

‘Who’s gonna shoe your Pretty Little Foot?’ Women’s Empowerment and Polysemy in a Song Cluster

Gerald Porter
Department of English
University of Vaasa

Dans cette recherche nous avons analysé le rôle de la transmission des chansons dans le processus de l’« empowerment » des femmes. Notre corpus est constitué d’une ballade traditionnelle sur l’abandon d’une femme par son mari aristocratique, « Lass of Roch Royal », bien connue en Écosse et en Irlande depuis plusieurs siècles. Aux États-Unis, une strophe courte, « Who’s gonna shoe your Pretty Little Foot? » a fourni la base pour de nombreuses chansons sur l’abandon. Malgré leur diversité, ces chansons traitent donc au moyen de dialogue les thèmes de l’abus et du pouvoir. Selon notre recherche, il y a dans le discours dialogique et ventriloque entre la jeune femme impuissante et sa fausse belle-mère, une performativité subversive qui explore les limites de la tradition orale de dissent.

Keywords: dialogism, empowerment, feminism, orality, performative

1 Introduction

In a position of unequal power, discourse is an important means of changing the balance, and song has long functioned as such a discursive practice. This paper addresses questions of language and power in such a performative context, and concludes that the consciousness of participating in a women’s oral tradition of dissent is itself an instrument of empowerment. Writing of the making of the working class in England, E. P. Thompson (1971: 539–541; 652–654) used the term “secret verbal tradition” to describe the way the ideas of syndicalism were transmitted. In *Folk och Musik* (Porter 1992: 52–66), I identified a similar tradition in women’s singing, locating it in:

- a) songs where women are prominent.
- b) women’s versions of songs.
- c) “traditional” women’s settings: children, women’s club meetings, harvest suppers, wedding parties, village socials; home singing a major entertainment on winter evenings.
- d) the act of performance.
- e) language, such as articulating shared concerns through questioning.

While I shall show that all of these aspects are significant for the song I shall discuss here, it is with the last of these categories that I am mainly concerned in this paper.

2 Material: the narrative ballad “The Lass of Roch Royal” in Scotland

“The Lass of Roch Royal” is a song that has been known in Scotland since at least the eighteenth century. The plot of the ballad is as follows: “fair Annie,” carrying a dying baby, arrives at a castle asking for Lord Gregory, since marrying him would legitimise her baby. Lord Gregory’s mother, impersonating her son, prevents her from entering, saying that, far from being able to prove her status as his betrothed, she is just a common witch. Rejected, Annie turns away from the door. In fact, he has not left home at all: he is inside sleeping, and on waking he curses his mother and leaves in search of Annie, only to find her and her baby lying drowned on the sea shore.

Although Irish versions of the song are also known from the eighteenth century onwards, the song has had a strong foothold in Scotland as a local song. Since power is structural and institutional, the editor Francis James Child laid emphasis on the significance of the building where the events took place, rather than, for example, trying to identify the two protagonists historically. On the basis of its title there, ‘Lass of Roch [rock] Royal’, he attempted to locate it geographically in Scotland: ‘Roch- or Rough-royal, [...] Ruchlaw-hill [...] I have not found, but there is a Rough castle in Stirlingshire. Loch Ryan runs up into the north-west corner of Wigtown, a shire in the south-west extremity of Scotland’ (Child 1965: 215). All mediation is interpretation, and by identifying it as a Scottish rather than an Irish song, Child coopted it into the view of the British mainland as the heartland and originary of narrative song, a position which is implied by the very title of his great work, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–98). It recalls James Macpherson’s attempt in the previous century to represent the Irish Fenian cycle as a uniquely Scottish phenomenon (Cronin 1996: 98).

David Buchan has shown how the song falls structurally into a perfect annular or ring-shaped form: *plaint-journey-rebuff-rebuff discovered-journey-plaint*, but it is the first half, dominated by the heroine, that Scottish singers emphasise (Buchan 1972: 121). It thus does not conform to Axel Olrik’s *Achtergewicht* [weight of the stern] principle of the significance of the closing scene, but instead concentrates on the most striking scene (*die Hauptsituation*), the liminal encounter between the two women, fair Annie

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and the 'fase [*false*] mother' (Buchan 1972: 105). It is relevant here that the song is overwhelmingly a song of women: the Roud Folk Song Index database lists 29 versions of the song as having been noted from 22 singers in Scotland (Roud Folk Song Index 2009: song 49). Of these singers, three-quarters are women, and seven unspecified. In the United States, the proportion is even higher, 29: 2 (Greenhill 1997: 229). It may thus be regarded as a 'women's song'.

In linguistic terms this means a discursive environment where women speak rather than are spoken for, in which they carry the bulk of the symbolic meaning, and in which the structure overdetermines both audience's and performer's understanding to encourage a personal identification with the 'I' who speaks: in this respect such songs may be contrasted with, for example, the classic Hollywood film (Williamson 1993: 79). The dramatic moment on which all singers focus is the encounter at the gate of the castle. In terms of gender politics the shutting out of the deserted mother, itself a central topos of literature from earliest times, creates a possible strength (a gathering of resources) in an actual weakness (marginalization and exclusion). This is the moment where the dialectic of gender and power is at its most stark. Hebdige (1988: 203) maintained that under such circumstances, "a 'war of position' is waged between conflicting alliances of "dominant" and "subaltern" class fractions over and within a heterogeneous range of sites, which are themselves shaped by a complex play of discursive and extra-discursive factors and forces." It is for this reason that the remainder of this paper is primarily concerned with the speech dynamics of this moment.

Of the 22 singers who have been recorded singing this song, I concentrate here primarily on the performance of Margaret Gillespie, who lived in north-east Scotland at the beginning of the last century. She was a domestic servant and married to a journeyman slater, and may have learnt songs like this one from Irish navvies (migrant labourers) constructing the railway near her home (Shuldham-Shaw, Lyle & Campbell 2002: 560–561). She was the sister of the collector James Duncan and the source of no less than 466 of the songs he published. She recited, rather than sang, her version of 'The Lass of Roch Royal' to Duncan in 1905. Although it resembles no printed text, it is uncannily like one transcribed from the singing of Anna Brown, living in the same

area more than a century earlier (Shuldham-Shaw, Lyle & Petrie 1995: 576), suggesting that it was a part of the repertoires of several women singers in north-east Scotland.

3 Discursive strategies in “The Lass of Roch Royal”

Michel Foucault maintained that ‘where there is power there is resistance’ (Foucault 1978: 94–96). He argued that it is a network dispersed across a social terrain, and therefore best resisted at the individual level (Farmer 2003: 41) through ‘micro-politics’. As an assertion of property rights, the power to exclude is traditionally an aspect of patriarchal power. Fair Annie’s role in the song is thus largely determined by what Hofstede and Hofstede (2005: 94) call power distance, the level to which a person who possesses less power in a certain society accepts inequality in the distribution of that power. There is a dissonance between her cultural identity as the mother of Lord Gregory’s son, and her position outside the castle. Her strategy is to adopt the feminine role deliberately, adopting linguistic conventions, converting subordination into affirmation, and thus beginning to turn the situation to her advantage (Eagleton 1996: 317, quoting Luce Irigaray). Therefore in all versions it is Annie, not the mother, who has the long turns in the conversational exchanges – in the performance by Margaret Gillespie it is six stanzas to the mother’s three (Shuldham-Shaw et al. 1995: 421). Moreover, her language, printed here and throughout this paper in the original Scots, is strongly affective rather than rhetorical:

- (1) O, wha will lace my shoes sae small
And wha will glove my hand
Or wha will lace my middle sae gimp [*small*]
With my new made Lunnon [*London*] band?

Wha will trim my yellow hair
With my new siller kame [*silver comb*]
And wha will father my young son
Till Lord Gregory comes hame? (Shuldham-Shaw et al. 1995: 421.)

Flemming Andersen (1985: 108–116) has shown that, within the symbolic structure of Anglo-Scottish traditional balladry, hair combing is associated with intense love relationships. By linking two aspects of reality, all symbolic structures of this kind act as a half-concealed but powerful form of argument.

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Fair Annie's reiterated questions, which open Margaret Gillespie's version, are part of that verbal tradition in which women articulate shared concerns. Since they are 'intimately connected to the tensions that give rise to social energy,' in narrative terms they also hurry them to their end (Zumthor 1983: 216). Annie's questions have become perhaps the most familiar stanzas in Anglo-American balladry. Already in the early nineteenth century they had become detached from the ballad and stood as a topos of maternal feeling (Child 1965: 225). In the United States the lines have become attached to at least 26 quite different songs, almost entirely taking the place of the longer narrative and misleading many collectors into thinking that they have found a traditional ballad (Coffin 1950: 81). More significantly, Pauline Greenhill (1997) has shown how the stripping down of the narrative has made room for new subject positions, as in the American version which gives the title to this paper:

- (2) Who's gonna shoe your pretty little foot?
Who's gonna glove your hand?
Who's gonna kiss your red ruby lips?
Who's gonna be your man? (*Collected Reprints from Sing Out* 1990: 101.)

On the basis of what feminist linguists called 'secret gender', in the absence of other evidence, the speaker is assumed to be male, the addressee female, and the situation a love relationship (Greenhill 1997: 225). In this way, it creates expectations around exchanges of power, services, and sexual agency. In fact, the singer in this case (Woody Guthrie) went on to challenge the sexual script of a woman's dependence on a man:

- (3) Papa's gonna shoe my pretty little foot,
Mama's gonna glove my hand,
Sister's gonna kiss my red ruby lips,
I don't need no man. (*Collected* 1990: 101.)

In this way, both Annie and contemporary singers in North America come to occupy what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls the Third Space, where traditional relations between dominant and dominated are opened up to questioning in a way that subverts relative power relations and turns them into a transcendental as well as a political experience.

4 Ventriloquism as empowerment

Fair Annie, standing in the rain with her dying child, pleads to be admitted, but is turned away, apparently by her lover. The dramatic narrative concentrates on the specific pathos of the woman's apparent exclusion by the father of her child. However, it is not, in fact, Lord Gregory speaking but his 'fa'se mither' [*false mother*] (Child 1965: 220), impersonating her own son, and speaking for him. The fact that Lord Gregory's mother can trick her own daughter-in-law into thinking that she is speaking to her son may seem inherently improbable, but recent studies in the United States have confirmed the relation between authority and pitch of voice to the point where female politicians are often mistaken for men (Holmes 2008: 173–174). The mother's role-playing is therefore not a lack of realism but a sign of dominance in linguistic discourse. It would be wrong to expect a perfect fit between the mother's cross-gender discourse and supposed male speech patterns. Gender identity is a construction rather than a fixed category. As Judith Butler expressed it as early as 1992, "What women signify has been taken for granted too long. [...] We have to instead break from the list of meanings and expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman" (Butler 1992: 16).

We should thus analyse the structure of the code of such an encounter in terms of reciprocal poles of dominance and submissiveness, of power and powerlessness, rather than of gender. These categories, of course, correspond to cultural as well as compositional patterns of behaviour, in which men traditionally take a superordinate position. Thus the mother simply adopts the style and conventions of any dominant authority, asserting social (class) power through distancing and maintaining status, and coercive power through giving orders (imperatives), setting tasks and making accusations (Doyle 1983: 262).

Distancing is a central metaphor of the assertion of power (Barker and Galasinski 2001: 120), and the mother's rejection of fair Annie hinges on refusing her access to the domestic hearth. When Annie begs,

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- (4) 'O, open the door Lord Gregory,
O, open an let me in
For the wind blows through my yellow hair
An I'm shiverin to the chin,'

the mother replies, speaking with the voice of Lord Gregory:

Awa, awa, ye wile [*vile*] woman
Some evil deed [*death*] may ye dee; (Shuldham-Shaw et al. 1995: 421.)

Secondly, she asserts her control over the situation in the form of a test, demanding not one but three forms of identification, like the successive passwords demanded for access to a university website. Once again she speaks in the voice of her son:

- (5) 'Now tell me some o the love tokens
That passed between you an me.' (Shuldham-Shaw et al. 1995: 421.)

In this version, two of the love tokens are rings, while the third, for which the baby she is holding acts as token, is the giving of fair Annie's own maidenhead: patriarchal discourse, of course, fetishises virginity, which adds to the significance of the fact that it was taken, as she says in her reply, 'in my father's ha[ll]' (Shuldham-Shaw et al. 1995: 421). The mother rejects Annie's attempt to prove her baby is indeed Lord Gregory's son with the contemptuous words, 'the king o heaven will father your son' (Shuldham-Shaw et al. 1995: 421).

Thirdly, she includes a specific charge that fair Annie has used supernatural means to gain influence over Lord Gregory:

- (6) 'Ye're but some witch or wile warlock [*evil magician*]
Or mermaid o the sea.' (Shuldham-Shaw et al. 1995: 421.)

This accusation of witchcraft is found in several Scottish versions (for example, Child 1965: 220, 222, 223–224), but not elsewhere: Child (1965: 214) comments loftily, "There appears to be no call for magic or witchcraft in the case. A man who is asleep is simply not informed by an ill disposed mother that a woman whom he would like to see is at the door; that is all". This is therefore strong evidence that the accusation is here part of the armoury of male discourse. Historically, Puritan societies like Scotland and the United States made such accusations against transgressive women, particularly, as in this case, where their actions challenged power structure. The significant truth is that,

in ventriloquizing his voice, Lord Gregory's mother is taking on the privileged discourses of both patriarchal and political power. By focusing on making specific demands and accusations, rather than on the feelings and reactions of a mother like fair Annie, she defends property and her lineal succession, both instruments of a familial power structure (Holmes 2008: 311). The mother's act of performing gender in speaking for her son has to be seen in its full extension, not only as an act of female empowerment but also, less admirably, to ensure the continued ownership of that property which is the ballad's setting, the castle of Roch Royal. In James's words,

The notion of the performative, while usefully tied to that of gesture and meaning within a social act, needs to be opened up to the possibility of transformation: performance that does not simply celebrate the metaphors of communal experience but actively "remakes" them in a new and reconceived way, so that they are "transformative" and hence bring into being a new perception of the world (Porter & Gower 1995: 276–277).

5 Conclusion

In Scotland 'The Lass of Roch Royal' is emphatically a song sung by women, who use the medium of song to extend their space in a way that simultaneously upholds and questions male roles. As the *makers* of oral tradition, the women such as Margaret Gillespie who sang it brought to prominence the dialogic moment when the outcome is decided in a confrontation between women, while the man is sleeping. In this way they challenged the familiar axiom of the lack of agency in representations of women: 'Men do, women are.' In Paul Zumthor's words (1983: 119), "Performance is also the instance [sc. instant] of symbolization: [it is] the integration of our corporal relativity within the cosmic harmony signified by voice". In 'The Lass of Roch Royal', both the women discussed here are extending their space. However, linguistically the false mother represents the most complex and culturally disruptive case, challenging the gender coding of speech and territory. In imitating the language of the 'other' sex, she implicitly reveals the imitative nature of gender itself. Since power is not only invested in a ruling class but wielded in strategic and discursive practices, her act simultaneously upholds and questions male roles. Although there are numerous documented examples of cross-gender behaviour of this kind, many of which are celebrated in song (see Dugaw 1989), the action of the mother does not, of course, operate primarily as a

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record of actual practice: by *performing* difference, she displaces a central element of patriarchal power.

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