THE STORY OF Gaelic-speaking Highland women before 1750 is one of subservience and subjugation but also of rebellion. While to a large extent they were treated as mere property by their husbands, brothers and fathers, in other ways Gaelic society treated them favourably. Women of high status, paradoxically, probably had less freedom than women lower down the social scale. The more important the stature of a woman’s father, the more likely she was to be married off on the basis of political expediency, whereas lower-caste women were more able to follow their hearts. However, this did not mean that there was any less heartbreak. A high-caste woman might be married against her will to a man she did not love, but the class system also prevented lower-caste women from marrying above themselves.

But marriage was not the be-all and end-all for these women. Many songs of the time boast of having a lover of high degree, even having children by him, but no shame or blame is involved. In Gaelic society of this period, men of noble birth generally acknowledged their illegitimate children to the extent of bringing them up in their households (whether or not their wives objected). Such children were recognised as belonging to the leadership of the clan, although they were not considered as heirs to their father. It was a source of pride rather than shame for a woman of low birth to have a child by a man of high degree, for she thereby ensured that her child would move up the social scale even if she herself could not.

A song that illustrates this mixture of love for the child, acceptance that she could never marry the father, and love for the father himself is ‘An Cúil Bachalach’.1 Beathag Mhör’s song to Màrtainn a Bhealaich concerns their illegitimate child. She had evidently been the mistress of Martin Martin and had borne him a son; but she must have been well below him on social scale, and thus unable to marry him. Martin was probably the eldest son of Donald Martin of Beallach, who married a daughter of Lachlan Maclean of Vallay in North Uist.2 Beathag seems to bear him no grudge for not marrying her, and her words reveal that, although the thought of him taking another as his wife grieves her, she still loves him; she even gives him advice on his choice of wife:
Ma Théid thu dh’Uibhist an eòrnen
Thoir tè bhòideach dhachaidh as.
Thoir dhachaidh tè shocair chiallach
Riaraicheas na caipteanan.³

(If you go to Uist of the barley
Take a beautiful bride home.
Take home a gentle, sensible bride
Who will be approved of by the clan leaders.)

Some verses have been recorded in which Beathag shows a less charitable attitude to some contenders for Martin’s hand:

Ma bheir thu bean a Siol Leòid
Gun iar i mòran fhasanan.
Ma bheir thu ban a Siol Tharmoid
Marbhaidh i le macnas thu.⁴

(If you take a wife from the MacLeods
She’ll want a lot of fashions.
If you take a wife from the MacLeods of Lewis
She’ll kill you with wantonness.)

Despite her love for Martin, Beathag’s main concern is the future welfare of her child, who will be brought up by his father and his new wife. This is why Beathag takes such an interest in Martin’s choice:

Thoir dhachaidh tè mhodhail chiùin
Dh’ionnsaicheas mo mhac-sa dhut.⁵

(Take home a modest, quiet bride
Who will teach my son for you,

Her protectiveness of her child is illustrated by the misfortune she wishes on any woman who would mistreat him, but she also blesses the woman who would be loving towards him:

Is ma bhuaileas i le feirg e
Guma meirg thug dhachaidh i.
Is ma bhuaileas i le fuath e
Guma luath ‘na chlachan i.
Ach ma bhuaileas i le gràdh e
Guma blàth fo d’achlais i.⁶

(And if she hits him in anger
A curse on the one who brought her home.
And if she hits him in hatred
May she soon be in the grave.
But if she hits him out of love
May she be warm in your arms.)

One can only imagine the heartache suffered by Beathag Mhór at the thought of giving up her child to the care of another, even though it might be in his own interests. This song illustrates the acceptance of illegitimacy. The child was acknowledged and brought up by his father, and the mother does not mention any hardship or shame which she has suffered because of having borne a child outside wedlock.

While it was neither unusual nor frowned upon for a man of noble birth to have a liaison with and children by a woman of lower status, the same could not be said of a noble woman who had an illegitimate child by a man of a lower class. According to the traditional story, a daughter of Domhnall Gorm MacDonald of Sleat fell in love with her father’s cowherd and bore him a child. The child was taken from its mother and sent to foster-parents in Uist; Domhnall Gorm’s daughter was sent to the household of Maclean of Coll, where she acted as a maidservant, while her unfortunate lover was literally ripped apart – tied between two horses which were then driven off in opposite directions. MacDonald’s daughter composed the song ‘Biodh an deoch-s’ air làimh mo rùin’, on being reunited with her brother after years of separation, when he visited Maclean of Coll.

Young Clanranald was greatly charmed with the tablemaid, chiefly because she resembled his erring sister. When he was ready to leave Coll she sang the song to him. He was glad to find her, and took her with him to Uist.

The rebellion of women of this period consisted not in a physical struggle, but in breaking the taboos of the time, most notably in their song-making. Women were permitted to compose lullabies, work-songs, laments and love-songs, but political and praise-poetry was the domain of the learned bardic order, a hereditary male occupation. This did not stop women such as Màiri nigean Alasdair Ruaidh, Mairearad nigean Lachlainn and Sileas na Ceapaich from composing panegyric and political poetry, leading in Màiri's case to her temporary exile from the household of her patron, Sir Norman MacLeod of Berneray.

Women had no political sway, and their fortunes depended wholly on decisions taken by men. All they could do was comment on the political situation, and lament events which adversely affected their clan. One such poetess was Mairearad nigean Lachlainn, whose poems give an account of the downfall of the Macleans of Duart in Mull. She firmly lays the
blame at the door of the Campbells, who profited from the disastrous loyalty of the Macleans to the Stuart kings:

Na Leathanaich bu phriseal iad,
Bu mhoralach nan inntinn iad;
‘N diugh crom-cheannach ‘s ann chitear iad,
‘S e teann lagh a thug striochdadh asd’;
Is maírgh a bha cho dileas riutha
‘Riamh do righ no ‘phrionnssa.
Gu ‘m b’ fhéarr ‘bhith cealgach, innleachdach,
Mar ‘bha ur nàimhdean miorunach;
‘S e ‘dhèfhaìadh gnothach cinnteach dhuihbh,
A bhith cho faicleach, crionnta
Is gu ‘m b’ fhiach leibh a bhith ‘tionndadh.

(The Macleans were greatly valued,
Their minds were dignified;
Now they are seen with bowed heads,
It was a hard law which caused them to submit;
Never were any as faithful as them
To King or to prince.

It would be better to be deceitful and cunning
As your malicious enemies were;
That would leave you strong and numerous.
It would make things certain for you
If you were so wary and cautious
That treachery was worth your while.)

The poetess Sileas na Ceapaich, another partisan Jacobite, gives her views on the 1715 Rising, and does not hesitate to attribute blame for its failure in her songs on the Battle of Sheriffmuir. In her eyes, only Clan Donald acquitted themselves well, while the leaders are accused of betraying the rising to preserve their own titles and lands:

Rinn sibh cleas a’ choin sholair
Thug a cholbha ‘n a chraos leis:
Nuair a chunnnaic e fhaileas
Thug e starradh g’ a fhaotainn;
‘Nuair a chaill e na bh’ aige
Dh’ fhàg sin acrach re shaogh’l e.

(You have done what the foraging dog did,
Who carried his limb of meat in his mouth:
When he saw its reflection
He made to catch it:
When he lost all he had
It left him hungry for the rest of his life.)

Another taboo was broken by Fionnghal Chaimbeul, a seventeenth-century bardess. Marriages amongst the Gaelic nobility were generally political rather than romantic in motivation. Clan alliances were formed by intermarriage, but some bonds were stronger than others. A woman’s ties with her own clan were considered broken when she married into another, and especially once she had children, but Fionnghal went against this. She was the wife of Iain Garbh Maclean of Coll who, along with their son Hector Roy, fought for Montrose and the Royalist cause in 1645. She was also the sister of Campbell of Auchinbreck, commander of the Covenant forces, who lost his life in battle against Montrose’s army at the battle of Inverlochy. Fionnghal seems to have been treated badly by the Macleans, and opens her song by lamenting the fact that she ever went to Coll, describing how her husband’s clan behaved towards her:

Rinn iad mo leab’ aig an dorus
Comaidh ri fearaibh ‘s ri conaibh;
‘S thug iad am braisd as mo hroilleach,
‘S m’ usgraichean ‘s mo chneapan corrach . . . 15

(They made my bed at the door
Made me eat with the men and the dogs.
They took the brooch from my breast
My jewels, and my rounded buttons.)

Her bitterness against the Macleans knows no bounds, as she curses her own son, Hector Roy, thus:

Eachainn Ruadh de’n fhine dhona,
‘S coma leam ged théid thu dholaidh,
‘S ged a bhiodh do shliocdh gun toradh.16

(Hector Roy of the bad clan
Little I care if you should be harmed
And if your line should be without fruit.)

Fionnghal feels totally alone in Coll, where there is nobody to share her grief for her brother, and she expresses her wish to be in Inveraray, where there would be tearing of hair and beating of hands over the death of Auchinbreck.

The strongest expression of her emotions, and her loyalties, is reserved for the final stanza. This is full of venom against the Macleans and Clan Donald, whom she holds responsible for the death of her brother:
traditional accounts, indeed, attribute Auchinbreck’s death to Alasdair Mac Colla, Montrose’s Captain General and a MacDonald:

Nan robh mis’ an Inbhir-Lòchaidh . . .
Dheanainn fuil ann, dheanainn stròiceadh,
Air na Leathanaich ‘s Clann Dòmhnall;
Bhiodh na h-Eireannaich gun deò annt’,
Is na Duibhnich bheirinn beò as.17

(If I was in Inverlochy . . .
I would shed blood, I would tear asunder
The Macleans and Clan Donald;
The Irish would be lifeless,
And I would take the Campbells out alive.)

It is said that ‘soon after Inverlochy [Fionnghal] went mad’, and David Stevenson comments ‘whether or not this is true, the poem starkly portrays a woman in the first wild paroxysms of grief, torn between the conflicting claims of her loyalty of Campbells and Macleans’.18 From the actual text of the song, however, it seems that Fionnghal’s grief stems not so much from conflicting loyalties as from the fact that her loyalty lay with one side, while she was the wife and mother of members of the opposing side, and living in the lands of a clan that was fighting against her own. One can only imagine the agony of her position and, if she did lose her mind, it is understandable.

One woman whose rebellion consisted in action as well as words was the daughter of Campbell of Glenlyon. Unusually for the songs of this period, there is a historical record of the circumstances in which her song ‘Cumha Ghriogair Mhic Ghriogair Ghlinn Sreath’,19 also known as ‘Griogal Cridhe’, was composed. Glenlyon’s daughter had run away and married Gregor MacGregor of Glenstrae against her family’s wishes, who wished to marry her to the Baron of Dall, and later watched her husband being put to death by her own father and uncle. Gregor Roy’s crime seems to have been that he preferred his own name to that of his feudal superior, Colin Campbell of Glenorchy to whom the earl of Argyll sold the twenty merkland of Glenstray along with the ward and marriage of Gregor in 1556.

Possibly Sir Colin might have befriended him if he had been willing to give up his own Clan, but Gregor evidently preferred to cast in his lot with his persecuted brethren. His name is found in several of the complaints against the MacGregors, and . . . it must be supposed that there were some feuds, the history of which has not been transmitted, or other causes to excite the malignity of Glenurquhay . . .20
Perhaps the ‘other cause’ which led to Gregor’s death was his love for Glenlyon’s daughter who:

Having met with young Gregor MacGregor of Glenstrae she gave up to him her heart’s warmest affections and which he fully returned. In spite of all opposition, she left her father’s house, and married him. Duncan was bitterly vexed, so were the then heads of the eastern Campbells, Sir Colin of Glenurchay and his son ‘Black Duncan’. In consequence Gregor and his wife were followed with the most unrelenting enmity... On the night preceding the 7 of April 1570, they had rested under a rock on a hillside above Loch Tay. Next morning... they were surrounded by a band of their foes, and carried off to Balloch. Gregor was at once condemned to death, and beheaded at Kenmore in presence of Sir Colin; his wife, daughter of the Ruthven, who looked out of an upper window; Black Duncan; Atholl the Lord Justice Clerk, and Duncan Campbell of Glenlyon. Most pitiful of all, the unutterably wretched wife was forced to watch her Husband’s execution. Immediately thereafter, with her babe in her arms, she was driven forth by her kindred helpless and houseless... In her great anguish she composed the song... and sung it as a lullaby to her babe.21

This account contains some basic oversights, if we accept the records in the Black Book of Taymouth. According to these Gregor Roy had two sons by the daughter of Duncan Campbell of Glenlyon, indicating that they were fugitives for quite some time before Gregor’s capture, even if John, the second son, was born posthumously. Also the song gives the date of Gregor’s capture as Là Lùnasd, Lammas morning, not the day previous to Gregor’s execution. On the latter point, however, Derick Thomson suggests that the original version of the song may have referred to Là Thùrnais or Palm Sunday, which in 1570 fell on 19th March. Thomson points out that it is highly unlikely that Gregor would have been held captive from August 1569 until April the following year, whereas ‘the interval between [19th March] and 7th April would have allowed the ‘great justiciar’ time to invite the ‘Erle of Atholl, the justice clerk, and sundrie uther nobillmen’ to Taymouth Castle to witness so effective a demonstration of Campbell authority in the former MacGregor territories.22

The song itself appears in two separate and distinct forms: a short version and a long one, with a different chorus for each. The short version summarizes the story given in the long one, for which up to eighteen verses are given in some sources. This longer song is in ballad form, telling the story of Gregor’s capture, his widow’s love for him, her grief over his death, and her hatred of those who have caused such anguish:
Mallachd aig maithbh is aig càirdean
Rinn mo chràdh air an dòigh,
Thàinig gun fhios air mo ghràdh-sa
Is a thug fo smachd e le foill.\(^{23}\)

(A curse on gentles and friends
Who have rent me thus with pain,
Who caught my darling unawares
And made him captive by guile.)\(^{24}\)

Naturally, the characteristic objectivity of the strict ballad form is not
found here, as the song is charged with emotion. Although composed as a
lullaby to Nighean Dhonnchaidh’s child, the son of Gregor, it is actually a
poignant lament for her husband.

There exists another song ascribed to Nighean Dhonnchaidh,\(^{25}\)
concerned with the same event, and addressed to Duncan Campbell
of Glenorchy, or Donnchadh Dubh a’ Churraic. The author of this
song was evidently a Campbell who was married to a member of an
opposing clan, and whose father brought about the death of her
husband:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Gun logh an Rìgh sin do m’ athair,} \\
\text{Gur caol a sgair e m’ fheòil diom;} \\
\text{Thug e bh’ uamsa m’ fheara-tighe,} \\
\text{Gu ‘m bu sgafanta roimh thòir e.}\quad\text{\(^{26}\)}
\end{align*}
\]

(May God forgive my father,
He has torn my flesh from me;
He took my husband from me
Who was brave before his pursuers.)

As well as intermarriage, the practice of fostering was a way in which
clan’s forged alliances, with the children of nobles of one clan being
brought up in the household of a member of another clan. Songs by a
\textit{muime} (foster-mother) to a \textit{dalta} (foster-child) are common, and the pride
shown in her \textit{dalta} could not be any more maternal.

A song that gives a telling insight into the relationship between \textit{muime}
and \textit{dalta} is that composed by Màirí Nic Phàil to Eachann Òg Maclean of
Tiree,\(^{27}\) who was drowned between Tiree and Barra. The song uses some
of the formulaic imagery of bardic elegy, such as ‘\textit{Chaill mu ubhlan mo}
\textit{chrann’}, but also contains strikingly imaginative similes of the bardess’
own:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Gun do sgoil e mo shic,} \\
\text{‘S tha mo chridhe ‘na lic,} \\
\text{‘S e mo ghnàths bhi air mhisg gun òl.}\quad\text{\(^{28}\)}
\end{align*}
\]
What is most interesting about this poem, however, is that it is composed as a lament to her foster-son, when her own son drowned in the same incident. Although the song runs to nine stanzas, her son is mentioned only in the very last one.

Gun robb cuilein mo ruin,
Fear na camagan dluth,
'S e a' seoladh ri d' ghluin,
Gus 'n do dhalladh a shuIl
Ann am mire nan sugh gun deò.29

(The love of my heart,
He of the thick curly hair,
Was sailing at your side,
Until his eyes were blinded
And he was lifeless in the rolling waves.)

The loss of the young Maclean would understandably have been seen by the clan as more important than the loss of his foster-mother's son, but it is strange that the bardess herself seems to think in the same way; the primary subject of her lament is Eachann Òg. However, this should not be taken as evidence that the loss of her own son was the lesser grief, merely that the dalta was of noble birth, and therefore convention demanded that his death be given priority.

A similar convention is seen in Catriona nighean Eòghainn mhic Lachlainn's lament 'Tha mi falbh an cois tuinne',30 where, because the subject of the song is a woman, she is referred to in terms of her male forebears. The song is addressed to Catriona Maclean, daughter of Maclean of Brolas, and wife of Lachlan, son and heir of the laird of Coll. It seems that this Catriona was also a foster-child of, or very closely acquainted with, the poetess, as she is referred to as 'mo leanabh'.31 The poem begins with the familiar image of the poetess looking out to sea:

Tha mi 'falbh an cois tuinne
'S tha mo shùil air na grunnaibh
'Dh'fheuch am faicear leam culaidh fo sheòl.32

(I walk by the shoreline
With my eye on the deep
To see if I can see a boat under sail.)

The poetess is awaiting news of Catriona, and proceeds to describe her, using stock images and phrases, before revealing that she already knows
that Catriona is dead. Catriona is identified in terms of her male ancestry on her father's side; her maternal grandfather, Allan of Ardgour, being "the most improvident of his race", who almost ruined his estate through his extravagance, would not be considered a praiseworthy subject, and is ignored:

Nighean Dhòmhnaill mhic Lachlainn . . .
'S [jar?] ogha Dhòmhnaill mhic Eachainn nan sròl.34
(Daughter of Donald son of Lachlann . . .
And [great?] granddaughter of Donald, son of Hector of the [banners].)

This is the cue for the focus of praise to move from Catriona to her father, Donald, third Maclean of Brolas, who 'received two severe wounds on the head in the battle of Sheriffmuir'.35 These injuries, and the circumstances in which they were obtained, are referred to by the poetess in a way which implies the bravery he has previously lauded:

Ged bha comharr' ad shiubhal,
Rinn thu gniomh bu mho pudhar,
'S dh' fhàg thu luchd nan ad dubha fo leon.36
(Although it left its mark in your gait
You performed a deed of power,
And you left the black-hatted band wounded.)

The poetess then brings the situation of the clan to our attention, with no chief, and a child as his heir, and with, seemingly, no-one else to lead the clan:

Dhuinne dh' èirich an diombuaidh,
Gu'n do dh' fhalbh ar ceann-cinnidh,
Gun do thaoitear bhith 't ionad 'nad lorg.
Tha do mhuinntir fo imcheist,
'S do mhac fhathast óg leanabail,
Bho dhubh sheachdain na Caingis 'so 'dh'fhalbh.37
(A great misfortune has befallen us,
Our Chief has left us,
And there is no Tutor to take your place.
Your people are anxious,
Your son is still young and childish,
Since this black Whitsuntide week that has passed.)

Donald of Brolas died in 1725, so the song can reasonably be dated to this period. The poem itself is evenly balanced, the first of five stanzas directed
at Catriona, the middle stanza placing her in relation to her father, and
the remaining five stanzas addressed to Donald himself. In common with
several other songs of the period, the poem is addressed to one person, but
ends up with the focus of attention on another. Perhaps this results from
pride in the initial subject extending to pride in their forebears and
relations, or it could be a kind of filling-in device: when the subject of
the poem has not achieved much glory in his or her own right, this is
supplied through reference to illustrious relations and ancestors.

This leads to a surprising – to modern readers – feature of Gaelic
women’s songs up to 1750, namely the paucity of songs composed by
women about other women. Out of over 200 songs by women that I
managed to collect, only fifteen were composed to or about other
women. These are mainly laments, although there are also satires,
taking the form of versified slanging-matches between bardesses from
rival clans. Perhaps there were more songs to women which have not
 survived, but even then, the balance is still tipped in favour of poetry
addressed to men, if we assume that the proportion of each type of
song lost was similar. Then again, if women were discouraged from
composing the type of poetry which was seen as the preserve of the
bards, the panegyric poetry, and also from praising anyone other than
their chief, it may also have been frowned upon for a woman to praise
the chief’s wife as a person in her own right, and not merely as her
husband’s chattel. Thirdly, the reason may be that women themselves
did not think highly enough of their own gender to praise them in the
same manner as they would a man. There is evidence that at least one
poetess has little pity for a girl who has been raped, instead praising the
man who attacked her:

An cuala sibhs’ a’ mhoighdeann cheutach
Air an tug Niall Ban an éiginn
Air taobh beinneadh ri latha gréineadh?
’S truagh, a righ, nach b’ e mi fhein i.
Cha sraicinn broil-leach do léineadh.
Nan sracadh, gum fuaighinn fhein i . . .

(Did you hear about the beautiful maiden
Who was raped by fair-haired Neil
On the mountainside on a sunny day?
Pity that it was not me.
I would not tear the front of your shirt.
Or if I did, I would sew it up . . .)

This implies that the poetess thinks that a nobleman remains attractive
and praiseworthy, even if his actions are ignoble. She thinks the raped girl
should have been pleased to have gained the attention of such a powerful man, and not resisted his advances.

Men were the key to power and position, and the only way in which a woman could improve her social standing was to marry a man higher up on the social scale than herself or, if she could not marry him, to bear him a child which would then enjoy the protection and some of the privileges of his father's status. Given these circumstances, repellent though they seem to a modern woman, we cannot condemn too severely the attitude displayed by the song's composer. Her mention of the raped girl is used as a prelude to her declaration that she herself would not have resisted, but, although declaring herself willing to become his mistress, she seems to hold no hope of actually marrying Niall Bàin. This indicates that his attention and affection are all that she can hope for, presumably because of her lower social status.

This underlines the position of women in the society of the time: reliant on men for their status, protection and power, and having little control over the direction of their own lives. Husbands were chosen for them by their fathers, and if the woman expressed her own views on the matter she was punished; for the most part the education of a woman was neglected in favour of that of her brothers: they were property, not people, with ownership passing from father to husband. Poetry was a means of escaping the narrow world into which they had been born, and, in some cases, with certain types of poetry, to stray a little into the world of men.

For the most part, it would seem that Highland women espoused the very system which kept them subjugated. But then, these were times of great political instability, and the ultra-conservative clan and caste system were the only set of rules that remained fairly constant. And what was a woman to do if she did not embrace the system? A woman could not inherit the chiefship of a clan; very few owned land in their own right (and even then only until they married) and a woman would not have been able to live as a creachadair (cattle raider), the only other available option. So they became wives and lovers, mothers and muimes; they either ran a household or worked in one and, in the most part, if they were unhappy with their lot, their only means of expressing their discontent was in their songs.

NOTES

1. *Gairm Magazine*, no. 9, 47.
3. *Gairm Magazine*, no.9, 47.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid, 238.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
34. *Na Bàird Leathanach*, i, 60–1.
35. *Account of the Clan Maclean*, 228.
37. Ibid.