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How Their Audiences Knew Them: Forgotten Media and the Circulation of Poetry by Women

Paula R. Feldman

Because most of our encounters with poems of the Romantic era have occurred within the pages of printed books, it is natural to assume that audiences would have read the poems in the same format during the authors' lifetimes. But especially for women poets, that assumption is often incorrect. Exposing students to the now-forgotten ways in which verse once commonly circulated adds an important dimension to their understanding of the poems they read by women.

Early in our discussion, I tell my students how the values of the aristocracy caused women in that social class to be wary of allowing their names to appear in print and how working-class women usually had neither the means nor the social connections to publish their work. I talk about how the patriarchal structure of publication tended to exclude even middle-class women in subtle ways. "Modesty," too, was a highly valued female trait that prevented many women of all classes from "putting themselves forward" in print. But these barriers didn't stop women from writing poems, and if the authors were gifted, their poems circulated anyway through various media—songs, manuscripts, letters, albums, dramatic performances, literary annuals, broadsides, and newspapers. Sometimes these works became among the most well known and highly valued of the age. I offer here some examples of these forgotten modes of distribution from my teaching repertoire.

Song

Many romantic poems began life as songs, composed with original scores or as adaptations of traditional tunes. The playing of a musical instrument, often with vocal accompaniment, was among the most valued of feminine "accomplishments." I remind my students that before television and radio, women, especially those of marriageable age, were called upon to entertain guests or the family circle with musical performance. Students are often familiar with this aspect of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century life through novels and films.

Sometimes, a song by a particularly talented woman might be striking, moving, or delightful enough to catch on as a popular song and spread far abroad by word of mouth. That happened to Lady Anne Lindsay's "Auld Robin Gray" (1772), the most popular ballad of the English Romantic period, which William Wordsworth called one of "the two best Ballads, perhaps of modern times" (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 678). William Hazlitt remarked, "The effect of reading this old ballad is as if all our hopes and fears hung upon the last fibre

of the heart, and we felt that giving way. What silence, what loneliness, what leisure for grief and despair!" (*Collected Works* 5: 141). Walter Scott called it "a real pastoral, which is worth all the dialogues which Corydon and Phyllis have had together from the days of Theocritus downwards" (8: 37).

"Auld Robin Gray" was not only sung throughout Lady Anne's native Scotland but also carried into England by balladmongers and strolling players and translated into French. It became such a craze that one season it even lent its name to the newest fashions, including the Robin Gray hat. Lady Anne observed some years later that it "had a romance composed from it by a man of eminence, was the subject of a play, of an opera, and of a pantomime, was sung by the united armies in America, acted by Punch, and afterwards danced by dogs in the street" (*Lives* 2: 333). It also found its way into other authors' literary works, including Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman*, where it is sung by a beautiful maniac (36). Its wide dissemination suggests it was printed on cheap broadsides, so ephemeral they have long ago disappeared.

Several people, including a clergyman, claimed authorship, for Lady Anne would not acknowledge her work. As she later observed, "I was pleased in secret with the approbation it met with; but such was *my dread* of being suspected of writing *anything*, perceiving the shyness it created in those who could write *nothing*, that I carefully kept my own secret" (3). Not until half a century after the song's composition did its author confess the truth to someone outside her family circle—Walter Scott, who had learned it from his aunt, a friend of Lady Anne Lindsay's family. He convinced Lady Anne to allow him to publish "Auld Robin Gray" with her name on the title page, in 1825, along with his introduction, for the members of the Bannatyne Club, a society for the preservation of Scottish literature and history. Thereafter it was reprinted in nearly every anthology of Scottish verse and was frequently the subject of commentary. In 1856 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* called it "one of those perfect and unimprovable works of genius which . . . the whole world receives into its heart" and noted, "there are lines in Lady Anne's ballad unparalleled, so far as we are aware, in depth of insight and perfect simplicity of expression" ("Family History"). In 1876 James Grant Wilson called it "perhaps the most perfect, tender, and affecting of modern Scottish ballads" (2: 334).

Carolina, Baroness Nairne, provides a similar example. She rewrote the earthy words to traditional Scottish national songs to make them suitable for the drawing room. Her new version of an old Scottish song, "The Ploughman" (1792), first sung, then circulated anonymously as a privately printed broadside, became an immediate hit, and unauthorized copies proliferated. Another of her well-loved compositions, "The Land o' the Leal" (1797), originated as part of a private letter of condolence. Lady Nairne wrote comic songs such as "John Tod" and "The Laird o' Cockpen" in the early 1820s, and her ardent Jacobite songs are said to be some of the best ever written.

Eventually, under the name of Mrs. Bogan, of Bogan, Lady Nairne contributed songs anonymously to a collection of national airs with words sanitized for

polite company, entitled *The Scottish Minstrel* (R. A. Smith). She jealously guarded the secret of her authorship, even altering her handwriting and masquerading as an old country woman to meet the publisher. Only a few family members and close friends knew of her authorship during her lifetime. But shortly after her death, with the cooperation of her surviving sister, seventy of her songs, some written more than half a century earlier, were published in a book entitled *Lays from Strathearn, by Carolina, Baroness Nairne*. *The Dictionary of National Biography* maintains

In her “Land o’ the Leal,” “Laird o’ Cockpen,” and “Caller Herrin,” she is hardly, if at all, second to Burns himself. . . . Lady Nairne ranks with Hogg in her Jacobite songs, but in several she stands first and alone.

Some of Lady Nairne’s songs remain among the most popular in English, and Scots schoolchildren still enjoy her enduringly humorous satire of the pompous, self-important Laird of Cockpen.

To give my students the flavor of these works, I have played in class Jean Redpath’s excellent recordings. I have also supplied musical scores to our student organization, the Nineteenth-Century English Club, so that the group could perform them in a musical event. (We included selections by Felicia Hemans too.)

Isabel Pagan, a working-class poet, literally sang for her supper. My students are intrigued to learn about how she entertained her alehouse guests with improvised dramatic monologues and amusing songs, some old but many of her own making. According to James Paterson’s 1840 account,

[N]ight after night the vaulted roof of [Pagan’s] humble dwelling rung with the voice of licentious mirth, and the revelries of bacchanalian worshippers, among whom she was the administering priestess. Famed for her sarcastic wit, as well as for her vocal powers, her cottage may be truly said to have been the favorite *howff* of all the drunken wags and ‘drouthy neebors’ in the district. She had no license for the retail of spirits, but usually kept a bottle for the supply of her customers; and by this means she contrived to eke out a subsistence which must otherwise have been sustained from charity. (116)

Her most famous song is “Ca’ the Ewes to the Knowes.” Robert Burns “discovered” it, according to his account when, in 1787, he heard it sung by the Rev. John Clunie. He had it transcribed, added a final stanza, “mended” others, and eventually published the poem in volume 3 of James Johnson’s *The Scots Musical Museum* (1790), acknowledging Pagan’s authorship only in later editions. “This beautiful song,” he said, “is in the true old Scotch taste, yet I do not know that either air or words were in print before. It has a border sound . . .” (32).

It was not until 1803, when Pagan was over sixty, that her works were first published in book form under her name. *A Collection of Songs and Poems on Several Occasions* appeared in Glasgow and contained forty-six favorite songs from her repertoire, including many original works. Unable to write herself, she dictated the volume to her amanuensis. Not included in her book are her well-known songs “The Crook and Plaid” and “Ca’ the Ewes to the Knowes.” By 1845, Pagan’s book had become so rare that Alex Whitelaw, doing research for a volume on Scottish song, was unable to locate a copy or even to confirm its contents. However, around the same time, Paterson recorded that “The Crook and Plaid” was still being sung (119). The persistence of Pagan’s work was not altogether dependent on print media.

Manuscript Commonplace Books and Albums

Students are generally unfamiliar with the traditions of commonplace books and albums, so I have to start from scratch in describing what they looked like, why people kept them, and what they contained. I remind students that scribes copied books before the invention of the printing press and that the tradition did not entirely die out. I am fortunate in being able to show my students a manuscript album book dating from the 1820s that I bought at a flea market, but instructors who do not own one can still expose their students to this nearly forgotten literary medium. A special-collections librarian may be able to help: many libraries contain such items among eighteenth- and nineteenth-century family papers, whether British, American, or European. Instructors can also simply describe the books, as I did before I found mine. I compare them to childhood autograph albums or the blank books sold today in stores; they have pretty bindings (usually leather, which was sometimes gilt-embossed) and no printing on the leaves. I explain how before photography, people would go on trips and sketch scenes in commonplace books to remember them. At home, people might press leaves and flowers in their books or copy things they had read, usually epigrams, sayings, poems, or short quotes from favorite authors. They might ask visitors to write in their albums as a memento. Visitors would often set down favorite passages of poetry, but sometimes they would write original compositions; the latter would, naturally, be expected of a poet. Thus many poets who never wrote for publication had their writing preserved, and to some extent circulated, for everyone who subsequently wrote in a book might read it, and family and friends might have access to it. This practice explains the titles of published poems by canonical and noncanonical writers alike that begin “Lines Written in an Album. . . .” To demonstrate how pervasive this tradition was, I bring to class a collected edition of the poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, where students can scan the contents for such titles (e.g., “Lines Written in the Album at Elbingerode in the Hartz Forest” and “Lines Written in Commonplace Book of Miss Barbour”). One suspects that many poets had a memorized repertoire of album poems to “compose” on the

spot. The album books that survive today provide us with a valuable record of popular poetic taste (rather than just what the critics approved). Some poems had a very wide circulation, almost exclusively in album books. For example, one popular selection was “Riddle on the Letter H,” by Catherine Maria Fanshawe, retitled in many sources “Enigma” (“Riddle”). At a house party in Surrey, Fanshawe composed the poem late one night and read it to the assembled guests at breakfast the next morning. The poem was widely attributed to Lord Byron and even appeared in pirated printed editions of his work. commonplace books often belonged to a whole family instead of one person. For example, Maria Edgeworth’s family kept manuscript albums in which Edgeworth copied poems that she never published, alongside poems written by other members of her family. (Several Edgeworth family commonplace books are in the National Library of Ireland.)

It is because of a manuscript album book that the poetical works of Susanna Blamire were preserved and finally published. Like many women poets, Blamire wrote most of her compositions on the backs of letters, on receipts, or on handy scraps of paper; the only exceptions are her long and powerful poem “Stoklewath” and a few other songs found in fair copy after her death. Most Blamire poems were not published during her lifetime, but they were nonetheless extremely popular, sung as songs, copied into commonplace books, and circulated in manuscript form. A few were published anonymously as single sheets in the 1780s and then found their way into collections such as *Calliope; or, The Musical Miscellany* (1788). But most remained unpublished at her death in 1794. Many of her songs, especially “The Nabob,” “What Ails This Heart o’ Mine,” and “The Chelsea Pensioners,” continued to be sung in the Carlisle region of England for decades after she died.

Julia Thompson, a teacher, preserved fourteen of Blamire’s poems in her commonplace book and taught them to her pupils. In the late 1820s, Patrick Maxwell decided to collect Blamire’s poetry, which he knew from his childhood. He located Thompson in 1833, and she allowed him to borrow her commonplace book, which contained eleven poems he had never seen. Henry Lonsdale, one of Thompson’s pupils, in 1839 met the poet’s niece, who turned up a cache of Blamire manuscripts. These she entrusted to Lonsdale, who passed them on, with his notes on Blamire’s life, to Maxwell. In 1842, nearly fifty years after the poet’s death, Maxwell published a collected edition of her works, comprising eighty-five poems—some in standard English, others in Scottish and in Cumbrian dialect, including ballads, epistles, elegies, and other lyrics—as well as notes and a biographical memoir. An early review of the volume observes that her songs thrill “a sympathetic string deep in the reader’s bosom. It may, indeed, be confidently predicted of several of these lyrics, that they will live with the best productions of their age, and longer than many that were at first allowed to rank more highly” (Chambers and Chambers). However, Susanna Blamire’s writing is an exception. Most poems that circulated in manuscript never found their way into print.

Literary Annuals

Literary annuals were a major publication outlet for women poets, one whose requirements often affected the subject matter and form of their poems. The annuals, I tell my students, were the coffee-table books of the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s. Their format was modeled after that of the manuscript album, and they were as sumptuously and beautifully made as possible, with tooled leather or silk bindings, gilt-edged leaves, and fine steel-plate engravings of works by the most popular and most well respected artists of their day. Some annuals contained only poetry; others included short fiction. Many canonized authors such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Alfred Tennyson, Mary Shelley, and Walter Scott contributed. I tell my students that for poets, publishing in the literary annuals was like publishing fiction today in *Esquire* or the *New Yorker* and even more lucrative. Especially in the early years of the craze, annuals paid their authors and engravers exceptionally well—better than any other print medium. Some editors, such as Letitia Elizabeth Landon, made extremely good livings from their work with the annuals. At the height of their popularity, Lady Blessington is said to have earned between two thousand and three thousand pounds a year from editing and contributing to them.

The books sold to a largely middle-class female clientele. They cost as little as eight shillings or as much as three pounds, depending on the binding and the quality and size of the paper. Because they were more elegant and more expensive than ordinary books, they were generally given only on special occasions to sweethearts, family, and close friends. Christmas and New Year's Day were the most popular occasions for giving annuals; as a result, they tended to be published around November expressly for the holiday season. They were often named after valuable and beautiful things, such as *The Gem*, *The Amethyst*, *The Pearl*, and *The Bijou*. The names reflected their function, too, for example, *The Forget Me Not*, *The Keepsake*, and *Friendship's Offering*. Most had a presentation plate on which the giver could write an inscription.

These books not only circulated poetry to a large, mostly female audience but also on a wide scale allowed middle-class households to own reproductions of great art. I remind my students that few art museums existed in those days. Most great art was housed in the private homes of the aristocratic and the wealthy, to which ordinary people had no access. Turner, Martin, Lawrence, Gainsborough, Reynolds, Opie, Landseer—most of the major artists of the period appeared in annuals. Many of the books were best-sellers—Alaric A. Watts's *Literary Souvenir* was selling ten thousand copies a year by 1830. Thus they are remarkable indexes to the popular culture and taste of the period. They document too the increasing economic importance of the female reader and her influence on the subject matter and style of poetry. Inexpensive examples of literary annuals still turn up in secondhand stores, for the craze leaped the Atlantic, and the books became as popular in the United States as in England. It is useful to bring a copy to class, so that students can appreciate

the format. Knowing about literary annuals helps students understand otherwise puzzling aspects of the women poets we study. For example, why did Letitia Elizabeth Landon write so many poems about China and the Far East? I explain that in those days publishers of literary annuals often commissioned or bought engraved plates and then paid poets to compose works to go along with the engravings. So, as editor of *The Drawing-Room Scrapbook*, Landon often had the difficult task of writing poems about subjects she did not choose and might not even have had much interest in.

Felicia Hemans exploited the medium of the annual probably more than any other female poet of the period. Her poetry is ubiquitous in them, and they must have provided her a major portion of her literary earnings as well as helping to fan her fame. Understanding the peculiar sensibility of the annuals gives us insight into Hemans's poetry. Frequently she published works first in the annuals and then in books. But other writers are known to us as poets only by their occasional contributions to the annuals. Interestingly, perhaps because of the annuals' largely female audience and mass popularity, many now-canonized writers disparaged the books while, unable to resist the lucrative fees, condescending to publish in them. But most twentieth-century scholars have heeded what these writers said rather than what they did and thus have ignored the medium as the significant literary phenomenon it was and as the vehicle for much women's poetry.

These books are a treasure trove of potential research topics for students, especially for those interested in art or in the intersection of popular taste and women's poetry. The two best guides to these books are still Frederick W. Faxon's *Literary Annuals and Gift Books: A Bibliography, 1823–1903* (1973), which includes pictures, a descriptive essay, and a listing of individual titles that contains bibliographical information, and Andrew Boyle's *An Index to the Annuals* (1967), which lists contributions to annuals by poets' names.

My last suggestion for helping students get a feel for how the work of women poets circulated is an outing to a library rare-book room, where students can see how poetry physically looked to its contemporary audience. There, students can experience firsthand the difference between an expensive quarto volume—the format, for example, of Felicia Hemans's *Poems* (1808), with its lovely copper-plate engravings and large pages with expansive white space (Browne)—and the more constricted and plain duodecimo format of, for example, children's poetry books such as the many early editions of Ann and Jane Taylor's *Original Poems, for Infant Minds* (1804). They can also examine a subscriber's list at the front of a volume of poetry and admire the hand work that went into a contemporary fine leather binding. The experience will help them appreciate the high cost of many books, which meant that some women had to enlist many subscribers to have their poems published and which often made it difficult for a woman to amass a personal library or educate herself through access to private collections. Instructors can use any books from the period to demonstrate these concepts: the examples need not be especially rare or even

by the particular poets the class is studying. It can be surprising to find how many examples are available even in the stacks.

Once students see how women's poetry often circulated in media we have long ignored as legitimate sources of literature—nonprint forms such as songs, albums, and manuscripts—and ephemeral print forms such as broadsides, literary annuals, and small private editions, they may be able to appreciate how so much poetry by women has been lost to us. Moreover, they may be better able to understand the challenge and excitement of current recovery efforts.