CMSW, Elizabeth Grant's *Memoirs of a Highland Lady* (1898) includes the following story:

> The Doune hill is supposed to be inhabited by one of the numerous Brownies of tradition. This one was a friendly little fellow who used to come out nightly from his hill, and work hard in the kitchen tinkering the pots and pans in return for 'the cream-bowl duly set.' But one unfortunate night the laird was kept awake by the hammering, and cried out peevishly to the Brownie to stop his noise and be off with him. The Brownie, in high dudgeon, retired within his hill, and has never resumed his service at the Doune, though he is supposed to account for the occasional disappearance of milk left standing in the offices. He may still be heard at work inside the hill, and there is a belief that in time his resentment will subside and he will return to his former haunts.

In an earlier text, also in CMSW, *Letters from the North Highlands, During the Summer of 1816*, by Elizabeth Isabella Spence, we read:

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A landscape associated with sublime features of gloom and superstition is evoked in this comment of a lady whose views are however distanced from these fearful beliefs, which are clearly marked as specific of the local culture; Enlightened rationality and pre-Romantic mysteries are as distant as Lowlands and Highlands, though the former cannot help being fascinated with the latter.

In this respect, it may be striking, though perhaps at this point not entirely unpredictable, to see the occurrence of lexical items indicating mysterious, folkloric phenomena in the texts of language commentators, especially in cases where these were not entirely descriptive, but had a strong prescriptive component, such as we see in numerous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century books and essays. In fact, language is intrinsically connected with culture; more specifically, popular culture can by no means be excluded from studies of actual usage. Until recently scholars failed to pay attention to language history 'from below', i.e. as witnessed in the (typically manuscript) documents of ordinary (perhaps minimally-schooled) users, not only because these documents were less easy to access than printed ones, but also on the ideological grounds that only literary sources were assumed to present reliable instances of 'good' usage: countless dictionaries and grammar books, elocution guides and even schoolbooks provided models derived from the texts 'of the best authors'. However, such choices were both arbitrary and — in some cases — even anachronistic, as they relied on documents which could date from several decades before, and thus could hardly be taken to be instances of current forms. It may therefore seem a happy paradox that when language codifiers turned to the 'vernacular', albeit to stigmatize it, they actually provided readers with instances of actual usage among ordinary speakers both in cities and in the country.

This is the case, for example, of collections of proverbs, which were very popular as witnesses of the 'pithiness' of a language, but which could feature among lists of 'vulgarities' to be avoided scrupulously by speakers who wanted to 'improve' their language and — as a result — their social status. In CMSW, *The Vulgarities of Speech Corrected; With Elegant Expressions for Provincial and Vulgar English, Scots and Irish; For the Use of Those Who Are Unacquainted With Grammar* (Anon. 1826) distinguishes 'useful' and 'vulgar' proverbs on this basis:

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Among ‘vulgar’ proverbs, however, the text includes some very well-known ones, such as the famous ‘Set a beggar on horse-back, and he’ll ride to the devil’, to which Stevenson alluded in *Kidnapped*. Along similar lines, ‘The old One, old Nick, or old Podger’ are said to be ‘slang vulgarities’.

On the other hand, lexical items associated with folklore and traditions could be assumed to be familiar enough to provide instances of pronunciation or of certain semantic values, thus making them memorable and therefore facilitating any didactic aim the texts could have. James Elphinston, who attempted to reform spelling so as to bring it closer to pronunciation, argued for the separation of ‘hwich, hwat, hware and hwen, […] from witch, Wat (littel Walter) ware and wen’ in vol. 1 of *Propriety Ascertained in Her Picture* (1786, in CMSW), while James Adams’s *Pronunciation of the English Language* (1799, in CMSW) used ‘ghost’ to illustrate that in ‘GH, No. 1. initially h vanishes, leaving g hard’. James Murray, instead, used this word in *The Dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland* (1873, in CMSW) among several others illustrating change from Anglo-Saxon vowels to English and Scottish ones:

> Eng. O, OA, OE, representing Ags. á, is in Sc. replaced by ea (usual orthography ae, a-e): so, go, wo, who, two, toe, sloe, bone, stone, broad, load, toad, one, none, no, ghost, cloth, whole, foam (Ags. swá, gá, hwá, twá, bán). Sc. seae, gene, weae, quheae, tweae, teae, sleae, beane, steane, breade, leade, teade, eane, neane, neae, gheast, cleath, heale, feame.

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The examples provided here are of course a very small number, so they are not significant from a statistical point of view: as corpora have typically (and generally in very fruitful ways) been employed to study quantitative data in relation to the occurrences of specific lexical items, these findings might appear to be merely accidental. However, what this investigation has attempted to show is that the cultural framework in which such items occur cannot be neglected.

Grammarians, lexicographers, and language commentators may seem unlikely sources for a study of vocabulary concerning magic and superstition, until their texts actually become objects of more fine-grained analyses. At that point we see that their interest in everyday usage, no matter how 'vulgar' (in fact, often because it was supposed to be 'vulgar', and therefore in need of 'improvement') may shed useful light on both lexis and culture, helping us see the importance of often overlooked methodological approaches to the historical and social contexts in which materials were produced and circulated. In addition, their authors' reliance on 'popular' vocabulary for the illustration of meanings and pronunciation stresses their aim to appeal to audiences beyond the distance that their (more or less prescriptive) agendas might have implied. People use language in their own daily lives, and — as both Antonio Gramsci and Hamish Henderson have taught us — no aspect of such lives ought to be disregarded in our studies; indeed, it is in what may be less predictable from an 'academic' point of view that greater authenticity may be found: 'a man's a man for a' that'.

References & Further Information

References

Corpus of Modern Scottish Writing (CMSW)
Dictionary of the Scots Language (DSL)
Historical Thesaurus of Scots
The Word on the Street: 'The National Library of Scotland's online collection lets you see for yourself what "the word on the street" was in Scotland between 1650 and 1910.'

All the websites cited in this article were last accessed in September 2016.

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