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The oral tradition and literature in Ireland and Scotland: Popular culture in Robert Burns and Charles Maturin

Jim Kelly

In a much recounted anecdote, the writer James Hogg recalled a meeting between Sir Walter Scott and Hogg's mother. Responding to Scott's interest in whether a particular song she had sung had ever been printed, Mrs Hogg scolded Scott's interest in printing what were orally transmitted ballads:

[There] war never ane o' my sangs prentit till ye prentit them yoursel', an' ye have spoilt them awthegither. They were made for singin' an' no for readin'; but ye hae broken the charm noo, an' they'll never sung mair.¹

The anecdote serves perfectly to show the uneasy relationship between the enthusiastic antiquarian, eager to 'preserve' remnants of an oral culture, and an actual practitioner of that culture, suspicious of someone who transposes, and thereby destroys, songs from an oral culture into a textual one.

The fault lines between an oral tradition and a modern print culture were felt particularly strongly in Ireland and Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As I hope to show through readings of examples of Robert Burns' poetry and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, the interface between a modern (print) culture and a primitive (oral) one could be a remarkably ambivalent thing, raising issues of audience and reception that were central to how authors positioned themselves in the literary marketplace. Far from being clear, the opposition between oral tradition and print culture, primitive and modern, was contingent upon a whole set of assumptions about social class and national identity.

The concept of what constitutes an 'oral tradition' can be quite hard to define. As Penny Fielding writes;

The oral is never simply one thing and what orality signifies in nineteenth-century writing cannot be understood without considering its

¹ James Hogg, *Domestic Manners of Sir Walter Scott* (1843) (Stirling, 1909), 53.

uses as an agent in the creation and re-creation of cultural norms and values. The oral is always the other: of writing (speech), of culture (the voice of nature), of the modern (a pre-modern past).²

The oral thus becomes more significant for what it stands against than for what it actually is. The idea of an oral tradition becomes a marker for modernity, “an ever-moving point marking off our own present (whenever that might be) from a long past.”³ The term ‘oral tradition’ had been used as early as the first half of the seventeenth-century when it denoted all the practices of the Catholic Church that existed outside of Holy Writ.⁴ Its modern sense comes from the late eighteenth-century when the distinction broadens to that between popular practices and secular (written) authoritative discourses. While the term retained some of its associations with Catholicism, it broadened out into a general descriptive term describing the method of transmission of practices and beliefs of the (predominantly rural) lower-classes. As George Denis Zimmermann points out,⁵ John Brand was one of the first writers to use it in his republication of Henry Bourne’s *Antiquitates Vulgares* (1777) to describe the customs and beliefs of an illiterate rural populace. In his preface to the re-issue, Brand specifically sets the oral tradition against a more public authoritative written word:

These [folk customs], consecrated to the Fancies of Men, by a Usage from Time immemorial, though erased by public Authority from the *written Word*, were committed as a venerable Deposit to the keeping of *oral Tradition*.⁶

While there is a residual linking of the oral tradition to popular religious practices Brand extends the remit of the phrase to include a whole set of cultural practices.

² Penny Fielding, *Writing and Orality: nationality, culture, and nineteenth-century Scottish fiction* (Oxford, 1996), 4.

³ Fielding, *Writing and Orality*: 5.

⁴ The term had been used since the counter-Reformation to denote unwritten Catholic practices. See Nicholas Hudson *Writing and European Thought 1600-1830* (Cambridge, 1994), 188, n. 39. The OED lists a use of the term ‘oral tradition’ from as early as 1628.

⁵ George Denis Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller* (Dublin, 2001), 168.

⁶ John Brand, *Observations on popular antiquities: : including the whole of Mr. Bourne’s Antiquitates vulgares, with addenda to every chapter of that work: as also, an appendix, containing such articles on the subject, as have been omitted by that author* (Newcastle upon Tyne: 1777), iv. Emphasis in the original.

Whether Brand uses the term ‘oral tradition’ or ‘popular antiquities’, there is, as Diarmuid Ó’Giolláin points out, a distancing of what is being described from the people who are describing it:

All of the terms [to describe practices and beliefs] were based on distance between the observer and the observed—distance in time (‘antiquities’, ‘survivals’) or distance in social class (‘folk’, ‘popular’).⁷

Brand’s distinction between a written public authority and oral tradition is a useful starting-point from which to compare the treatment of oral culture in Burns’ poetry and in *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Brand’s distinction carries with it the sense that the written, textual word has a greater claim to public agency and yet is fundamentally unable to erase all forms of popular tradition from the national record. It neatly prefigures a public sphere that is resolutely textual, yet it also acknowledges that there are alternative forms of knowledge and cultural transmission outside that sphere. The oral tradition becomes a ‘deposit’, a national storehouse, for folk customs.

Yet while this seems to give some residual agency to the oral as repository of popular memory, the written word is the form in which these folk customs will eventually survive (namely, in Brand’s reissue of Bourne’s book). Folk culture goes through a sort of ‘double authorisation’, therefore. It is, on the one hand, consecrated through memory, becoming authoritative through its survival outside of the modern world of a public print-media. On the other hand, the only way in which it can be appreciated by the modern audience is to be recuperated from being merely ‘a venerable Deposit’ through the means of the public authority of the written word. It is authorised, in other words, by being both outside print-media yet only knowable to a polite audience by the authority of print-media. Colin Graham’s remarks about Yeats’ *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) might prove useful in observing the relationship between the ‘authentic’ folktale and the ‘authorising’ medium in which it is presented to the public:

Yeats’s ambiguous control over the authenticity of his material reveals in its triple-level of authentication (tales, storytellers, folktale-collectors) that authenticity thrives on the textuality and substance of its medium. . . . Textuality seems to provide the material existence which

⁷ Diarmuid Ó’Giolláin. *Locating Irish Folklore: tradition, modernity, identity* (Cork, 2000), 32–3.

authenticity needs in tandem with its resistance to definition—its mystique is maintained and *evidenced*, while what is actually ‘authentic’ is filtered through further authenticating processes (folk tales are themselves authenticated democratically by their tellers, then approved and re-authorised by their collectors/editors).⁸

The authenticity of folk customs therefore exists due to both its status as an alternative to print-media, and its subsequent absorption into and ultimate legitimisation by/of print-media. They provide an alternative form of knowledge yet that form of knowledge can only be activated and transmitted to a wider audience by means of the very form outside of which it is supposed to operate. The textual authority of the book is needed to reincorporate oral tradition into the national imagination as ‘at once a troublesome site of contested authenticity and a figure of national origin’.⁹ The oral tradition, then, is an alternative system of knowledge yet paradoxically it is always already contained as an object within the system that it is an alternative to. The ‘vulgar’ practices of the common people, recuperated by an enlightened form of ethnography ‘could be used to certify the specificity of a nation, and to justify the restoration of its rights if they seemed endangered’.¹⁰

We can see a distinct role that the peasant culture plays within the modern social sphere. By the act of being published it confirms both an organic base for the national community, and in its appropriation by the very medium to which it is seen as a counterpoint, i.e. print-media, it gives the nation a sense of its own modernity. These incongruous positions (organic tradition and commercial modernity) are only seemingly incongruous. The urge that leads to an ethnographic recuperation of peasant culture in effect credits that culture with its organic national connotations. An amorphous body of stories, songs, and practices can only become an ‘oral tradition’, that is, something somehow uncontaminated by a commercial modernity, through its definition in print. As Diarmuid Ó Giolláin writes on the relationship between folklore and nationalism:

There was a liberating and validating dimension to the discovery of folklore, legitimising the traditions of a population that had usually been

⁸ Colin Graham. *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture* (Edinburgh, 2001), 144. Italics in original.

⁹ Fielding, *Writing and Orality*, 9.

¹⁰ Zimmerman, *Irish Storyteller*, 168.

denigrated, giving them the status of culture, and allowing ordinary people to participate in the building of a nation. Folklore archives were ideologically informed, but represented the cultural production of the common people and formed a unique body of documentary evidence, which by their very existence offered an alternative to a view of history and culture as the work of 'great men'.¹¹

When we come to examine how folk customs appear in writers as different as Burns and Maturin, therefore, we need to examine not only how they appropriate folk beliefs into their text, but also how they comment on the very process by which material from an oral tradition is presented within a textual artefact.

Towards the beginning of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Maturin gives a description of a local Wise Woman and some of the methods by which she entrances the local population. It is the longest sustained description of folk superstitions given in any of Maturin's works:

[I]f there were no lives to be shortened, there were fortunes to be told;—she worked 'by spells, and by such daubry as is beyond our element.' No one twined so well as she the mystic yarn to be dropt into the lime-kiln pit, on the edge of which stood the shivering inquirer into futurity, doubtful whether the answer to her question of 'who holds?' was to be uttered by the voice of demon or lover.

No one knew so well as she to find where the four streams met, in which, on the same portentous season, the chemise was to be immersed, and then displayed before the fire, (in the name of one whom we dare not mention to 'ears polite'), to be turned by the figure of the destined husband before morning. No one but herself (she said) knew the hand in which the comb was to be held, while the other was employed in conveying the apple to the mouth,—while, during the joint operation, the shadow of the phantom spouse was to pass across the mirror before it was performed. No one was more skilful or active in removing every iron implement from the kitchen where these ceremonies were usually performed by the credulous and terrified dupes of her wizardry, lest, instead of the form of a comely youth exhibiting a ring on his white finger, an headless figure should stalk to the rack, (*Anglicè*, dresser), take

¹¹ Ó'Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore*, 76.

down a long spit, or, in default of that, snatch a poker from the fire-side, and mercilessly take measure with its iron length of the sleeper for a coffin. No one, in short, knew better how to torment or terrify her victims into a belief of that power which may have reduced the strongest minds to the level of the weakest . . .'¹²

What seems to be a straightforward piece of auto-exoticism listing peasant customs becomes more complicated if we look at the source for these beliefs. For unlike a novelist like Lady Morgan, who took pains to present interpolated recordings of Irish customs as coming straight from the local cottage, we are not getting something 'authentic' in this passage. Maturin had a negligible interest, or opportunity to interact with, the rural populace. This is not popular culture mediated to the literate public from some reservoir of archaic folk customs. What we have instead is a straightforward prose rendition of folk customs mentioned in Robert Burns' poem 'Halloween'. When we look closer at the text of 'Halloween', it becomes apparent that even that provides a more complicated account of the relation between a literary work and the customs it describes.

The introduction Burns provided for his poem locates the peasant's desire for knowledge of futurity in the 'rude' state of society, showing the influence of Scottish Enlightenment social theorists:

The passion of prying into futurity makes a striking part of the history of human nature in its rude state, in all ages and nations; and it may be some entertainment to a philosophic mind, if any such honour the author with a perusal, to see the remains of it, among the more unenlightened in our own.¹³

Burns is presenting to an enlightened audience these practices as ahistorical, and thus recovering folk practices into an enlightened historicity. The ethnographic listing of folk customs is proffered to the reader as perhaps being of 'some entertainment to a philosophic mind'. Its entertainment value lies in the fact that it grants the reader an insight into a more natural, pre-civilised stage of mankind. It returns the reader, therefore, to the savage stage, the 'rude state' that precedes

¹² Charles Maturin. *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), ed. Douglas Grant (Oxford, 1968), 11. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

¹³ Robert Burns, 'Halloween'. *The Canongate Burns*, ed. Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg (Edinburgh, 2001), 74.

the enlightened audience of the poem. The idea that one is returning to a more natural state that is to be valued for the insight it gives into a universal human nature is vitally important. Yet Burns does not preclude the possibility that to some of his readers the folk customs will already be familiar:

The following poem will, by many readers, be well enough understood; but for the sake of those unacquainted with the manners and traditions of the country where the scene is cast, notes are added.¹⁴

Burns' ideal readership, therefore, will contain *both* those who recognise the customs described as well as a more (modern) philosophical reader who will be able to place such beliefs within a larger framework of comparative historical concepts.

A good example of this ambivalent position of audience and text can be seen in a less well-known poem; 'Address to the People of Scotland, Respecting Francis Grose, Esq; the British Antiquarian' which appeared in *The Northern Star*, April 14, 1792. While there is no direct evidence that Maturin might have read this, the presentation of folk material and the processes by which it is presented are relevant to the strategies employed in *Melmoth the Wanderer*. The poem was introduced by the enlightened editorship of *The Northern Star*:

The following address to the People of Scotland, was written by Mr Robt. Burns, the Ayrshire Poet, when Capt. Grose, the British Antiquarian, was on his peregrination in Scotland, in the year 1791, collecting materials for his publication of the antiquities of that country.

The ideas in this, like the rest of Mr Burns's productions, are singular and eccentric, and exhibits a just picture of the sentiments of the low peasantry of Scotland, respecting any gentleman who is professedly an Antiquarian—He is deemed to be in colleague with SATAN, and to be a dealer in magic and the BLACK ART, a vulgar prejudice, which all the light and learning of the present day, have not yet been able totally to eradicate.¹⁵

This is followed by Burns' poem, written in dialect:

¹⁴ Ibid. 74.

¹⁵ 'Address to the People of Scotland', *The Northern Star*, April 14–16 (1792), 7. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

Hear, Land o' Cakes, and brither Scots,
 Frae Maiden Kirk, to Johnie Groat's,
 If there's a hole in a' your coats,
 I red you tent it;
 A chield's amang you taking notes,
 And faith he'll prent it. (1–7)

We have multiple perspectives here. On the one hand enlightened readers will label the oral tradition and superstitious practices of the peasantry as a means by which we can delineate human nature in a primitive state. This poem by Burns though, is written from the other side. Here the antiquarian is an intruder, and the threat to the community is that he will print the notes he takes. Yet the poem is in turn presented by the editor as detailing superstitions that are assumed to be alien to the presumed readership of *The Northern Star*. The poem, in other words, addressed to the people of Scotland, is reconfigured as addressed to an enlightened cosmopolitan audience, and it performs the same act of 'printing' that is threatened by Grose. There are then at least two audiences addressed in the poem and its textual apparatus that are presented as mutually antagonistic. What the poem also does, however, is invest the figure of the antiquarian with precisely those supernatural elements that he is supposedly recording:

At some auld howlet-haunted biggin,
 Or kirk defected by its riggin,
 It's ten to one ye'll fine him snug in
 Some eldritch part;
 Wi deils, they say, Lord save's! colleaguin
 At some *black art*. (15–21)

Burns even points out Grose's military background (It's tauld he was a sodger bred/And one wou'd rather fa' than fled [25–26]). His choice to "taen the Antiquarian trade" (29) is intimated to be just an extension of this, a practice that replaces actual violence with a type of cultural violence. The placing of the poem in the *Northern Star* is interesting though. We have here a confluence (albeit an uneasy one) between separatist republicanism and popular culture. The popular antiquities that antiquarians were so enthusiastic about are just as open to different political interpretations as the print-media. In the 1790s the oral tradition was as often a repository of potentially radical and subversive

sentiment as it was of ethnographic observation. As Marilyn Butler points out when discussing the antiquarian Joseph Ritson's reprinting of English oral tales and ballads, such forms were seen as full of 'democratic implications'.¹⁶ In Burns' case, a poem about the danger to a community by a soldier turned antiquarian is itself transformed by the preface into a poem worthwhile because of its veracity as an ethnographic document in its own right.

We can see in 'Address to the People of Scotland', then, some of the issues of audience that are brought up in the poem that Maturin plagiarises. The dichotomy between an address to an organic community and a modern readership is represented in Burns' poem 'Halloween' by the presence of footnotes describing in Standard English the customs presented in Scots in the poem itself:

Wee Jenny to her Graunie says,
 Will ye go wi' me, Graunie?
 I'll *eat the apple* at the glass,
 I gat frae uncle Johnie:'

Take a candle and go alone to a looking glass; eat an apple before it, and some traditions say, you should comb your hair all the time; the face of your conjugal companion, *to be*, will be seen in the glass, as if peeping over your shoulder.¹⁷

At least for part of Burns' readership, then, the customs mentioned are part of a living tradition. Unlike, for example, the Irish originals of Ossian that are mentioned in *The Wild Irish Girl* but are nowhere directly presented, Burns presupposes that some of his readership will have had direct contact with these customs, if not having practised some of them themselves.

Maturin's plagiarising of Burns' poem implies quite a different readership. Instead of the quasi-communal aspect of Burns' introduction, we have the folk customs presented to an audience who will have encountered them in a prior published text rather than in real life. If the reader of *Melmoth* recognises the customs mentioned, therefore, it is not because s/he is a Scottish peasant (presumably) but because s/he might have read of those customs previously. We are therefore presented with a subtle intertextuality that locates these cus-

¹⁶ Marilyn Butler. *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge, 1984), 203.

¹⁷ Burns, 'Halloween', 78.

toms as belonging to a community of *readers* rather than of practitioners. This separates the listing of folk customs in Maturin's novel from similar auto-exotic moves in novels like *Castle Rackrent* or *The Wild Irish Girl*. Whereas they were involved in 'the tendency to employ footnotes and digressions in order to represent a 'real Irish' local or historical background',¹⁸ Maturin's deployment of folk culture draws attention to the whole process by which that culture is absorbed and legitimated by the very print culture outside of which it is supposed to operate. The 'priority' of the folk customs in terms of their ahistoricity in relation to the 'enlightened' text is deconstructed, leaving them presented as bound up within that historicity, as part of a recognisable series of literary tropes already before the reader.

As such, the 'local colour' in *Melmoth the Wanderer* can be seen to be reducing the authenticity of the Irish oral tradition that would make it of moral and cultural value to the nation. Biddy Brannigan, the old woman who is characterised as 'witch-like' seems to be portrayed solely in a negative light along with the cultural traditions that she supposedly represents. She lives a 'squalid existence by practising on the fears, the ignorance, and the sufferings of beings as miserable as herself' (10). There are suggestions, though, that her role as local witch is not exclusively negative. What is important though, is to note how her practices vary according to the class she is addressing:

Among the better sort, to whom she had sometimes had access by the influence of servants, she tried the effects of some simples, her skill in which was sometimes productive of success. Among the lower orders she talked much of the effects of the 'evil eye', against which she boasted a counter-spell, of unfailing efficacy; and while she spoke, she shook her grizzled locks with such witchlike eagerness, that she never failed to communicate to her half-terrified, half-believing audience, some portion of that enthusiasm which, amid all her consciousness of imposture, she herself probably felt a large share of . . . (10)

In other words, Brannigan has a sometimes restorative effect on the 'better sort', while her relationship with her own class is characterised by both imposture and 'enthusiasm'—she practices a form of spiritual enslavement.

It is possible that we have here the central problem involved in appropriating folk customs into polite literature in both Ireland and Scotland in

¹⁸ Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth-Century* (Cork, 1996), 37.

the early nineteenth century. The fundamental misunderstanding between Sir Walter Scott and Mrs Hogg is strategically investigated by both Burns and Maturin in their very different texts. On the one hand is the beneficent effect of introducing a polite readership to peasant culture, while on the other is the enlightened recognition that such practices when performed among the classes from which they come, 'the lower orders', are a purely negative. Maturin's version of folk culture and the oral tradition operates in that liminal space suggested by Burns in the introduction to 'Halloween' between enlightened observers and credulous practitioners. We have here both a celebration and censoring of folk customs, a recognition that the appeal and function of folk customs varies in type across class boundaries. As such, the appropriation of folk material into polite culture as relics of a 'venerable deposit' can be construed as a process with definite class implications. As the ideological battles of the 1790s had demonstrated, certain practices and popular traditions could be recuperated for specifically radical ends. Folk customs, in other words, become invested with social and political capital not *a priori* but through their mediated appearance before 'the better sort'. What invests the oral tradition with symbolic capital is not some essential quality it possesses, but the manner in which it is appropriated by modernity.

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