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David Groves

Urban Corruption and the Pastoral Ideal in James Hogg's *Three Perils of Woman*

James Hogg's novel *The Three Perils of Woman* has never been reprinted since it first appeared in 1823, just one year before his masterpiece *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Until very recently it was the fashion for critics to pour scorn on the *Perils of Woman* by comparing it unfavorably with other novels written for women, such as those of Jane Austen or Susan Ferrier. Thus, a reviewer in 1823 found Hogg's work "indelicate, coarse, and even beastly," and ridiculed the author as "a most unmannerly writer" who was mistakenly trying to become "the fine gentleman, the painter of manners" by writing a novel for women.¹ Not until 1980 did the *Perils of Woman* receive its first favorable notice, when a Canadian critic declared it to be "effective and moving" and "an often fascinating study of emotional extremism."² Since then Douglas Mack has argued that *The Three Perils of Woman* "is one of Hogg's major achievements," and a *satire* (rather than a straightforward imitation) of conventional women's fiction.³

¹Anon. rev., *Blackwood's Magazine*, XIV (Oct. 1823), 431.

²Nelson C. Smith, *James Hogg* (Boston, 1980), pp. 67, 66.

³Douglas S. Mack, "Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life: James Hogg's *Three Perils of Woman*" in *Studies in Scottish Fiction: Nineteenth Century*, ed. Horst W. Drescher and Joachim Schwend (Frankfort, 1985), p. 15.

A storm of controversy surrounded Hogg's descriptions of Edinburgh prostitutes in the *Perils of Woman* in 1823. One critic noted "several very indecent and reprehensible passages" in the novel, and warned

that no author ought to write what no gentleman could say in respectable, far less in female, society. Further, that . . . the frequent allusions to women of ill-fame . . . are in the worst possible taste.⁴

The work was stained with "grosser passages, that must banish [it] from the toilets of those who would wish to learn what the perils are," announced one Scottish critic,⁵ while in London the *Perils of Woman* were said to contain "adventures among the softer sex" which "we must . . . decline mentioning . . . from the coarseness of the allusions."⁶ Although the reviewers of 1823 were horrified at the depiction of brothels and prostitutes in a novel for women, those allusions in fact confer upon the work a level of dignity, social satire, and mature moral concern, which are now just beginning to be appreciated.

Agatha Bell is the teenage heroine of the first half of Hogg's *Three Perils of Woman*. She and her brother Joe leave their father's sheep-farm in the Borders to become students in Edinburgh. Unfortunately their father has little knowledge of the city, and, in choosing their lodgings, he simply agrees to rent "the whole flat that he first went into,"⁷ with the result that his two children end up living in the red-light district of the capital. As Agatha explains later in a letter to her parents, the area is "a sink of sin and iniquity." Through Agatha's inexperienced eyes the reader receives some impression of the extent and nature of prostitution in Edinburgh at the time:

There are a great number of girls here, and some of them very fine accomplished ladies, that are merely bad girls by profession; that is, I suppose they lie, and swear, and cheat, and steal for a livelihood; at least, I can find out no other occupation that they have. What a horrible thing this is, and how it comes that the law tolerates them, is beyond my comprehension. I think there must be some mystery about these ladies, for I have asked Mrs Johnson and Mrs M'Grinder all about them, but they shake their heads, and the only answer that I receive is, that 'they are bad girls, a set of human beings that are lost to every good thing in this world,

⁴Anon. rev., *Literary Gazette*, VI (30 Aug. 1823), 547.

⁵Anon. rev., *Edinburgh Literary Gazette*, I (10 Sept. 1823), 257.

⁶Anon. rev., *Literary Museum*, II (13 Sept. 1823), 581.

⁷James Hogg, *Three Perils of Woman: or, Love, Leasing, and Jealousy*, 3 vols. (London, 1823), I, 32. Subsequent references are included parenthetically in the text.

and all hope in the next.' The very idea of this is dreadful, my dear father; and at times I tremble at being an inhabitant of such a place; a door neighbour, and one of the same community, as it were, with the avowed children of perdition. (I, 102-103)

Unlike the reviewers of the day, Agatha's parents still fail to realize that she and her brother have taken up residence in an area dominated by brothels. In the same letter, Agatha goes on to complain that Joe has become friends with Diarmid M'Ion, a young medical student of shady reputation who happens to live in the same building:

the worst thing of all is the intimacy between my brother and this M'Ion, which constitutes the latter, as it were, an inmate of our lodgings. Now, my dear father, this is what I cannot endure, and I do not think it becomes a girl of my age to be intruded on at all times by a young gentleman, particularly by one who is apt to make a boast of favours obtained from our sex, else there be some who do not speak truth of him. (I, 99)

The questionable character of Diarmid M'Ion is very central to the first half of the *Perils of Woman*. Despite Agatha's disapproval, she falls in love with Diarmid and makes plans to marry him. However, it happens that her cousin Cherry also comes to live in the same building in Edinburgh, and Diarmid soon changes his mind and proposes to Cherry instead of to Agatha. A very suggestive scene follows, as Diarmid's mother, hearing of these alterations, responds by writing to the heart-broken Agatha with the news that she had accused her son of "absolute prostitution" (II, 14) in his double-dealing with the two young cousins. These far-reaching words from Mrs M'Ion's letter are repeated twice for emphasis. She had used the phrase loosely and had not intended it to be taken literally, but yet Diarmid's immediate reaction had shown definite signs of a guilty conscience:

"It is absolute prostitution, and must not be thought of.'—When I said this, my dear son eyed me with a piteous look, . . . groaning in spirit . . ." (II, 15)

Eventually Diarmid changes his mind again and finally marries Agatha. They leave the city to live on the sheep-farm in the Borders owned by Agatha's father Daniel. But cousin Cherry, too, comes to live with them, and before long the bride begins to hear "plenty of tongues" telling her that her "husband is more attached to your cousin than to yourself; and that he devotes those attentions to the maid that should be paid to the married wife" (II, 70).

The situation then becomes extremely dubious as Diarmid falls ill with "some serious ailment, although he said not what it was." This apparently infectious and ravaging disease dominates the last half of the story, but its

name is never mentioned. Without using the term "venereal disease," Hogg seems to go to considerable length to suggest that the infection is indeed a venereal one. "[N]othing would satisfy [Diarmid], although he had studied medicine and surgery himself, but sending for one of the first-rate professional gentlemen from Edinburgh to consult with on his case" (II, 73). His father-in-law Daniel finds it rather strange that Diarmid will only discuss the illness with a physician from the city, rather than with one of the local, country doctors: it was an extraordinary business that a doctor should send for another doctor so far, to cure a disease of which nobody could perceive any symptoms" (II, 73-74). "Alas!" the narrator comments, "there were some there who saw what was totally concealed" from the general view (II, 74). Many readers in 1823 would surely have assumed, especially in view of the previous allusions to prostitution in this work, that the unnameable illness is either syphilis or gonorrhea.

Of all the people living in Agatha's parents' house, the disease only affects Diarmid, his wife Agatha, and his suspected mistress Cherry. It leaves no symptoms visible to other people, and it apparently poses no threat to others outside their relationship. A "great doctor from Edinburgh" comes to examine the three victims, has a long and secret "consultation" with Diarmid (II, 74), and says sadly that it is "out of his power" to bring about a cure (II, 75). Meanwhile, the two young women have settled into a "melancholy gloom" (II, 65), and announce that they expect to die. Just as in real life, they have widely different physical reactions: Diarmid himself escapes relatively unharmed, while Cherry actually does die, and Agatha suffers severely but recovers after three years. However, following Cherry's funeral, Diarmid offers a more respectable explanation for the illness. "[I]t was not till after the performance of that last duty," notes the narrator, that Diarmid "informed his friends" that Cherry's condition had "originated in a hectic fever, which had brought on a rapid consumption" (II, 100). Diarmid's posthumous explanation is not entirely convincing, however. Many readers may have wondered why neither Cherry nor Diarmid, nor any other character, ever named the disease during the long period leading up to Cherry's death. The very least that can be said is that Hogg seems to have deliberately raised the disturbing possibility of venereal illness, before briefly offering a conventional explanation which would perhaps satisfy respectable readers. A more suspicious reader, however, might argue that Diarmid's speech after the funeral does little to dispel questions which will almost inevitably have arisen during the main part of the story. Hampered by the conventions of an age in which even the word "pregnancy" was seldom used in fiction, James Hogg has attacked a major source of human suffering and corruption in his society by raising the twin specters of prostitution and vene-

real disease.⁸

A book written by an Edinburgh doctor in 1840 indicates the extent of the problem in that city, and gives valuable background information for the *Three Perils of Woman*. Dr. Tait estimates that at any time during the 1820s Edinburgh contained about two thousand full- or part-time prostitutes. In his experience of treating these women over many years, Tait was "able to discover *only two* who have been any considerable time on the town without ever having contracted one or other form of the venereal disease." Considering that Diarmid M'Ion in Hogg's novel is a medical student, it is very interesting that Dr. Tait observes that many prostitutes supported young "fancy men" who "are always the objects of their own choice, in general poor, and often . . . students of law or medicine."⁹

Many other scenes in *Three Perils of Woman* similarly point to the problem of urban prostitution. Agatha and Cherry have a third cousin named Richard Rickleton who also comes to the city from his home in the Borders. In his search for a bride, Richard happens to fall in with nine women who live together in Edinburgh. He naively accepts them on their own statement as "the nine . . . tallow-chandler's beautiful daughters." Rickleton is a foolish man who never stops to realize that these nine "sisters" are all approximately the same age. Nevertheless, he is "delighted beyond all bounds" during late evening in their company: "But, he being obliged to treat the party, remarked that they kept an expensive house" (I, 226). Even Richard begins to "have some strong proofs against the ladies for extraordinary freedom of behaviour, going the length of drinking and sleeping with sundry gentlemen" (I, 321). On another occasion Richard meets an attractive woman named Cathrine, whom he later marries. As usual he fails to comprehend that this "lady who had so many followers and admirers" and who is "inclined to dress and dissipation" (I, 204) is almost certainly a prostitute. When he arrives at her "house" he must make his way through a crowd of men he imagines to be "some of [Cathrine's] baffled lovers":

When they reached the door, he kept hold of her hand, as with a determination to enter into some explanation; but she casting her eye on the number of their attendants, and afraid of a farther exposure, said . . . 'Pray, walk in, sir.' Richard complied in a moment; and ere ever he had time to appreciate his luck, he found

⁸For a further discussion of these issues, see my articles, "James Hogg's *Confessions* and *Three Perils of Woman* and the Edinburgh Prostitution Scandal of 1823," *Wordsworth Circle*, XVIII (Summer 1987), 127-31; and "De Quincey's 'Daughter of Lebanon' and the Execution of Mary McKinnon," *Wordsworth Circle*, XIX (Spring 1988), 105-08.

⁹William Tait, *Magdalenism: An Inquiry into the Extent, Causes, and Consequences, of Prostitution in Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1840), pp. 166, 56.

himself in a small elegantly-furnished drawing-room, alone with the object of his admiration. (I, 208)

Three months after her marriage to Richard, Cathrine gives birth to a child by a previous lover.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the reviewers of 1823 were scandalized by the "frequent allusions to women of ill-fame" in this work. One critic declared that although he read the entire novel himself, he felt it necessary to "make it a sealed book" for his wife and daughters.¹⁰ Unfortunately none of the critics stopped to consider that Hogg may have been simply trying to call attention to what was undoubtedly a widespread social evil. James Hogg himself would certainly have disapproved of prostitution, as may be seen from his many poems, songs, and stories celebrating natural, healthy love. Hogg was a religious man, and in his last year he published a sermon to advise young men that "if ever your adopted friend should endeavour to persuade you into a house or company which is improper, thenceforth drop all intimacy with him, and remember this sterling adage, 'My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not.'"¹¹ Critics of the day were simply being irrelevant and narrow-minded when they announced that the *Perils of Woman* "sins . . . against religion, modesty, and good breeding."¹²

The figure of Daniel Bell provides the main contrast to the depravities of modern urban life in this novel. As a well-intentioned, affectionate father, and a Borders sheep-farmer, Daniel resembles Walter Laidlaw in Hogg's earlier novel *The Brownie of Bodsbeck*, and other shepherd fathers common to Hogg's fiction.¹³ He would also, of course, have reminded readers of James Hogg himself, the renowned "Ettrick Shepherd." Daniel is significantly the only main character in the first half of the novel who speaks in Scots and consciously ignores English ideals of language and conduct.

¹⁰Anon. rev., *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review*, IV (27 Sept. 1823), 615.

¹¹James Hogg, *A Series of Lay Sermons, on Good Principles and Good Breeding* (London, 1834), p. 134. For a fuller discussion of Hogg's *Lay Sermons* in relation to *The Three Perils of Woman*, see my article, "'Stepping Back to an Early Age': James Hogg's *Three Perils of Woman* and the Ion of Euripides," *Studies in Scottish Literature* XXI (1986), 176-97.

¹²Anon. rev., *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review*, p. 615.

¹³I have used the word "shepherd" to emphasize the connection with pastoral literature, although of course "sheep-farmer" would be a more accurate term to describe Daniel Bell. By the same token, James Hogg called himself "the Ettrick Shepherd" even though in reality he was a sheep-farmer from 1815 until his death in 1835.

Readers of the 1820s would have been far more familiar than modern readers with the ancient tradition of pastoral literature which Daniel's presence invokes. That tradition has its roots in the Psalms and New Testament, and in Classical pastoral poems like those of Theocritus and Virgil. More recent examples would include Allan Ramsay's *Gentle Shepherd* and Wordsworth's "Michael." Many of Hogg's own poems, including "Love Pastoral" (1812) and "Will and Sandy: A Scots Pastoral" (1829), follow the conventions of traditional pastoral. Similarly in *Three Perils of Woman* Hogg emphasizes the imagery of a shepherd and his flock, and of the Psalms, to convey a foil to the corruptions of the city, and a sense of the superiority of rural over urban existence.

The role of the shepherd in pastoral literature in general is to be "a simple man who speaks of the pastoral ideal" and the "idealised virtues of rural life."¹⁴ Daniel Bell is a rough, earthy man who rejects the two extremes of prostitution, on the one hand, and puritanism and refinement, on the other. When he reads the letter from Agatha complaining of those "bad girls by profession" in Edinburgh, Daniel cries in disgust at his daughter's lack of human sympathy: "It's just nae better than if a gimmer hogg war gaun to gie an auld toop a lesson how to behave in his vocation" (I, 105). Here Daniel uses pastoral imagery to compare his daughter to a young ewe (a gimmer hogg), and himself to an old toop, or ram. He repeatedly compares people with sheep, and uses gruff, rustic expressions which deflate the pretensions to refinement and urbanity on the part of Agatha and others.

It is a mark of the complexity of this novel that Daniel Bell should also be the cause of much of the suffering. Although the rural, natural ideal which he represents is good in itself, the novel also reveals that ideal to be ineffective in coping with the complexities of modern life. Because he never comprehends Agatha's veiled remarks about prostitution, the simple, well-intentioned Daniel completely fails to understand the suffering to which he has exposed his daughter in causing her to live in the worst part of the city. Hogg seems to be suggesting both the validity and the partial naiveté of traditional pastoral ideals, through the maturation process which Daniel undergoes in this novel.

At the start of the *Perils of Woman* Daniel Bell is *too* hearty, rustic, and impetuous, just as his daughter, at the opposite extreme, is trying to be too refined, civilized, and unemotive. The contrast is clearly seen when Agatha, maintaining rigidly her "sacred bounds of virgin decorum" (I, 14), takes to her room after being jilted by M'Ion and vows that "I shall never rise from this bed again" (II, 29); her father responds in his boisterous, masculine way

¹⁴Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957), p. 176.

by crying, "What, in bed again, daughter? . . . I wish you had a good companion to keep you in it, since you seem to like it sae weel" (II, 18). Daniel has only an immature notion of love, and very little sense of the dangers which love would bring to women of the 1820s. Through his innocence, he does much to bring about the disastrous relationship involving his daughter, his niece, and M'Ion. When he suspects that the unmarried Agatha has been seduced and abandoned by M'Ion, he imagines that the problem will disappear if he simply gives Agatha a bigger dowry and challenges M'Ion to a duel: "Hout na," he says to himself,

"she maunna be lost awthegither;—my bairn, and my only ae daughter, maunna just be lost. No, nor she saunna be lost either!" cried Daniel aloud, striking his stick into the earth half way to the head, and springing to his feet. 'I'll clap another thousand pund to her tocher, and five years after this, she'll no be a preen the waur! But I'll stick the Highlandman! That I will! I'll stick—stick—stick the confounded fair-fashioned dog of a Highlandman!"

And as he said this, he stabbed the air with great violence . . . (I, 309-310)

In its context, this passage conveys the relative freedom and vitality, as well as the naïveté and inadequacy, of Daniel and the pastoral ideal which he embodies.

Readers in 1823 would have been quick to notice a strong Biblical element in the pastoralism of *Three Perils of Woman*. Pastoral literature, as a twentieth-century critic reminds us, was deeply indebted to religious symbolism

Through the happy coincidence of meanings in the word *pastor*, shepherd and priest, and through the influence of pastoral life visible in the scriptures; the shepherd Abel, the shepherd David, Christ the Good Shepherd, the Lamb of God, the shepherds present at the nativity, [and] the entire pastoral atmosphere of the Song of Songs.¹⁵

Each of these connotations of the word 'shepherd' is invoked implicitly in Hogg's novel through the presence of Daniel Bell. Daniel significantly refers to his work as his "pastoral vocations" (I, 105), and he fondly calls Agatha his "favourite lamb" (II, 136). He often talks to his sheep (a fact which enforces the implied parallel between people and sheep), and towards the end of the story he begins reading the Psalms, the one section of the Bible which contains the most images of shepherds and sheep. His prayers for Agatha's recovery from her illness reassert the simple values of pastoralism, and invoke the Biblical parallel between earthly shepherd and divine

¹⁵Peter V. Marinelli, *Pastoral*, Critical Idiom Series, 15 (London, 1971), p. 6.

shepherd: "O Lord," he prays,

look down in mercy an' compassion upon us two mortal and dying creatures here kneeling before thee on the earth, the crumb-claith below thy throne,—an' for the sake o' the best day's-man that ever took a job by the piece since the creation o' the world, an' executed the sairest an' the hardest darg, grant us a remission of our manifold sins. (II, 139)

The reviewers of 1823 were just as horrified by Hogg's use of common shepherd's terms in a religious context, as they were by his open references to prostitution elsewhere in this novel. Proletarian expressions like "crumb-claith" (a cloth spread beneath a lamb before shearing) and "darg" (a day's work) were apparently "shockingly irreverent" and "profane and revolting to good feeling."¹⁶ Daniel's allusion to Christ as "the best day's-man that ever took a job by the piece" was seen by the critics as a "sporting with things sacred," and an example of Hogg's "blasphemous . . . familiarity with the Deity."¹⁷ None of the critics noticed that the spontaneous prayers Daniel utters in his "hamely mother tongue" (II, 138) are an integral part of his spiritual struggle, and of his distrust of fashionable "formal divines" (II, 130) from the city.

William Empson once described pastoral literature as essentially the "process of putting the complex into the simple."¹⁸ In *Three Perils of Woman* James Hogg has used pastoral elements to provide a simple, instructive level of traditional symbolism, and to give a contrast to the complexity and corruptness of city life. Yet, far from recommending merely a nostalgic return to former ways, the pastoral elements of this novel imply a need to modify those older values in order to make them effective and relevant to real conditions in the modern world.

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¹⁶Anon. rev., *Literary Gazette*, pp. 548, 547.

¹⁷Anon. rev., *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review*, p. 616.

¹⁸Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral: A Study of the Pastoral Form in Literature* (London, 1959), p. 23.