CHAPTER FIVE

Images of Women in Sixteenth-Century Scottish Literary Manuscripts

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IN SCOTTISH POETRY from the sixteenth century, women are generally portrayed in iconic or stereotypic images that seem for the most part to be of male creation. Some promising new scholarship may alter this perception,2 but, as currently known, Scots literature of this period lacks a significant corpus of works definitely written by women. Thus, while many poems include or even focus upon women, rare indeed are voices consciously based in and speaking for women's experiences, values, and epistemology, rather than voices unconsciously, or consciously, based in and furthering the prevailing culture of male experiences, values, and epistemology.3 Moreover, since contemporary social and literary circumstances may suggest that probably few anonymous poems can be confidently said to have been written by women, representations of the female in sixteenth-century Scots manuscripts seem largely the products of male poets.

Literature is, however, a product not only of the individual poet, but also of the cultural matrix. Late medieval poetry, accordingly, reflects, reifies, and helps to create images of women; to degrees that are varying obvious, these images support and continue the culture's existing social and political arrangements, in particular the location and disposition of power between the sexes.4 This poetry, then, as most literature, illustrates but also advances the culture's dominant ideology.

In serving such ends, the poetry casts women for the most part in accord with traditional polarities as idealised love object or personification of virtue, or conversely as evil wife, unkind mistress, or the unmarried but sexual woman who may appear, for example, as an abandoned maiden or a prostitute. Poems containing negative and satiric portrayals of women are fairly obvious in their political ends. As they allege women individually and as a sex to be inherently flawed in character, such poems help to justify the limited roles for women in society and the culture's generalised misogyny. However, poetry containing ostensibly positive portrayals of women often serves the same ends. Poems presenting women iconically as idealised love object or personified virtue, seemingly generated by a positive attitude toward women, often prove on closer analysis to confine 'good' women to rigidly restricted positions that forbid and preclude female agency. Thus, whether based
upon models of the impossibly good or the unredeemably bad woman, these poems convey how women are meant or not meant to be, and how men are to think and behave toward women, that is, convey to both sexes the gender roles they are to fill. While the term 'gender' seems in this period not to refer to individual roles accorded by sex, something like the concept of 'gender' seems to have been known. In transmitting such politically didactic information, these poems assist the enforcement of gender roles essential to the system of male dominance.

This essay discusses eight poems that illustrate these processes and that are representative of verse containing images of women as icons or stereotypes. These poems are found in two principal late Middle Scots manuscript anthologies, the Maitland Folio Manuscript and the Bannatyne Manuscript. The Maitland Folio Manuscript has a focus on poems by its compiler, Richard Maitland, but also contains poems by other authors. George Bannatyne's literary compendium, much larger in scale with nearly 400 poems, includes work by Scottish writers and by writers from England and elsewhere whose verse was put into Middle Scots.

One iconic type of poem found in these manuscripts concerns the idealised love object, a lady declared to be possessed of all beauty and goodness. Such poems are not, of course, peculiar to Scottish literature, but are common in English and European literature as well. This content would seem to reflect a positive assessment of women or at least of the particular woman objectified. However, such poems often embed another popular if somewhat conflicting image, and treat the woman additionally as the 'unkind mistress'. Such 'love' poems as a result contain strongly manipulative rhetoric to coerce the lady into showing 'mercy' or 'grace' to the would-be lover. The lover's avowals of the lady's superiority and his submission to her are therefore undercut by his veiled or overt threats if she does not respond as he desires. The content and frequency of this manipulative language in poetry addressed to the desired female illustrates the ambiguity of the perspective that professes to hold women preeminent but at the same time unequivocally asserts male authority. One of the Bannatyne Manuscript's poems that idealises the lady while concealing a knife among the flowers is poem number 263, which is anonymous and unique to the Bannatyne Manuscript. The first stanzas reflect the influence of courtly love: the narrator/lover details the lady's excellence, cites his own inadequacies, and expounds upon his devotion. His lady, 'the gudliest / That ever formit wes be dame nature', stands superlative to all other women (II.17–18). In accord with the catalogue of female beauty, the lover praises her gold hair, her 'beriall brycht' eyes, and her heavenly 'hew' (II.25,33). Declaring his abject servitude, he professes his heart's enthrallment to this woman who will ever be his
soraign. In a consummate statement of her qualities, the lover pro-
nounces the lady ‘of womanheid the rich mirror’ (ll.17-18).

While certainly seeming approbatory, these pronouncements serve a
contravening function, the creation between the two of a synthetic sexual
hierarchy with female dominance. This purportedly unequal relationship
is a necessary context for the would-be lover’s later demands. Establish-
ing this false hierarchy makes possible the pressure the lover subsequently
applies to the lady who, because of her alleged position of superiority, is
required by courtesy to show ‘mercy’ or ‘grace’ to her subject. The lover’s
declarations of his shortcomings and his proclamations of utter devotion
are thus disclosed as major techniques that help create the imbalance
postulated in such poetry between the exalted lady and the inferior lover.

That the lover may have a purpose other than adoration is first
suggested halfway through the poem, when the lover notes suggestively
that because of her he has joy but also says ‘allace’. The fourth and fifth
stanzas follow this pattern, offering extravagant dedication and praise
but then, in a line or two at the end of each stanza, betraying the lover’s
real insistence when he forcefully asserts his need for ‘mercy’. Toward the
end of the sixth stanza the lover ceases to use the third person and directly
addresses the lady, at which time his peremptory nature and his real
purpose emerge most distinctly.

In the course of this apostrophe the lover recites his wishes and the
reasons why the lady must acquiesce to them. His manipulative and
menacing rhetoric divulges both his willingness to compel and the lady’s
inferior and vulnerable status. Although the lover first asserts mildly that
no ‘medisoneir’ but she can save him, he then directs a series of increas-
ingly severe, if not unusual, threats against her if she does not have mercy
on his ‘grevois pane’ (ll.45, 49). His life is wholly under her control, he
argues, and if she does not accede to his desire he will be slain; then she
will be accused of his death, be shamed forever, and, moreover, thereby
‘do grit Injure’ to the deity (l.53). This last is not, however, the most
alarming result the lover predicts. In the final line of the poem, the lover
pronounces the final dreadful consequence of the lady’s lack of com-
pliance: her failure to show mercy, he tells her, will indicate ‘grit lak vnto
your womanhed’ (l.56).

The reference to the lady’s ‘womanhed’ in the lover’s ultimate threat
echoes his use of the term in his ultimate compliment, and links the
poem’s two parts. The poem thus circles back to its beginning by
positioning the lady’s gendered status, her ‘womanhood’, as key element
in both the lover’s praise and his intimidation. A favourable attitude
toward the lady and the determination that she is correctly gendered are
thus predicated upon her compliance with male desire. Hence, although
purportedly about love, the poem demonstrates quite decidedly the
pragmatic nature of the lover's exaltation of the lady, since the lover's apostrophe demonstrates his real object to be not the articulation of his love and submission to the lady, but rather coercion of the lady into submission to his desire. Moreover, because of the gravity of the retaliations that are in the lover's power and the precariousness of her status, the lady cannot be said to possess real agency. While such poems idealise the female and seem to demonstrate male worship of women, they also delineate society's structures of power and the role of literature in maintaining those structures.9

Another type of poem appearing at its surface to advocate for the female sex portrays women as the image of all virtues. Bannatyne includes several such poems in his miscellany, including number 245 by Robert Henryson which offers a variation on the conventions of such poems.10 This poem, unique to the Bannatyne Manuscript, is titled in a colophon as 'the garmont of gud ladeis'. The narrator begins by declaring that if the lady will love him and follow his guidance he will make for her 'ane garmond gudliest' (l.3). This garment actually consists of many items of female clothing that the narrator proposes to give the lady and that will bring to her all the qualities an excellent woman should have. Such a state of virtue, clearly, is not inherent in the lady but available to her through male guidance, in keeping with much Biblical dicta.11 Before she can become this paragon, however, the lady must meet the would-be lover's conditions, that she love him and submit herself to his governance.

Drawing upon the organisation of the traditional catalogue of female beauty, the would-be lover starts at the top of her head and works down, listing the garments he will give her for each part of her body and the virtues they will entail. Her hood will be of 'he Honour ... / garneist with gouernance', so that 'no demyng suld hir deir'; this hood will ensure that her ethos, mental deliberations, and subsequent conduct will cause no consideration or comment that could injure her (11.6-7). Her 'sark', in keeping with its location on her body, will be made of chastity mixed with schame and dreid' (l.11); her 'kirtill' is similarly meant to make certain that her body and her sexual self are properly assigned and disposed: 

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\begin{align*}
\text{Hir kirtill suld be of clene constance} \\
\text{Lasit with lesum Lufe} \\
\text{The mailyeis (eyelets) of continwance} \\
\text{for nevir to remvfe (ll.13–16)}
\end{align*}
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Other clothing such as her gown, belt, mantle, sleeves, and shoes, will bring her such qualities as goodliness, kindness, humility, hope, and stability so that she will not slide into sin.

Whether the lady will attire herself in these garments is uncertain, the narrator's use of the subjunctive at the poem's beginning and end
indicating some doubt. At the poem’s ending he says that ‘Wald scho put on this garmond gay’, that is, if she will take this clothing, she will wear nothing else half as becoming; this reiteration echoes his opening avowal that ‘Wald’ the lady love him best he will make for her these virtue-bringing clothes. This language implies that the lady has some self-determination enabling her to decide if she will be guided by him. However, the narrator makes clear that in order to possess these desirable qualities the lady must put herself into his charge and, as he states, ‘wirk eftir my will’. Her self-determination may permit her to choose against him, but she will thereby choose against virtue.

The system of virtue he offers thus necessitates that the lady commit herself and her sexuality to one man in marriage. The kirtle he will give her, we remember, is held together specifically by ‘lesum’ (lawful) love, the eyelets of continence meant to prevent removal. While these indications of the sexual confinement of a woman are couched in relatively mild terms, they nonetheless evoke the chastity belt, a garment similarly designed both to contain sexual activity and to prevent removal.12 The lady can indeed be the embodiment of virtue, but only if she accepts the role established for women in patriarchy. Like poetry portraying women as idealised love objects, these poems that accord to women all virtue make that state contingent upon resignation to male control.

The popular image of the evil wife is pivotal in a chanson de mal marié, poem thirty-one by Richard Maitland, entitled ‘The Folye of ane auld Man’.13 This warning to older men who marry younger women constitutes a good example of the adaptability and ubiquity of the stereotype of the evil wife and the conventions of that image. Although stating at the outset that its focus is men’s ‘foly’, the poem accomplishes its intent not just by noting such elements of men’s foolishness as their ‘vane consait’ and their blindness, but by developing a substantial portrait of women as lustful, superficial, and materialistic.14 Foremost in this misogynous portrayal, and vividly conveyed through Maitland’s metaphors for the female, is the reduction of woman to her sexual and reproductive dimensions.

The influence of Chaucer’s ‘Merchant’s Tale’ (pp. 153–68) is conspicuous in the names of May and January, in the attribution of ‘blindness’ to the man past fifty who marries a young woman, and in the particularising of January’s characterization as a man engaged, like Chaucer’s Merchant, in international business. Also alluding to Chaucer’s tale is a brief but striking scene when the narrator describes a result of the May-January marriage: ‘Ane auld gray beird on ane quhyt mouthe to lay/In to ane bed, it is are petuous sycht / The ane cryis help, the vther wantis mycht’ (ll.19–21). Although this bed scene might conceivably generate in the reader sympathy for May, the narrator quickly cuts off such response by shifting
attention immediately to the husband, whose worldly experience can not prevent his losing ‘his geir’ and impoverishing himself. In contrast to Chaucer’s more balanced exposition, which permits some sympathy for the young wife of an older man, Maitland’s poem prompts the reader to a judgmental perspective toward her.

In poems elaborating the stereotype of the evil wife, her sexuality is often a defining characteristic. This poem begins by warning that since a young woman’s blood ‘is in ane rage’ she will despise the husband who cannot ‘serwe hir appetyte’ (ll. 5–6). The statement implies not just women’s lasciviousness, but their superficiality, since they are moved by sexual desire rather than by virtues or larger considerations.\textsuperscript{15} The contempt expressed for women and their sexuality is further adduced in Maitland’s punning admonition that older men should prefer ‘morall telis’ (tales) rather than ‘talis’ (tails); although the pun may equate body and text, the metaphor ‘tails’ reduces women to a body part and confirms the poem’s general condemnation of all women (ll. 8–9). The extrapolation from young women to all women is also evident in the assertion that besides being lustful and shallow, wives are materialistic and wasteful, causing husbands to impoverish and ruin themselves.\textsuperscript{16} The poem’s warning force thus relies not just on iterating that older men are sexually inadequate but on reiterating generalised misogynist statements.

In addition to using the obscene metaphor ‘tails’, Maitland also discusses women as part of a song, as a ship, and as farmland. The poem employs the first of these metaphors to discuss the marriage’s fundamental difficulty, unequal sexual energy: May and January fail to agree ‘vpone ane sang’ because that song lacks the ‘tribbill’ (treble) that ‘sould be swng abwne’ (ll. 13–14). Since the ‘tribbill’ undoubtedly refers to the penis which is unable to be ‘above’ and is not therefore dominant, this metaphor manifests both the primacy of the penis and masculine anxiety over its potency. The discussion of woman metaphorically as ship further attests the danger of phallic inadequacy; the older man who marries is said to get into a leaking boat when there is also not a ‘steif mast’ (l. 28). Finally, women are discussed as land and the penis, predictably, as a plough. Here we see most clearly the harm accruing to the older man who marries. Because his farm field requires ‘grit Laubor’, fertilising, and ploughing, it presents to the husband an unrealisable challenge (l. 29). The husband lacks ‘grayth for to manure the land’ as well as ‘seid’, and lack of seed makes him grow tired of tilling (ll. 30–31). As a result of the husband’s inability, the field is open to any man who comes along, observes the unused land, ‘yokis his pleuch’, and tills (ll. 31–33).

Although in other contexts the association of women with the earth can carry positive connotations, woman as land is here both lustful and lumpish; she demands more tilling, fertilising, and planting than the
lawful owner can give, yet she also simply waits, available to whoever passes by. The consequence of her demands and availability is shame for the husband, but not as the poem first suggests because of his own 'grit folye' in marrying a young woman, but because her demanding sexuality threatens the husband, and because her overt promiscuity broadcasts his sexual insufficiency. Reducing the wife to her sexuality and demonstrating a lustful woman's ability to injure and topple male sexual ascendancy, the poem actively promulgates the stereotype of the evil wife. Images of the woman who does not marry but is nonetheless sexual are also prevalent in sixteenth-century literature; a group of poems Bannatyne clustered together, and which are found only in the Bannatyne Manuscript, aptly illustrates the culture's contradictory attitudes towards such women. As a group these poems seem to suggest a progression in Bannatyne's mind that accords with late medieval thinking about what we now call 'gender'. Bannatyne offers first poem 185, by Alexander Scott, cynically advising men how to deceive women and accomplish their desires. Then Bannatyne presents three poems, 186, 187, and 188, probably by Robert Sempill, about prostitutes or women sexually available to men. Bannatyne then positions an anonymous poem (189), about an abandoned maiden who attempts abortion. This cluster ends with another poem by Alexander Scott (190), that virulently castigates women for their sexuality. The poems about three prostitutes and an abandoned and pregnant maiden are thus framed by Scott's two works, one poem advising men on how to be sexual with women, and the other denouncing women for being sexual with men. In addition to conveying something of Bannatyne's own attitudes, this cluster of poems certifies the hypocrisy of a society that constructs women as sexual objects which men should try to overcome, but that then condemns women for being the target of male desire.

The narrator of the first of these poems enjoins men in the opening stanza to 'lat be the frennessy of luve' because of women's 'natur course & strynd' (186, ll. 1–5). This abjuration of women is not the narrator's real intention, however, since he devotes six of the seven eight-line stanzas to counselling men on mastering women, instructing men how to conceal yet advance their true ends, to beguile and delude, or, in sum, to be 'Sobir in thair sicht ... Bot feckill of intent' (ll. 10–11). The general contempt for the female sex visible in such injunctions is also evident in the narrator's assumptions about women. He presumes unmarried women, though initially requiring considerable attentions, to be shallow and essentially malleable; they will respond to soft words and outward performance and, having once surrendered, are entirely compliant. The narrator adopts the language of a siege to assure men: 'Wyn anis the Entres & the hous is yowris' (l. 48). He assumes a widow, however, to
be more easily attained because of her sexual deprivation. His instruction is therefore succinct: ‘as for a weddow wirk weill on hir wame / I knaw no craft sail cause hir lufe yow bettir’ (ll. 55–6). Unquestionably, the goal is sexual conquest, the only difficulty anticipated not female virtue, but the man’s cynical employment of the right approach and technique.

After this poem advising men how to conquer women sexually, Bannatyne offers three poems focusing on prostitutes, two of which poems are discussed here as representative.20 The first of these poems about ‘slicht wemen’ compares ‘Margret’ to a ship, ‘a littill fleming berge’ (i 86; l.1). Although she displays some discernment in refusing to take on certain landsmen, she is available to other sorts of men, especially seamen with strength, experience, and endurance. In the development of this metaphor of Margret as ship, obscene allusions chronicle her abilities and her shortcomings; she will readily sail all the winter night, but the narrator cautions that ‘gif scho lekkis’ then skilful men are needed ‘To stop hir hoilis’ (ll.19–20). The poem consists substantially of directions, with gross sexual innuendo, for managing the ship. In doing so the poem reveals that this Edinburgh prostitute, as most if not all prostitutes, exists and functions at the wish of men and of their culture. In Edinburgh, as in many towns until the Reformation, brothels were legal even if disapproved.21

The second poem purports to defend ‘crissell sandelandis’, jailed for being unlawfully with a man (187). While seeming to argue for the accused Crissell by referring to the innocent Susanna, the poem soon reveals its satiric nature by labelling Crissell as one of ‘dame venus virgenis’ (l.6), an oxymoronic reference that distinctly undermines the preceding intimation of her innocence. Similarly, the narrator’s rhetorical question to the accusers, asking if they believe that virgins are so quickly won, seems to imply Crissell’s virginity, yet the narrator again undercut such advocacy by immediately remarking that ‘men may bourd’ and that women are ‘nocht the wor Quhen that is done’ (ll.19–20). We are obviously meant to understand Crissell is not a virgin; from the narrator’s viewpoint, subsequent sexual activity for her is of little relative consequence since Crissell has already lost her virginity.

To follow these poems about women Bannatyne termed ‘slicht’, he chooses a work that details, from a male perspective, the consequences for an unmarried woman of sexual activity (189). The tone of the narrator who overhears the speech of the abandoned and pregnant maiden is light and mocking throughout, even as he records her woe, fear, and anguish. The maiden relies on euphemisms to describe her circumstances, lamenting that a mandrake had bitten her and caused her ‘littill finger’ and other bodily parts to swell; despite many and varied attempts to abort the pregnancy, she is unsuccessful. The narrator declines to take her dilemma
with any seriousness and mockingly warns all ‘Trew maidis’ to keep their ‘littill finger’ from the ‘mandraikis snair’ (ll.79–80). He not only trivialises her plight but also assigns responsibility for sexual activity and its consequences exclusively to women.

At the end of this cluster of poems about unmarried but sexual women after the initial poem advising men on sexual conquest, the three poems about prostitutes, and the poem of the abandoned and pregnant maiden Bannatyne places Alexander Scott’s ‘Ane ballat maid to the derisioun And scorne of wantoun wemen’ (190). This last poem’s denigration is not confined to women who are considered ‘wanton’, however, but applies to all women; the narrator charges that even the wisest of women ‘May sone / Sedusit be and schent’ (ll.17–18). The narrator gives to women abundant and specific instructions about interactions with men, warning women, for instance, that ‘It settis not madynis als / To latt men lowis thair laice’ (ll. 41–42). When the reader recalls Scott’s poem that began this cluster and its detailed directions to men on seduction techniques (185), many of the commands to women in this poem that ends the cluster seem ironic indeed. In many ways this poem seems a summary of the preceding poems as it refers to male seduction, to female weakness, to lasciviousness, to pregnancy, and to illegitimate birth. Certainly Bannatyne recognised connections among these poems and the ideas they elucidate, and obviously he saw how Scott’s ‘ballat’ codified those ideas and provided to this cluster a forceful culmination. Whether Bannatyne was also aware of the cultural hypocrisy thereby exposed is another matter. In his choice and arrangement of these poems, however, Bannatyne had overt moral and socio-political messages for the readers. Examining the nature of representative images in these sixteenth-century Scottish manuscripts thus illuminates the narrow roles for women in this literature as icon or stereotype. Moreover, these poems in aggregate manifest the importance of those prescribed images of women and their direct relationship to the maintenance of the prevailing social system. In so doing, this poetry attests the ideological function of literature in sixteenth-century society and culture.

NOTES
1. In quotations from the Bannatyne Manuscript and the Maitland Folio Manuscript I modernize thorn and yogh, and silently provide conventional expansions. Poems in both manuscripts are for convenience designated here by Arabic numerals rather than the Roman numerals used for designation in Ritchie’s and Craigie’s editions.
2. See Sarah Dunnigan, ‘Scottish Women Writers c.1560–c.1650’ in Douglas

3. On the ways in which female and male thinking and values differ, see Carol Gilligan’s germinal book, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA, 1982).


11. For example, Paul’s prescription of women’s silence in the presence of male authority (I Corinthians 14:34).


14. E. Newlyn, ‘The Function of the Female Monster in Middle Scots Poetry:


18. E. Newlyn, ‘“The Wryttar to the Reidaris”: Editing Practices and Politics in the Bannatyne Manuscript,’ forthcoming in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 31. This essay is part of a larger scholarly project on women in Middle Scots literary manuscripts.


20. Poem no 188 weighs the merits of female tapsters.