

Punishing the Victim. A Comparative Study of the Dialectics of Guilt

Gerald Porter
English Studies
University of Vaasa

Cette étude examine des questions de la culpabilité et l'innocence, de la traume et la guérison dans le cas de la chanson européenne traditionnelle "Maria Magdalena," que s'appelle en Finlande "Mataleena" ou "Magdalena på Källebros" et en Irlande "The Well below the Valley." Le cas de Magdalena, violée par son père et son frère (parfois son oncle), meurtrière de ses enfants, pose le paradoxe éthique: comment est la victime de l'abus sexuel devenue l'accusée? Il suggère que, pendant que l'ordre patriarcal est formellement maintenu, une résolution alternative et radicale est fournie par le milieu naturel: une source (ou, dans plusieurs versions européennes, les puits ou un ruisseau) lui fournit une arène où elle peut réclamer la justice de son passé.

Keywords: incest trauma; healing; water symbolism; identity; Mary Magdalen; "The Well below the Valley"

In 1883, in Ingria, a singer known only as "Olgoi" sang of a frivolous upper class woman, Mataleena, attempting to enter a church. She is prevented from doing so by Jesus himself, who tells her:

(1)	Kolme on lasta vyösijalla: yksi on ismaroi issois toinen vedroi velvyees kolmas on vateruees.	There are three children under your belt: one by your noble father one by your supple brother And one by your godfather. (Kuusi et al 1977: 340. Trans. Michael Bosley)
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He then drives her from the church. In another version of the same song, sung by Eriika Haudanmäki at a Whitsun [Helluntai] celebration in Sääksmäki (Häme) in 1879, Jesus asks Mataleena, clearly an incarnation of Mary Magdalen, for water, but then refuses it, saying she that she has had three children (the number varies), and buried them all (Kuusi et al 1977: 337–338). Mataleena then washes the feet of Jesus with her tears and asks for acts of penance:

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| (2) Soihin, maihin portahiksi
porttojen poljettavaksi . . .
siloiksi meren alloille
lahopuiksi lainehille . . .
tunke hiiliksi, tuleheen
kekäleiksi valkiahiaan | to be steps on marshy ground
to be trampled on by whores . . .
to be a bridge on the sea
rotten timbers on the waves
push like charcoal in the fire
like a brand into the flames.
(Kuusi et al 1977: 337–38. Trans. Michael Bosley) |
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Penitence (*katumus*) leading to redemption (*lunastus*) is, of course, the defining feature of Mary Magdalen, and her name is nearly always linked with the protagonist of this song in Finland: Elias Lönnrot included it under that name in the *Kanteletar* (1864). It was particularly popular with Finland-Swedish singers: it has been the subject of a full-length study by Häggman (1992). Building on the work of Andersson (1934), who collected 19 versions and no less than 22 melodies from singers in localities like Närpes, Korsnäs and Skaftung, she documents 79 performances in the Swedish-speaking area of Finland alone, including Närpes and Malax (Andersson 1934: 92–108; Häggman 1992: 345–354).

Kuusi, calls the Matalena songs “outstanding products of Finnish medieval poetry”, and comments on their “refined sense of moral consciousness” (Kuusi et al 1977: 558). Today this rejection, indeed abjection, of a woman who is herself the victim of violence from male members of her own family, roots her firmly inside a highly selective ethical system. “Showing moral consciousness” means criminalizing a victim of multiple incest, which Freud considered the most universal of taboos in developed societies (Parkin-Gounelas 2001: xiv). Taking a striking version of this same song recorded in modern times in Ireland, this paper studies the complex ethical and linguistic strategies adopted by performers of this widely-distributed song. These strategies are linguistic, gendered and ecological (suggested by the common Finnish name for the song, “Matalenan Vesimatka”, and together they undermine the surface logic of an apparently simple narrative and present its ethical complexity.

There is a semantic distinction to be resolved here: firstly, “ethics is metaphysical through and through and can therefore never simply be assumed” (Bennington 2000: 64), and is therefore ripe for deconstruction. I therefore here consider ethical questions to be systemic, while moral questions are communal but not the province of the legal

system. Questions of morality have traditionally been handed over to the clergy, but a moral life can be lived without religion. Thus questions of conflict of interest or plagiarism are ethical questions that can be settled in a court of law, or a university Senate, whereas those involving double sexual standards, or taking care of one's parents, are moral questions that cannot be so easily settled, though they may or may not be condemned or praised socially. Binary divisions, of course, are there to be unpicked, and in the case of this paper it occurs at the moment of singing a song, in the relation between singer and audience that is the dialectic of every performance.

Traditional singers often probe ethical questions by means of moral narratives: questions of right and wrong are decentred, gendered and historicized. Therefore such narratives as the one I examine in this paper are typically dialogues, a format that works well in the dialectic between performer and audience, but also makes visible the lack of fit between ethical norms and moral praxis. However, such narratives are not simply personal explorations of a dilemma but obviously also embedded in communal practices, as Thompson made clear in his discussion of the "moral economy" (1993: 185–351).

"Mataleenan Vesimatka," is known in Swedish-speaking Finland as "Magdalena på Källebro" and in Ireland as "The Well below the Valley". Versions of the ballad "Maria Magdalena" are known all over Europe: Child (1882: 228–32) cites analogues in sixteen languages from Spain to Belarus (Italian, Catalan, French, Breton, Serbian, Moravian, Polish, Belarussian, Bohemian, Wendish, Norwegian, Danish, Faroese, Swedish, Finnish and Scots). It is not common in English. However, in 1955 and 1969, the first versions of the song in English to have been found by collectors in more than 150 years, "The Well below the Valley", were recorded in Ireland (O'Connor 1991: 120; Conran 1997: 222). In the later version, a "man of noble fame" meets a woman at a well and asks for a drink of water, but then refuses it. He says that she is in a state of sin: she has had two children by her father, two by her 'uncle Dan' and one by her brother, and has murdered them all, including "two o'them buried by the kitchen fire" (Conran 1997: 222). He then offers her fourteen years of penance: "You'll be seven long years a-ringin' a bell . . . / You'll be seven more a-portin' in Hell" (Conran 1997: 222). Like many ballads approaching questions of guilt, trauma and healing, the narrative of "The

Well Below the Valley” is elliptical: many of the details have to be filled in, often speculatively, from the analogues in other languages.

1 Naming

This paper focuses on the female protagonist, and specifically her punishment as victim. This is seen as an ethical dilemma by singers but not within the discourse of the song itself: Tom Munnely reported that older traveller singers in Ireland refused to sing “The Well below the Valley” because of what they felt to be its sinister overtones. They considered it “unlucky” or “forbidden”, and Christy Moore himself reports that “I have known it to evoke strange sensations” in performance (Planxty 1973, sleeve note; Perry 2006: 302; Moore 1984: 33). There are many possible reasons for this, including the theme of incest, but uneasiness at the dislocation between the ethical and the moral systems is certainly one of them. Tony Conran has suggested that this is why some versions of the song make it clear that the children did not die at birth but were murdered (1997: 217–218). This obviously offers a more unambiguous condemnation of the woman than that offered by an incest victim.

Another reason for unease is that, since Jesus demands penance, as in “Mataleenan Vesimatka”, he seems to be condoning violence against women. This may be why Eriika Haudanmäki, curiously made him a shepherd:

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| (3) | Jiesus paimenenna pajussa
Karjalaisna kaskismaissa | Jesus, a herdsman among willows
a drover in burnt clearings.
(Kuusi et al 1977: 337–338. Trans. Michael Bosley) |
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Although the “Mataleena” song, or a Scandinavian version of it, could have come to Ireland with the iron trade (Conran 1997: 217), Irish versions do not make the identification between the man at the well and Jesus: instead, he is “a rider” or a “man of noble fame”. However, his empowered status is never in doubt. He completely dominates the exchange, speaking twice as much as the woman. He becomes her memory, dominating the narrative and she falls silent. In the process, although he makes the victim face her own repressed trauma, his role as confessor makes him both judge and therapist, which for singers today is an impossible ethical contradiction. In fact, his role in the song has

been represented by one critic (Constantine 1996: 173) as that of an authority figure cast as a potential seducer: the topos is that of the Corrupt Magistrate, found in canonical European narratives such as *Measure for Measure* and *Tosca*.

As we have seen, in most of the many versions from Continental Europe the woman is identified with Mary Magdalene (Child 1965: 228). However, in all the versions of the song in English, both Scottish and Irish, she is not named, but for a different reason, since she is not described or even introduced but just referred to as “she”. She has literally “lost her good name” (*proprio nomine perduto*) (Child 1965: 228). “Every society has its own practices and ceremonies of naming, but all go deep into the heart of issues having to do with fundamental patterns and practices of culture; with cultural difference, cultural strength, and cultural prestige; with knowledge of self and other; with paradigms of identity and assertion of self-determination; and with the legacy of colonialism in our modern world” (Tymoczko 1999: 239). Whether in a rural society such as Sääksmäki, or between individuals in an Internet Relay Chatroom (IRC), naming is thus a central aspect of identity, both cultural and personal. Conversely, the loss of a name is a blank, a little death. Moreover, since naming is also an exercise of power, whether over a baby, a tree or a continent, or over a subjugated people, the substitution of one name for another, is a transfer of power. It is at the same time a marginalization, a loss of voice, as Brian Friel famously demonstrated in his Irish play *Translations* (1981) about colonial appropriations of Irish placenames.

The Irish singers do not suppress the fact of incest as many other singers do, and a new social element is introduced. While Scandinavian and Finnish versions emphasise the fate of a highborn woman brought low, the woman in both Irish and Scottish versions of the song is clearly of low social position, confirmed by the fact that she is encountered outside the community washing clothes by a well (Child 1965: 232). The connection between incest and poverty has often been noted in moral terms: a character in an English novel written at a time when England and Ireland were politically a single country, remarks that “incest and infanticide are as common among [the lower classes] as among the lower animals” (Disraeli *Sybil, or, The Two Nations* (1845), III.5, quoted in Atkinson 2002: 120).

In “The Well Below the Valley”, it is not stated whether the woman entered into her incestuous relationships by consent. However, there is no more space for moral choice in crowded urban housing conditions, than there was in rural communities where, chillingly, dependant daughters were assigned a ‘special’ place in the patriarchal order by satisfying the sexual needs of male members of the household. This is also the case in the *gwerz* “Mari Keleenn”, from Brittany, where a woman who has been abused by her father is refused absolution by seven priests and given penance by the eighth, a young priest: her punishment is to be locked up for seven years in a chest, where, not surprisingly, she dies (Constantine 1996: 129–78). In both “Mataleena” and “Mari Keleenn”, the church, which has the responsibility for guarding and asserting moral values, allied itself with the dominant order, a patriarchal one. (I keep here to my earlier distinction between ethical codes, which are enforceable by secular bodies, and moral codes, which vary at any one time between various groups and individuals). The clergy were called on as much as legislators in asserting moral virtue, but their location within the social order, and their sex, made it impossible for them to make independent judgments of either morality or virtue (as has recently been confirmed, priests can live very immoral lives). In this connection, the fact that in Scandinavian versions it is the local pastor who has fathered one of her children has a subversive irony. No priest is mentioned in “The Well Below the Valley”, probably for the same reason that he was included in Lutheran Scandinavian analogues like the widely-recorded Norwegian ‘Maria’ (Child 1965: 228), that sex with a man of the church was considered a graver crime than incest. His language, however, is not that of the New Testament but that of the Church.

In Scottish versions, there is a surprising coda to the story: having completed her penance, the woman will return as a virgin once again: “When thou hast thy penance done,/ Then thoust come a mayden home” (Child 1965: 232). Spinoza, like the Epicurean philosophers, linked ethical means (the punishment for wrongdoing) with moral ends (Russell 1965: 560–562), and this cyclical return to the *status quo ante* lays the narrative open to a gendered reading. As the history of the word *virtue* shows, a man could be virtuous in many ways, such as in physical or moral strength (13thc.), but a woman in only one. For women at this time, it meant sexual chastity, as in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1599. Shakespeare 1981: 175; 4.1.84); the word *virtuous* too has borne the

meaning of ‘sexually chaste’ only with reference to women since the fourteenth century (*Compact* 1991: 2241). Shakespeare and Spinoza were both writing in the same period as the Percy manuscript (c. 1620), which contains the lines just quoted.

2 Water and Healing

Rodi-Risberg (2010: 265) emphasises that “narrating the story of trauma is not enough if there is no empathic and affirming listener”. Such a just and ethical solution is not to be found in the song through human agency: the male speaker vicariously recounts her past history of abuse in a bizarre parody of the act of rememory which is crucial for healing. Within the resources of the song, therefore, the only milieu left for the woman to recover that occluded past and question prevailing sexual ideologies is her immediate environment, which in nearly every case is a spring or a well. “Natural justice” is legitimated by the environment in the form of water, which is specifically rejected by the male character, who relies on transcendental forms of punishment. As both the Finnish and the English titles suggest, the song is dominated by water, and the entire song seems to take place far from human habitation. A natural element like water is a traditional source of security and strength, because it is a liminal setting outside the symbolic order and not (yet) enmeshed in property codes. We have already seen, for example, how it erases the social status of the woman, leaving her in the enfolding environment suggested by the chorus:

- (4) *At the well below the valley, O,
Green grows the lily, O,
Right among the bushes, O.* (Conran 1997: 222. original italics)

Writing of folksong metaphor, Toelken (1995: 135) says that “water can imply physical sexuality on the one hand and spiritual redemption on the other”, while the persistence of the woman’s association with the lily, an almost universal symbol of light, purity and innocence (Becker 2005: 178), makes her fusion with the natural environment unmistakable, as in an early Scottish version: “Dew ffell of[f] her lilly white fleshe” (Child 1965: 232).

Rodi-Risberg (2010: 223) has recently discussed precisely this association of the abused body with the landscape: “the ‘nature’ of trauma (the physical return and witnessing . . . of the repressed female body) may dissolve the borders between the mind and its environment in representation”, or in the words of Meridel Le Sueur, “The body repeats the landscape” (quoted as the epigraph to Smiley 2004: [n.p.]). Drawing on Whitehead (2004), she remarks that trauma narratives in which the natural environment is prominent “frequently have marginal figures testifying to their own occluded history” (2010: 173).

3 Conclusion

Speaking of women singing traditional songs in Brittany, Constantine closes her discussion of the Breton “Mari Keleenn” by comparing the way women receive a “potent set of narratives and images designed to help them see and understand the world in a certain way”; but then return those images “crystallized into new and sometimes strange formations, to the confessor-like figure of the gentleman-collector. At either end of the chain is a distinctively masculine and written word; in between are the voices” (1996: 178). “The Well below the Valley” group of songs is thus what Rodi-Risberg calls a battle for the narrative of the past: “for some form of cure or closure to take place trauma needs to be told and recognised in a social context of empathic understanding” (2010: 181). The repetition of a song in performance is clearly such a context: it is an act of witnessing that has provided a collective “working through” of the ordeal for numerous women since at least the seventeenth century. In its full extension across many European languages, culturally-inscribed identities of inferiority predicated on the double standard were interrogated, subverted and exposed. I suggest that the final step of rejection, impossible within the cultural discourses of the time, was achieved within the water symbolism of the narrative, which remains constant through all the song’s various transformations. Set against the demonization of the victim, “The Well Below the Valley” carries the moral resistance of that symbolism of the song in every verse.

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Appendix

THE WELL BELOW THE VALLEY (Conran 1997: 222)

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 A gentleman he was passing by,
He axed [<i>sic</i>] a drink as he got dry
<i>At the well below the valley, O,
Green grows the lily, O,
Right among the bushes, O.</i> | 9 “Well if you’re a man of the noble fame,
You’ll tell to me what happened [to] them”
<i>At the well . . .</i> |
| 2 “My cup it is in overflow
And if I do stoop I may fall in”
<i>At the well . . .</i> | 10 “There was two o’ them buried by the kitchen
fire”
<i>At the well . . .</i> |
| 3 “Well, if your true love was passing by
You’d fill him a drink if he got dry”
<i>At the well . . .</i> | 11 “Two more o’ them buried by the stable door”
<i>At the well . . .</i> |
| 4 She swore by grass and she swore by corn
That her true love was never born.
“I say fair maiden you’re sworin’ wrong
<i>At the well . . .</i> | 12 “The other was buried by the well”
<i>At the well . . .</i> |
| 5 “Well if you’re the man of that noble fame,
You’ll tell to me the father o’ them”
<i>At the well . . .</i> | 13 “Well if you’re a man of the noble fame,
You’ll tell to me what’ll happen [to] mysel”
<i>At the well . . .</i> |
| 6 “Two o’ them by your father dear”
<i>At the well . . .</i> | 14 “You’ll be seven long years a-ringin a bell,”
<i>At the well . . .</i> |
| 7 “Two more o’ them came by your Uncle Dan”
<i>At the well . . .</i> | 15 “You’ll be seven more a-portin in Hell” ¹
<i>At the well . . .</i> |
| 8 “Another one by your brother John”
<i>At the well . . .</i> | 16 “I’ll be seven long years a-ringin the bell
But the Lord above might save my soul
From portin in Hell”
<i>At the well . . .</i> |