

WOMEN AS THE CHIEF PRESERVERS OF TRADITIONAL BALLAD POETRY¹

Sigrid RIEUWERTS

Seminar für Englische Philologie, Johannes-Gutenberg-Universität
Jakob-Welder-Weg 18, D-55099 Mainz, Germany

Abstract: F. J. Child argued that it is “mainly through women everywhere” that the ballads are preserved and yet to him, as to Percy, Herder, Motherwell or Grundtvig before, women are only the mediators of an older male form of literature (heroic ballads, minstrel song, etc). The essential maternal femininity of orality is part of the German Romantic myth of origin. The ‘Volk’/people had to be (kept) anonymous in order to produce ‘VOLKSballaden’/popular ballads. What has come down to us in writing are very often ballads sung by women, recorded by men and presented as the ‘manly’, powerful, genuine ballads of the people. By arguing for women everywhere being the chief preservers of traditional ballad poetry, F. J. Child paved the way for seeking out these women locally.

Keywords: gender folklore, Scottish ballads, gesunkenes Kulturgut, Herder, Child

When in the second half of the nineteenth century Francis James Child began to seek out and collect all the truly popular² ballads in the English language in all their forms, he concentrated his search on manuscripts, broadsides and early printed editions. He would have liked to have included ballads from oral tradition but his many appeals to collect old songs and ballads were not crowned with success. In “Prof. Child’s Appeal”, published in London in 1873, the Harvard professor gives details of his plans and intentions:

I am engaged in preparing an edition of the English and Scottish Ballads, which is intended to embrace all the truly ‘popular’ ballads in our language, in all their forms. I purpose [sic] to get in every case as near as possible to genuine texts, collating manuscripts, and early printed books and broadsides, and discarding editorial changes not critically justifiable. To do this to the full extent, it is essential that I should have the use of the original transcripts of ballads derived from recitation in recent times. I should especially wish to see David Herd’s and Mrs. Brown’s manuscripts. [...]

¹ This article first appeared in German in *Gender – Culture – Poetics*, the Festschrift for Natascha Würzbach.

² ‘Popular’ not in the sense of ‘well-liked’ but of ‘belonging to the people’ (Latin: *populus*).

Something also must still be left in the memory of men, or better, of *women*, who have been the chief preservers of ballad-poetry. May I entreat the aid of gentlewomen in Scotland, or elsewhere, who remember ballads that they have heard repeated by their grandmothers or nurses? May I ask clergymen and schoolmasters, living in sequestered places, to exert themselves to collect what is left among the people? And if I should be so fortunate as to interest anybody in this search, may I beg that everything be set down *exactly* as repeated, and that the smallest fragment of a ballad be regarded as worth saving ([CHILD] 1873).

In this appeal, Child not only asks for information on ballads in general but he specifically urges male clergymen and teachers, living in remote areas, to note the traditional ballads among the people. They are most likely to be successful among women, suggests Child, for in his opinion, there is to be no doubt: “*women* [...] have been the chief preservers of ballad-poetry.” Women are most likely the ones to remember the songs from their early childhood; the songs and ballads older women, especially their grandmothers and nursemaids, used to sing.

I.

Women as the chief preservers of English and Scottish ballad poetry – this is the topic of my paper and yet, as Mary Ellen Brown has observed recently, basic research is still missing in this field, especially when it comes to comparative repertoire studies of men and women,

which might suggest in a more definitive way whether there were indeed differences, and if so, what those differences might suggest, in general, about women’s and men’s choice of songs, about gender-related repertoires. As yet there have been so few extended repertoire studies, which ideally link individuals, their lives and times, with texts and tunes, that it is difficult to make even these tentative kinds of conclusions (BROWN 1997: 50).

Therefore, it is necessary to concentrate first on the poetical and theoretical assumptions of the eighteenth and nineteenth century underlying Child’s dictum about women being the chief preservers of tradition before embarking on the more practical applications of gendered repertoire studies by drawing on examples from oral tradition among Scottish women in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

For it is no coincidence that Child appealed for help to the singing women of Scotland. Bishop Percy had in the mid eighteenth century already turned to Scotland, Wales, Ireland and the North of England in search of old songs and ballads. Thus he writes to his friend and adviser William Shenstone in 1761:

It is in the remote and obscure parts of the kingdom, that I expect to find curiosities of the kind I want. Many curious old Songs are there preserved, of which no traces remain elsewhere: In the more southern part of this Island fashion and novelty have greater sway and cause those old things to be neglected and forgotten (in BROOKS 1977: 109).

Just as Percy believed that ‘fashion and novelty’ pushed the old and traditional things aside, so did Child one hundred years later when he put the blame on the introduction of book-culture, the rise of general education and technical advances, especially the introduction of the railroads (CHILD 1868: 33)!

Underlying Child’s argument is the belief in the cultural development of mankind in progressive stages. As long as the people are homogeneous and think and feel as one and as long as no distinction can be made with regards to social class, knowledge and desire, the poetry the people produce is still popular and genuine. For unity in ideas and feelings leads to unity in poetry. The popular ballad, according to Child, is therefore “an expression of the mind and heart of the people as an individual, and never of the personality of individual men” (CHILD [1874]: 214). Just as this *primaeval* unity comes to an end with an increase in civilization, the poetry of the people (“the popular poetry”) is eclipsed by the poetry of the individual (“the poetry of art”). The term ‘popular poetry’ was first used – in the form of ‘*poësi populaire*’ – by Michel de Montaigne in 1580 and later by J. G. Herder as ‘*Volkspoesie*’ (see RÖLLEKE 1975: 463). Since Herder’s distinction between ‘*Volkspoesie*’ and ‘*Kunstpoesie*’ is not only echoed but, moreover, exemplified by Child’s *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, a short introduction to Herder’s thinking on ‘*Volkspoesie*’ in relation to women may be useful.

Following Rousseau and Hamann, Herder posited nature as something original, genuine and unspoilt, something in opposition to reason as well as to the development of culture and society. ‘*Volkspoesie*’ springs from nature and the popular ballads’ authenticity is vouchsafed by the spirit, that is to say, the poetic style of the ballads themselves, being ‘so short, so powerful, so *masculine*, so fragmented in pictures and sentiments’ (HERDER [1773]: 8; emphasis mine). With their leaping and lingering, their free and vivid language, the popular ballad reveals its original unspoilt nature, or to use Herder’s words, the symbolic, the powerful, the *primaeval* or in short, the masculine. The original – the masculine – is postulated. The contemporary – and that is the feminine – is also nothing more than a theoretical construct: it is a relic of the masculine. Herder argued, as Child was to do a century later, that with the beginning of civilization the *primaeval*, masculine poetry is no longer to be experienced directly but only indirectly, that is to say, mediated through ‘unspoilt children, women and people of good common nature’ (HERDER [1773]: 35).

With ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ Herder refers, above all, to the different forms of poetic style that manifest themselves in ballad poetry. And yet his use of gender terminology is not metaphorical or coincidental since he elaborates on the distinction between the sexes by describing men as the original and women and children as

the contemporary bearers of tradition. Indeed, it speaks volumes that his critics, and here especially Nicolai and Rammler, put the label ‘*Ammengeschwätz*’ (the prattle of the nursemaids) on the poetry of the people and that Herder in turn used the derogatory term ‘*Küchenlieder*’ (songs for the kitchen) to connote the haughty, self-indulging and no longer innovative poetry of his time (see BRAUNGART 1996: 17), i.e. the poetry of art. Both labels refer to the world of women and are used in a disparaging way. Admirers and critics of popular poetry are thus in total agreement on this one point, namely that masculine composition is the origin and goal of all poetry.

And yet contemporary criticism and ridicule of popular poetry did not pass Herder by as becomes apparent in his extremely apologetic introduction to the second part of his popular songs. And indeed, we have to thank his wife Karoline Flachslund for his ‘*Stimmen der Völker in Liedern*’, as his collection is widely known, judging by a letter Herder wrote to Gleim: ‘Not least owing to your endeavours and inspirations, my wife did not let off until I had the folksongs arranged and – namely one part – prepared for publication’ (in RÖLLEKE 1975: 478).

Herder himself was inspired and confirmed in his own undertakings by two collections of poetry, namely by *Fragments of Ancient Poetry – [Ossian]*, compiled and edited by the Scotsman James MACPHERSON (1760) and by *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* by the Englishman Bishop PERCY (1765). From today’s perspective, however, Herder’s enthusiasm must be viewed with mixed feelings since it has by now become all too apparent that neither of these publications is what it pretends to be, i.e. fragments or relics of the primaeval, genuine, unspoilt poetry of mankind.

The enormous influence Macpherson’s faked Ossian as well as Percy’s amendments and rewritings of the English and Scottish ballad tradition had, was still to be felt a century later – at least as far as the popular ballad was concerned. Percy’s and Macpherson’s collections were, no doubt, products of their time and yet a distinction their works partly provided and partly gave rise to, namely the distinction between the poetry of nature and the poetry of art was to be an interpretative model collectors and editors of the national ballad collections in the nineteenth century still felt they could use (RIEUWERTS 1994) – explicitly mentioned here are F. J. Child for the English ballads and Svend Grundtvig for the Danish.

The distinction between the poetry of the people and the poetry of art, however, causes numerous problems with regards to the role of women in oral tradition. According to Child, the poetry of art supersedes the poetry of nature, “the poetry of art appears; the popular poetry is no longer relished by a portion of the people, and is abandoned to an uncultivated or not over-cultivated class – a constantly diminishing number” (CHILD [1874]: 214). As ‘*gesunkenes Kulturgut*’, sunken culture, ballads linger on through those deemed to be the not over-civilized or even uneducated classes of society. As Tom Cheesman observed, such stage-managing of traditional song and poetry is for the newly discovered marginalised groups a two-edged sword. “While it served to introduce the voices of the dispossessed into salon dialogues, at the same time it disempowered those voices: the concept of ‘folk’ literature denied their synchronicity with the voices of those citing them” (CHEESMAN 1991: 86).

II.

Among these disempowered voices were those of women. Since women were to F. J. Child the chief preservers of ballad poetry, he consequently had to count them among the 'not-overly civilized' classes of society. Owing to their (allegedly) lower standard of education, or to rephrase it positively, owing to their (allegedly) more effective way of memorisation in compensation for their poor command of reading and writing, the old relics of poetry that once unified the people remained with them for much longer. The preservation of the old popular ballads is thus not only a question of geography (remote, uncivilized spaces), but furthermore of gender (women as uneducated).

Women may have been ennobled as the chief preservers of the ballad tradition but it is important not to ignore that their role was disparaged: women were seen as the weakest and also the last link in a long chain of tradition. They were the preservers of a '*gesunkenes Kulturgut*'. Only on this low level, were women the preservers of ballad poetry. Originally the ballads were composed by men and yet, it is said, that the golden age of ballad lore is long gone. Only relics of this originally 'masculine' golden age of poetry were at times to be found among women. Therefore, the interest did not rest with women and their songs but with the lost 'masculine' poetry that was supposed to have found expression in their songs.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century it was neither seen as important to give an authentic record of their repertoires nor to study what songs these women sang and how they sang them. Almost the opposite was the case: the fact that women sang these songs and ballads had to be disguised or ennobled by Herder's ballad theory. Only in this way could women's songs enter into salon dialogues and conform with contemporary poetic taste. The '*Volk*'/the people must be kept anonymous in order to sing and write '*Volk'sballaden*'/ the poetry of the 'people'. To put it more bluntly, what has come down to us in written form are often orally transmitted ballads stage-managed as the 'masculine', powerful, and original poetry of the people.

Even Herder's and Child's statement that it is chiefly through women everywhere that ballads are preserved, is embedded in this myth: "the essential maternal femininity of orality is part of the German Romantic myth of origin" (CHEESMAN-RIEUWERTS 1997: 15). That women *locally*, that is to say empirically verifiable and not only theoretically construed as women *everywhere*, preserve the old popular ballads was well known to Child judging by his many detailed references in his collection. And yet, Child's interest was not directed towards the women singers or to oral tradition, but to the ballad texts themselves. The recorded and edited songs were fashioned as museum pieces without asking questions about the authenticity of the ballad recording or about references to the ballads' cultural background. This alleged poetry of the people is no less artificial than its opposite number, the poetry of art. That this dichotomy is problematic also becomes apparent by the fact that the collections of popular ballad poetry themselves were the result of an artistic, learned and philological study that found its expression in lists of works cited and editorial notes (see BRAUNGART 1996: 17).

The notes of the male editors – no ballad collections are known to have been edited by women in the eighteenth and nineteenth century – exhaust themselves in linguistic and historical observations; they were hardly any references made to the *Sitz-im-Leben* of these ballads before Child's monumental critical edition. Indeed, it was never about the individual but about a group of people, about a regional, national or linguistic community. The individual was regarded as an unfailing characteristic of the poetry of art. Thus, it is hardly surprising that each individual trait was cancelled out by generalisation or was completely wiped out. If at all, then it is only possible to ascertain the *Sitz-im-Leben* by painstaking analysis, by examining and studying the extant manuscripts, diaries and correspondence – a project for the popular ballads on which no one, to my knowledge, has yet embarked.

Natascha Würzbach encountered similar problems in her study of the English street ballad. According to Würzbach, it would have been necessary, 'to collect as much data as possible about the life of the recipients at the time and the contemporary value systems, in order to understand better the individual references in the texts' (WÜRZBACH 1981: 357) in order to situate the ballads culturally and historically as well as to define the genre along pragmatic lines. And yet, because we are not dealing with generally accepted literature, we face great problems in 'situating the ballad genre culturally and historically by the reconstruction of an historical audience, its expectations, tastes and ways of reception' for example (WÜRZBACH 1981: 357). Furthermore, the study of the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the popular ballads is not helped by the fact that they mainly belong to a private sphere and thus come from a performance-related, highly personal context. If the street ballad, as Würzbach's study shows, was directed at 'entertainment, education and topicality' (WÜRZBACH 1981: 357), then surely the popular ballad is concerned with transmitting a communal spirit. And these questions about the singers and the performance situation for instance must be studied today despite the fact that these are also the ones the first ballad collectors in the field failed to ask.

III.

It is now time to take a second look at the relationship between women and oral tradition. Who were these women, what songs and ballads did they sing on what occasions and for whom? These are the questions I would like to focus on, confining myself to the Scottish ballad tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

Unlike his colleague William Walker of Aberdeen, who was his co-worker and helper in the final stages of his monumental ballad collection, Child did not know the Scottish ballad tradition from his own experience or personal narration; he did not know "the mothers and nurses of fifty or sixty years ago, with their tenacious memories, and ready faculty for lilted and adapting old-world songs, while they fondled, soothed, or amused their young charges" (WALKER 1915: 204).

Oral tradition by women is to the Harvard professor remembering, forgetting and at times 'dis/improving'. A creative, new way of dealing with and adapting tradi-

tional texts and tunes from oral tradition was not considered by Child. Walker on the other hand knew only too well that Scottish women did not only preserve songs of an alleged prehistoric time but that they sang, improvised and adapted these songs. His observations on the 'lilting and adapting old-world songs' are based on Scottish women singers in the mid nineteenth century. Surprisingly, however, Walker shares Child's notion that with the rise of a reading culture and the spread of printed songs and ballads, the art of "improvisation and impromptu adaptation" is dying out. "No such thing is heard now – the gift seems lost, or is only found in the most outlying districts" (WALKER 1915: 204).

The way traditional material has been transmitted may have changed but that is not to say that the old songs have died out. On the other hand, the fact that ballads are still sung in Scotland and elsewhere today – many years after Child and other ballad scholars have tolled the death bell for this type of poetry – cannot be made into an argument against Child's theory about the end of ballad making. Quite on the contrary, Child would have expected this to be the case. He clearly distinguished between the *popular ballads*, i.e. the old traditional ballads of an alleged prehistoric time and the *folk ballads*, i.e. the songs and ballads that can enter into the tradition at any time (see RIEUWERTS 1996).

For *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* Child was – as the title suggests – only interested in the *popular ballads* not, however, in the *folk ballads* or even the *broad-sides*. And yet, he saw himself compelled to admit the latter as long as there was a spark of a popular ballad glimmering in them. He himself had to admit that his own poetical and theoretical distinction could not altogether be put into practice. In any case, this distinction was an alien concept to the traditional women singers. As pointed out before, it is a philosophical and poetical construct that can be traced back to the poets and printers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century 'discovering' women as singers and potential customers of traditional poetry.

Even the earliest English and Scottish ballad collections at the beginning of the eighteenth century cannot support the notion that there exists – perhaps in very remote places – a pure oral culture in Scotland. The one song collection that influenced oral tradition more than any other was Allan Ramsay's *Tea-table Miscellany* (RAMSAY [1723–1737]). This collection of poems, songs and ballads was published in four volumes between 1723 and 1737 and was intended for women, regardless of their social standing. Without making any textual changes, the songs that were previously sold as half-pennies and broadsheets in the streets of Edinburgh, were now compiled and sold as a book to which women of higher society subscribed. Scottish songs and ballads were in great demand by women at the royal court or by the common milking maid. The literature of the common people and that of the literate elite were still one and the same. With its mixture of old and new poems, ballad imitations, opera songs, street literature and traditional ballads, the *Tea-table Miscellany* was the unrivalled bestseller of the British Isles in the eighteenth century (RIEUWERTS 1999).

How great the impact of Ramsay's *Tea-table Miscellany* really was at that time can be measured by the great number of pirated editions and imitations, or even the

collections advertising themselves with the help of Ramsay's *Miscellany*; one example is *The Nightingale*, a collection of songs printed in Edinburgh in 1776 which bears the subtitle: "A Collection of Ancient and Modern Songs, Scots and English, None of Which are in Ramsay"! Furthermore, the first field-collectors in Scotland complain time and again that Allan Ramsay's remodelling effects and often supersedes the old traditional songs. For example, William Laidlaw, a close friend and co-worker of Sir Walter Scott's, has this to report:

I had begun to enquire, and write down from the repeating of old women and the singing of the servant girls, everything I could hear of, and was constantly aroused by vexation at two circumstances, namely, finding how much the affectation and false taste of Allan Ramsay constantly annoyed me instead of what I wanted, and had superseded the many striking and beautiful old songs and ballads of all kinds that I got traces and remnants of; and again, in discovering how much Mr. Scott had been too late – from the accounts I received of many men and women who had been the bards and depositories of the preceding [sic] generation (in MONTGOMERIE 1966: 26 n 59).

Aytoun's *Ballads of Scotland* helps to confirm Laidlaw's observation:

He [Ramsay] never felt any hesitation in altering, retouching, and adding to the old material which fell into his hands, so as to suit it to the prevalent taste of the age; thereby throwing great difficulty in the way of his successors (AYTON 1858/1: xxi).

Where are those women then who pass down ballads in oral tradition? Are they still around, asks Child with melancholy in his voice. He mentions at the same time a number of women helping Sir Walter Scott with his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1868):

Where are the Mrs. Farquhars, the Mrs. Browns, the Mrs. Arnots, the Miss Rutherfords themselves, and the nurses who taught them ballads? Small hope, we acknowledge, of finding such nurses any more, or such foster-children, and yet it cannot be that the diffusion of useful knowledge, the intrusion of railroads, and the general progress of society, have quite driven all the old songs out of country-women's heads – for it will be noted that it is mainly through women everywhere –

'The spinsters and the knitters in the sun,
And the free maids that weave their thread with bones' –

that ballads have been preserved (CHILD 1868: 33).

IV.

Where are those women then? “Any lady, maidservant, fishwife, dairywoman or nurse” must be brought – if necessary under threat of punishment – to give up all the ballads known to them, wrote Child jokingly in a letter to his friend James Russell Lowell (*Scholar-Friends* 1970: 57) and yet, Child’s appeals remained in the main unanswered.

A woman with the repertoire of a Mrs Brown was not to be found. “No Scottish ballads are superior in kind to those recited in the last century by Mrs Brown of Falkland” wrote CHILD in his introduction to the *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–1898/1: vii). And indeed, even today the repertoire of Mrs Anna (Gordon) Brown of Falkland (1747–1810) is considered to be one of the oldest and best preserved in Scotland. Even more importantly in our context is the fact that her repertoire is a genuine female repertoire, sung and handed down by women:

Anna Gordon’s ballads are stories of a woman’s tradition; her three immediate sources were women, and the most important of the three, Anne Farquharson, derived hers from the nurses and old women of Allanaquoich (BUCHAN 1972: 64).

Anna Gordon, or Mrs Brown of Falkland as she was later called, learned her songs in early childhood from her own mother and her mother’s sister, namely her aunt Ann (Forbes) Farquharson from Aberdeen. She claimed that she never saw the texts written down until her ballads were published by Sir Walter Scott and Robert Jamieson. All of them were derived from oral tradition and handed down by generations of women.

This is the first and most important reason why Mrs Brown is significant in our study of women and the oral tradition of the English and Scottish popular ballads. The second reason is her remarkable discomfort at the thought of being named in public in connection with oral tradition. She and her husband were dismayed to see her name being mentioned in Sir Walter Scott’s introduction to the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (SCOTT 1868/1: 170–71). She wanted to remain anonymous and pleaded with Jamieson not to make the same mistake in his ballad edition. Why she could not take her name being mentioned publicly in connection with old popular ballad poetry as a compliment is still an unresolved question. And the third and not least important reason for studying Mrs Brown is her strong personality as a singer and her remarkable art of singing from oral tradition (see BUCHAN 1972: 51–173). It is astounding that her ballads were exactly what Child was looking for (complete and in the authentic ballad style) but that her personality as a singer in no way matched his ideal. Anna (Gordon) Brown was no uneducated woman on the fringes of society but daughter of a professor and wife to a minister with no children of her own. She wrote poetry, was familiar with Macpherson’s and Percy’s collections and admired Ramsay’s *Tea-table Miscellany*!

A woman that more easily fits into Child’s image of a ballad singer is Mrs Storie,

born Mary Macqueen. Although she could read and write, she was – unlike Anna (Gordon) Brown – not particularly well educated. In his detailed account of Mary Macqueen, her family and her local circle, Andrew Crawford described her as coming from “a travelling or some such a tinklar family.” She served as a maid in Boghead, in the parish of Lochwinnoch, before she married the weaver William Storie in the year 1821 and moved with him and their four children to Canada in 1828. One year before they left, the twenty-six year old had her songs recorded: “The same Mary Macqueen has a great number of auld ballads which I had fished out of her for Mr William Motherwell” (in LYLE 1975–1996/1: xxx) wrote Crawford. Indeed, Motherwell accepted fourteen of Mary’s ballads in his collection and employed Mary’s brother Tom, the local poet, song-writer and journalist to be, to hunt down the orally transmitted ballads in Ayrshire, Galloway and Dumfries (see LYLE 1975–1996/2: xviii and xxviii). Some songs of her extensive repertoire – among them twenty-two Child ballads – Mary owed to her brother Tom. Most of her songs, however, she learnt from her mother, her grandmother and her great-grandmother (LYLE 1975–1996/1: xxxi).

To read and to write was no problem to her and thus, it can come as no surprise that *broadsides* and *garlands* have influenced her repertoire greatly. With Emily Lyle’s recently completed edition of the Crawford Manuscripts (for the Scottish Text Society) to hand, such detailed repertoire studies have now become possible. In the songs printed and sung (by Jo Miller on an accompanying tape) and commented on (by Emily Lyle), Mary Macqueen’s songs come alive – they are embedded in their own time and world. Here is where to begin then the empirical and context-related work on the popular ballad and to continue the work Natascha Würzbach began in her studies of the English street ballad.

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