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The 'ethno-symbolic reconstruction' of Scotland: Joanna Baillie's The Family Legend in Performance

Penelope Cole

On 29 January 1810, Joanna Baillie's 'Highland Play' *The Family Legend* premiered at the newly remodelled Edinburgh Theatre Royal. By 1810, Baillie was an established author, a light in the literary circles of England and Scotland. She had published a critically acclaimed volume of poetry, written and published the first two volumes of her plays on the passions, and seen her play, *De Monfort,* grace the stage of the Drury Lane theatre in London. She was celebrated as 'one of 'the brightest luminaries of the present period' by the *British Critic* as early as 1802.[1] In *A History of Scottish Theatre,* Barbara Bell states: 'She was without a doubt the best-known Scottish playwright of her time'.[2]

One can only imagine the excitement surrounding the debut performance of *The Family Legend.* While none of her plays had previously been performed in Scotland, this new play, set in Scotland and based on an ancient legend featuring a clash between two prominent Highland clans, stirred the imagination and national sentiments of the Edinburgh audience. Add to this that the production was expertly costumed in 'authentic' Scottish plaids by Walter Scott and performed by the famous son of an even more famous and revered actress,[3] the resounding applause of the first night audience can be understood.

Baillie's close friend Walter Scott wrote to her about the first performance of the play in a letter dated 30 January 1810: 'You have only to imagine all that you could wish to give success to a play, and your conceptions will still fall short of the complete and decided triumph of the *Family Legend*'.[4] The

[1] Quoted by Greg Kucich, 'Joanna Baillie and the Re-Staging of History and Gender' in Thomas C. Crochunis (ed.), *Joanna Baillie, Romantic Dramatist* (London and New York, 2004), 108.

[2] Barbara Bell, 'The Nineteenth Century' in Bill Findlay (ed.), *A History of Scottish Theatre* (Edinburgh, 1998), 192.

[3] Henry Siddons, son of actress Sarah Siddons, was the manager and principal actor for the Edinburgh Theatre Royal in 1810.

[4] Walter Scott to Joanna Baillie, 30 January 1810 in J.G.Lockhart, *The Life of Sir Walter Scott: Volume 3*, (Edinburgh, 1902), 191.

commentator from *The Correspondent* concurred that the play was well received and further noted that, 'Its success here was evidently owing to this nationality. . . Applause was conferred almost entirely upon those parts in which high compliments were paid to the Scotch'.[5] From these accounts it is clear that the play, as a performed text, delivered images and symbols of Scotland in a compelling and immediate manner to the citizens of Edinburgh.

Walter Scott, principal supporter of the Edinburgh Theatre Royal, was the primary force behind this first production of Baillie's play. Intriguingly, an examination of the published text as compared to accounts of the play in performance reveals striking differences between the intent of the author and the objectives of the producers. In seeking to clarify the ways in which Scott's personal views, as well as the political and theatrical realities of the time impacted and altered the text in performance, I will (in part) reconstruct the 1810 production. As no prompt script has been located at this time, this reconstruction will be based on letters between Baillie and Scott, comments found in Baillie's introduction to the published edition, the letters of Henry Siddons (manager of the Edinburgh Theatre Royal) to Scott and contemporary reviews of the production.

In addition, both Baillie and Scott were participants in the re-visioning of Scotland through the rehabilitation and appropriation of both the real and invented images of the culture and traditions of the Highlands. I will examine how this re-visioning is evident through both the writing of the play as well as the text changes and production choices made by Scott.

'This strange, unnatural union of two bloods, / Adverse and hostile, most abhorred is': these uncompromising words, referring to the union, through marriage, of the clans Maclean and Campbell, are uttered in *The Family Legend* by Benlora, a tradition-bound Highland warrior and vassal.[6] Based on a purportedly true story, the legend recounts the ill-fated marriage between Helen, the daughter of the lord of Argyle of the clan Campbell, and a chief of the Maclean clan in the early 1500s. The details of the legend vary, but Maclean eventually turned against his wife, stranding her on a rock in the middle of the strait that separates the Isle of Mull from the mainland. She was saved from certain drowning by a passing fisherman who returned her to her father's home. Ultimately, the Campbells avenged the attempt on their kinswoman's

[5] Review quoted in Margaret Carhart, *The Life and Work of Joanna Baillie* (New Haven, 1923), 146.

[6] Joanna Baillie, 'The Family Legend' in Adrienne Scullion (ed.), *Female Playwrights of the Nineteenth Century* (London and Rutland VT, 1996), 30.

life and the violation of the bonds that united the two clans by murdering the cruel and faithless husband, Maclean.

Baillie took the bare bones of this story and shaped them into a complex debate on the nature of identity, specifically Scottish national identity, examining the possibility of a discrete Scottish identity existing within the construct of Great Britain. While the plot of the play may be viewed as straight-forward (certainly there are no surprises embedded within the dramatic action of the play), Baillie's telling of that story and the creation and interactions of her characters are far from simplistic. Utilising the framework of the marital union of the two warring clans to explore the ramifications of the political and economic Union of 1707 between England and Scotland, Baillie ultimately posited a new kind of Scottish identity. This new identity is signified by a character of Baillie's invention; the infant son of the luckless marriage of Helen and Maclean. The child is completely disregarded by both of the clans throughout the play. Reviled by the Macleans as a vile mongrel and seemingly forgotten altogether by the Campbells, this infant occupies a previously un-imagined site wherein simultaneously a unique, exclusive Scottish identity and a new, inclusive British identity might be formed and potentially reconciled.

The history of Scotland post-union is a study of negotiation as the Scots have continually and consciously engaged in a variety of activities in the attempt to create and maintain a unique and 'different from England' national identity within the larger entity of the British Empire. National identity is, according to Anthony D. Smith, 'The continuous reproduction and reinterpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the identification of individuals with that pattern and heritage and with its cultural elements.'[7]

The Scottish theatre has provided an important space in which this reproduction and reinterpretation of the elements that comprise national identity has been carried out. By actively performing ideas of national identity on the stages of Scotland these ideas are transmitted directly to individual members of the nation, thus creating the potential for the recognition of oneself within the patterns and heritage enacted. In the case of *The Family Legend,* both Baillie, through the text, and Scott, in the production, identified, selected and then reproduced and reinterpreted distinctive Highland values, symbols and traditions in the telling of the story, engaging the contemporary audience by

[7] Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Malden, MA, 2001), 18.

focusing their attention on the similarities between the character's struggles, fears and choices, and their own current political situation.

Furthermore, through artistic creation and public performance, theatre engages in what Smith refers to as a 'process of 'ethno-symbolic reconstruction' [which] involves the reselection, recombination and recodification of previously existing values, symbols, memories and the like, as well as the addition of new cultural elements by each generation."[8] Joanna Baillie's play, *The Family Legend,* participates in this program of ethno-symbolic reconstruction in a variety of ways. At the core of the play is the discussion and active negotiation of place, as the two rival clans attempt to forge a new union in spite of the long-held prejudices, enmity and cultural superstitions of the clan members. The characters of the drama question the institutions and traditions which have governed them in the past, debate vociferously the appropriate reaction to the changes in that governance and individual status and actively test a number of responses which are variably seen to lead to success or failure (failure in this instance usually meaning death). In addition, by placing the action of the play in the Highlands of Scotland and using as her plot a story taken directly from a centuries-old Highland legend, Baillie participated in both the rehabilitation of Highland culture and tradition and the appropriation of that culture as symbolic of the whole of Scotland. The images of the tartan, the bagpipe and the perceived values of the clan society (duty, honour, loyalty and sacrifice) as well as the less admirable superstitions, ready violence and prejudices of the culture are woven into the fabric of the text. Through Baillie's sympathetic characterisation and careful construction of argument, which includes at least three equal and opposing views of each conflict, these signifiers of Scotland are given a voice, dignity and status that had not been seen before on the stages of Scotland or England in quite this way.

Walter Scott, believing that the theatre was a potent site for cultural negotiation wrote, 'In short, the drama is in ours, and in most civilised countries, an engine possessing the most powerful effect on the manners of society'.[9] This conviction would lead Scott to take an active hand in the negotiations for the patent of the Edinburgh Theatre Royal when it came up for renewal, helping to secure the patent in 1809. Christopher Worth suggests that Scott saw the opportunity to 'reform the Edinburgh theatre, and provide a civilised Scottish model to the corrupted English theatrical system'.[10] The

[8] Ibid., 20.

[9] Walter Scott, *Miscellaneous Prose Works, Volume 1* (Edinburgh, 1847), 805.

[10] Christopher Worth, "'A Very nice Theatre in Edinr.": Sir Walter Scott and Control of

patent was awarded to a consortium of Edinburgh's literati and political élite, which included Scott, Henry Mackenzie, William Erskine and the Dundases. Scott enthusiastically engaged in the organisation and articulation of the direction the Theatre Royal would take, securing a high profile manager in Henry Siddons and aiding in the financing of the renovation of a theatre space in New Town Edinburgh. In *The Family Legend* he found a play that must of have seemed tailored made for presentation in his new theatre.

The letters between Scott and Baillie indicate that he was involved in every portion of the production. He researched the appropriate costume for a Highland lady (and helped the leading lady, Harriet Siddons, to learn how to wear said costume), identified the clan tartans of the Macleans and Campbells, provided fireworks to spice up a boring exit, edited the text, changed the names of certain characters, wrote the prologue and orchestrated the composition of the first-night audience. While many of the textual changes cannot be verified with any certainty in the absence of a prompt script, the alteration to characters, including the changing of certain names, the portions of the text which most likely received considerable editing and some details of the actual staging can be discussed with confidence based on the available contemporary accounts of the production.

'I will put all the names to rights and retain enough of the locality and personality to please the Antiquary without the least risqué of bringing Clan Gillian about our ears': Scott wrote to Baillie on 27 October 1809.[11] Several of the names were indeed changed for performance, most notably Maclean to Duart, the clan Maclean to clan Gillian and Sir Hubert De Grey to Sir Malcolm De Grey.

It is quite easy to understand the reasons behind the change in the name of Maclean. As Scott himself noted, 'The highland prejudices are still glowing through the embers and we really find it would be most unsafe to venture upon what a numerous and hot-headed clan might, though unjustly, take in Dudgeon'.[12] That Scott had done his research is evident from the substitution of Duart for Maclean, as Duart is the name of the castle which was, and still is, the traditional seat of the Macleans (although it was not in their control in 1810). In this way he appeased the 'Antiquary', somewhat distanced the

the Edinburgh Theatre Royal', *Theatre Research International*, 17 (1992), 88. This is an excellent article detailing the political maneuverings that led to Scott and his friends gaining control of the theatre.

[11] Walter Scott to Joanna Baillie, 27 October 1809, NLS, Ms 851 ff. 4–5.

[12] Walter Scott to Joanna Baillie in Victor Plarr 'Walter Scott and Joanna Baillie', *Edinburgh Review or Critical Journal*, 216 (1912), 355–71.

contemporary clan members from the negative representation of their clan in the play and, at the same time, maintained a connection to the heritage of the Macleans.

The character of Sir Hubert De Grey, the only English character in the play, is the model of moderation in the play. In love with Helen, he is the only character to view and value Helen as herself and not as member of a certain clan. He is also the only one to recognise the value of Helen's child, prizing the child as part of Helen. A pivotal character he was subjected to a name change. Hubert De Grey, son of a northern England nobleman, bears a Norman name, indicating that his lineage can be traced back to the invasion of 1066. Seemingly, this association with the ancient history of England would have been acceptable except for the fact that the Normans originated from an area of France, the nation with whom Great Britain was currently at war. Beth Friedman-Romell has suggested that Hubert was too French a name to be readily accepted by the Edinburgh population.[13] While this makes a great deal of sense, I think it is equally, if not more, instructive to speculate on the choice of the new name; Sir Malcolm De Grey.

Malcolm was the name of several ancient kings of Scotland, including the man who defeated Macbeth for the throne of Scone. Each of the four kings of Scotland who bore the name Malcolm had close ties to the southern areas of Scotland, including Lothian, and northern England, most significantly Northumbria. In addition, Scott chose to retain the surname De Grey. The elision of the name Malcolm with the typically Norman / French surname De Grey resonates on many levels. The signification of the name Malcolm indicates that the character has an ancient tie to Scotland, which infers an interest in, and a potential commitment to, the maintenance of a Scottish nation. By virtue of the surname De Grey the character also has a tie to the ancient history of England. This balance of interests can be seen in De Grey's characterisation as a man of moderation, one who exists between worlds, negotiating a new identity from the best of both cultures. Through this name change, Scott not only romanticised the character by providing him a connection to Scottish history, he also created a space within which the elision of the Scottish and English identities could be explored.

While Baillie's interest in providing the reader with a multi-dimensional viewpoint of the issues examined is evident in the text, in Scott's production

[13] Beth Friedman-Romell, *Producing the Nation: National and Gender in the Theatre of Hannah Cowley, Elizabeth Inchbald and Joanna Baillie,* Ph.D. dissertation (Northwestern University, 1999).

the arguments were undermined and the potential for the expression of a wide range of viewpoints was diminished. In the case of the vassals to Maclean, Baillie provided three contrasting figures: Benlora, the traditional Highland warrior; Lochtarish, a smart and duplicitous power grabber; and Glenfadden, a man somewhere in the middle, honourable yet scheming, a follower, not a leader, who at every step must actively decide what course of action to take.

Scott reported that Siddons was 'forced from mere necessity to reduce Glenfadden to a walking gentleman'.[14] Siddons indicated that he chose to limit the role of this character due to a lack of suitable actors he could trust to play the roles of the conspirators. In this instance, a character's role was substantially changed due to the realities of the theatre business. Unfortunately, in the loss of Glenfadden's lines, the audience loses a moderating voice in the debate surrounding the appropriate response of individuals to the problems of governance, tradition and kinship. Furthermore, Glenfadden is the one character in this triumvirate of Macleans who is actively making decisions. Unlike the concrete positions of Benlora and Lochtarish, Glenfadden has moments of contradiction and decision and this loss of his voice simplifies the debate and distils the argument.

In their correspondence, Baillie and Scott discussed the possible alteration in six scenes of the play. Of these, the alteration or omission of three crucial scenes, the Cavern scene (betrayal of / by Maclean) and the two scenes in which De Grey takes leave of first Argyll and then Helen, had the most impact on the reception of the ideas embedded in the play.

Baillie was interested in delving into the ramifications of the Act of Union on the individual, exploring the very real fears of extinction expressed by the clan Maclean and presenting diverse views and attitudes towards political and social institutions. Dramaturgically this is evident in the fact that the longest scene in the play is the Cavern scene in which the three Maclean vassals discuss their current situation and propose remedies, which include the death of Helen. Scott wrote that he was concerned about the length of the scene and Baillie indicated in a letter to Scott dated 21 October 1809 that she would endeavour 'to shorten the Cavern Scene'.[15] What specific changes were made are unknown but, as previously discussed, the role of Glenfadden, one of the three principle Maclean vassals, was severely reduced. Therefore it is quite likely that Glenfadden's lines in this central scene were among those to be cut. Scott also encouraged Baillie to remove the repetition of certain portions of

[14] Walter Scott to Joanna Baillie, 27 October 1809, NLS, Ms 851 ff. 4–5.

[15] Joanna Baillie to Walter Scott, 21 October 1809, NLS, Ms 3878, f. 180–4.

the argument, specifically references to omens and the superstitions of the clan, most of which are delivered by Glenfadden.

Whatever changes Baillie may have made or however the changes may have been implemented in performance, any compression of this scene diminishes its power. Baillie built the arguments in the Cavern scene carefully, adding layer upon layer of appeals to the vassals' sense of tradition, kinship, guilt, superstition and pride. The weakening of any of the arguments, but especially those based on superstitions that reflect and prey upon the vassals' fears of their clan's annihilation, reduces the vassals' motives for the betrayal to selfish ones.

De Grey, as the ambassador for the English to the Scottish clan society, provides an important and potent site for the negotiation of Scottish identity within the Union that both Baillie and Scott were interested in exploring. Scott referred to De Grey as 'the most delightful stage lover I have the honour to be acquainted with so we must leave no blot on his scutcheon nor even the appearance of one'.[16] For Scott, it appears that it was important to have this character represented as completely blameless, above the petty machinations of the clans, and possessing the qualities of leadership, compassion and rational thought to which the clan chieftains should aspire. To this end, changing the first name of this character to Malcolm further legitimises the rights of the Englishman De Grey to be viewed as the ideal leader. In this representation Scott's unionist politics are quite obviously served.

Baillie's attachment to the character was a bit more complex and even a bit ambiguous. De Grey is an Englishman but Baillie made him a northerner, one who has a great deal of experience with and regard for Scotland, its land and people. There is even the suggestion of a shared history in the possibly un-performed scene between Argyll and De Grey, as Argyll begs to be remembered to De Grey's father. Baillie presented him as emotionally tied to Scotland as he is emotionally tied to Helen. The union between De Grey and Helen is one to be wished for but is, significantly, by no means certain to succeed in the text as Baillie wrote it.

The scenes in which we see De Grey interact with Argyle and with Helen provide us with important information regarding De Grey's emotional attachments to Scotland, the Campbells and Helen. In these scenes, in particular the scene with Helen, we see De Grey actively struggling with the concepts of identity and status. In Baillie's text, as the play unfolds, we are asked to accept Helen as a metaphor for Scotland, De Grey as a metaphor for England and

[16] Walter Scott to Joanna Baillie, 15 August 1809, NLS, Ms 851, f. 1–3.

their platonic 'love affair' as the site of negotiation. It is in this potentially omitted scene that the active negotiation of these two characters / countries is explored and exposed most fully, a scene in which De Grey is seen to be uncomfortable and insecure and Helen in control. Both characters are diminished by the loss of this scene as each is reduced to a one-dimensional symbol: Helen / Scotland, the victim, and De Grey / England, the source of knowledge and gain.

Scott was also very concerned with the visualisation of the play and to that end undertook the researching of the appropriate dress for a Highland lady and the clan tartans of the Macleans and Campbells. The use on stage of the tartan, as well as the re-conceptualised clothing of the Highlander, contributed to the re-signification of these images, their acceptance as a 'true' representation of the Highland culture, and the appropriation of these redefined and re-designed images by the whole of the Scottish nation.

In many ways the tartan serves to this day as a Scottish flag, an emblem of a specific nation, Scotland, while at the same time attempting to both preserve and create the identity of the individual within the generic tartan through the use of specific colours and patterns. Therefore, Baillie indicated that when Helen is saved from drowning she is seen wrapped in a tartan, not a flag bearing the Cross of St Andrew which had been visually merged with the Cross of St George of England since the Union of the Crowns in 1603.[17] Whether Helen appeared thus wrapped in performance is unknown but the image described by Baillie of Helen enfolded in a tartan is a compelling one. Given Scott's adherence to the use of tartan for the clans it is quite probable that the tartan was used in the tableau vivant at the end of Act III. In any case, it is this image of a tartan wrapped, nearly insensate Helen, supported by the common people of Scotland with De Grey at her feet that secures her place as a metaphor for Scotland in Baillie's play.

In the text of the play Baillie downplayed the peril to the heroine of the play, Helen, by condensing the action of her abandonment, imminent death and ultimate rescue into three extremely short scenes and having the major action, her rescue, take place off stage. Furthermore, following Helen's off-stage rescue are two more complete acts which take place not on Mull or on the sea, but in Argyle, providing a point of comparison between the two clans,

[17] The stage directions read 'Enter Helen, extremely exhausted, and almost senseless, wrapped closely up in one of their plaids and supported by the other two Fishermen.' As De Grey is overcome by her presence the stage directions indicate he is on his knees in tears. See Joanna Baillie, 'The Family Legend', 41.

another opportunity for debate of the appropriate behaviour of a Scotsman or woman, and the prospect of imagining a new place for the Scots within the world.

In an examination of the reviews from the time period, however, it seems clear that the scene was skilfully executed to maximise the affect of the peril of the heroine. As Scott wrote to Baillie, 'The scene on the rock struck the utmost possible effect into the audience, and you heard nothing but sobs on all sides'.[18] So too the reviewer for the *Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany* stated, 'The situation of Helen, left alone on the rock, with the waves roaring around her and venting her despair at the view of her rapidly approaching fate, is one of the wildest and most singular that ever was presented to an audience'.[19] The staging of these scenes and the visual and aural impact of the performance focused the audience's attention on the danger to and the victimisation of Helen / Scotland, again reducing Baillie's complex representation into a more easily identified and named image. Furthermore, the focus on Helen / Scotland as victim negates the potential for an active exploration of a new definition of Scotland and releases the Scottish characters in the play from a certain amount of responsibility for their actions and their own political destinies.

The nature of the Union of 1707 and the possibility of a distinctive national identity within a multiplicity of nations is the debate in which Baillie engaged in *The Family Legend*. Both within the written text of *The Family Legend* and on the stage, the de-fused signifiers of the clan society of the Scottish Highlands are gathered and viewed in conjunction with symbols of the new order. Appropriated, re-imagined and placed in a new context, the bagpipes, the tartan and the values of the clan (duty, honour, loyalty and sacrifice) are given a fresh potency in relation to the current power structure. Helen and Maclean's child is representative of a new kind of Scot, for whom both the Scottish leader Argyle and the Englishman De Grey are responsible in the play as written. In this play Baillie articulated the potential for a new Scottish identity that is of equal importance within the societies of Scotland and England: Great Britain.

In the first performance, based on the circumstantial evidence available, Baillie's moderating voices (Glenfadden and De Grey most significantly) were

[18] Walter Scott to Joanna Baillie, 30 January 1810, in Lockhart, *Walter Scott: Volume 3*, 192.

[19] 'Critical Analysis of Miss Baillie's Play of the Family Legend', *The Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany* (January 1810), 107.

all but silenced through cutting of scenes and modifications to characters; script changes that simplified the arguments and vilified the detractors. While there remained much for the Scots to celebrate in *The Family Legend* (including the fact that none of the Scots represented on the stage were the typical 'Scotch' boobs and ninnies seen on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English and Scottish stages), the opportunity to engage in an active discourse on the subject of their own national identity seems to have been mostly denied them. In performance, as produced by Walter Scott in 1810, *The Family Legend* was presented as a patriotic anthem in support of the Union. An anthem which indeed celebrated a revisioned, united Scotland, but that ultimately reinforced the inequality of the Scots within the governance of Great Britain.

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