

1999

## Maidenheids and Moudiewarks: Scotland and the Bawdy Song Tradition

Sheila Douglas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Douglas, Sheila (1999) "Maidenheids and Moudiewarks: Scotland and the Bawdy Song Tradition," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 31: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol31/iss1/16>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

*Sheila Douglas*

## Maidenheids and Moudiewarks: Scotland and the Bawdy Song Tradition

One who was the Devil's Piper, a wizard, confest to him that at a ball of dancing the Foul spirit taught him a bawdy song to sing and play and ere two days past all the lads and lasses of the town were liltin' it through the streets.<sup>1</sup>

This quotation which links bawdy song with the witch cult and thus with the old pagan religion has various elements in it that make it more relevant to the present day than would first appear. First of all it expresses the condemnation of the Kirk for anything which was perceived to have a sexual connotation, such as social dancing and folk music and song. The reason these things were condemned was because they were associated in the minds of preachers with paganism. Kirk folk still cling to these old attitudes although they may have lost sight of the reason for them, and from this comes the idea that "We're no in this world tae enjoy oorsels" and also the "sex is dirty" attitude so many of us in Scotland were brought up with. True, this attitude is much less prevalent than when I was a child but, even without the puritanical prudery and the work ethic, sex still carries a grubby label.

Secondly, this quotation shows that people especially young folk, in spite of pulpit thunderers and repressive dogma, take a frank delight in the natural side of life in which they see no sin. The myth of the dour Scot is hard to dispel and it may come as a surprise to many non-Scots to discover that the reserve and taciturnity shown, particularly by our menfolk, veils a deeply emo-

---

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Murray, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford, 1921), pp. 137-8.

tional, even passionate, nature. The warm humanity found in Burns's poetry and song, which carries with it a strong drive to express this humanity, struggles against the "Thou shalt nots" of what can also be a sincerely held faith. The tension between these two polarities accounts for much of the nature of the Scottish character.

Of course there is good reason for people to be afraid of sex. It is a very powerful human instinct and a tremendous driving force in life, and dealt with wrongly can cause untold suffering. Human beings try to deal with it in different ways. Civilization tries to control it and often does not succeed. Emotions have a nasty habit of upsetting this control, so many people—even in our so-called permissive society—are frightened of showing emotion and shrink from enjoying their own sexuality.

One of the liberating aspects of the Folk Song Revival in the Sixties was that it allowed people to sing in clubs songs that elsewhere were considered "dirty" or not fit for mixed company. Of course, there *are* dirty songs, but a song is not automatically dirty because it deals with sex. For some people, sadly, sex is dirty, but many have a healthier attitude and, as well as finding it beautiful and loving, can also see its funny side. There *are* songs I consider dirty: these are the ones which include explicit sexual references of the crudest kind, and foul language, without any justification, simply from a childish desire to shock, or appear macho and without the saving grace of mature wit or humor.

A minister in the Sixties wrote a letter to the editor of *The Scotsman* complaining about what he called "brothel ballads" being sung in some folk club he had—horror of horrors!—wandered into. So anxious was he to discredit folk song, about which he did not appear to know very much, that he made the Freudian slip of confusing the words "bothy" and "brothel." It was clear what was going on in *his* mind! A bothy is the Scots equivalent of the cowboy's bunkhouse. The bothy system<sup>2</sup> is long gone in Scotland, but a rich corpus of songs that were sung by the old farm workers has come down to us and is still popular today. Some, but by no means all, of these songs are bawdy. One which appears in Volume 7 of *The Greig-Duncan Folk Song Collection*<sup>3</sup> is of a type I particularly value, which manages to be both down-to-earth and hauntingly beautiful:

---

<sup>2</sup>The bothy system was that by which farm workers were accommodated in a communal cottage, or bothy, where they ate and slept.

<sup>3</sup>*The Greig-Duncan Folk Song Collection*, Vol. 7, ed. Patrick Shuldham-Shaw and Sheila Douglas (Edinburgh, 1997). Henceforth Greig-Duncan. Gavin Greig and James B. Duncan were an Aberdeenshire schoolmaster and minister who amassed a huge collection of folk song in the North East of Scotland in the early 1900s. They both died before it could be edited for publication. It is the biggest song collection ever to come out of the British Isles, consisting of over 3,300 songs in a multiplicity of versions.

Rinnin' roon the hoose at nicht  
 Loupin' o'er the dykes O, [leaping walls  
 'Twas there I got my first young son,  
 But noo I ken the keepin' o't.

For aye I rue, and aye I rue,  
 And I rue my bargain O;  
 The nicht I sel't my maidenhood  
 For tippence ha'penny farthing' O (Greig-Duncan, 7, 233).

Some years ago I collected from an old Perthshire singer called Sandy Watt a fragment of an old song, which went as follows:

This field you're going to break upon's been echteen years in lea; [lying fallow  
 This field you're going to break upon belongs no more to me,  
 So if you want a crop of it this very present year  
 Just draw oot your horses an then commence tae feer. [make the first  
furrow

Then he drew his horses out the number being three;  
 Two big geldins gaun abreist, and Whitey gaun afore,  
 For want o' yird the missel-pin was in its highest bore. [earth; bridle of  
the plough

The song is about a woman who has been a widow for eighteen years and who remarries. The sexual symbolism of the song is taken entirely from farming: her widowed body is pictured as a field lying fallow, sexual intercourse as ploughing, and the male genitalia as a team of plough horses. The last line, with its reference to the pin holding the bridle of the plough being in its highest setting, means that the plough share was going in as deep as it could. The frank and free humor of this song is light years away from the sniggering suggestiveness of dirty songs. Not only does it celebrate sexual union as a joyful and natural thing, but it also relates to the connection we have mentioned between bawdy song and the old religion. In the days when religion embraced sex, people worshipped male and female sexuality in the form of earth goddesses and phallic gods. We had the Song of Songs, the use of sexual intercourse as a religious ritual to make the crops grow and bring back the sun, and the loss of virginity as a sacrificial offering to the gods.

In *The Golden Bough*, there is a passage which says:

We may infer that our rude forefathers personified the powers of regeneration as male and female and attempted, on the principle of homeopathic or imitative magic, to quicken the growth of trees and plants by representing the marriage of the sylvan deities in the persons of the King and Queen of May, a Whitsun Bridegroom and bride and so forth... And it was natural to suppose that the more closely the mock marriage of leaf and flower-decked mummers aped the real marriage of the woodland sprites, the more effective would be the charm. Accordingly, we may assume,

with a high degree of probability, that the profligacy which notoriously attended these ceremonies, was at one time not an accidental excuse, but an essential part of the rites and that in the opinion of those who performed them, the marriage of trees and plants could not be fertile without the real union of the human sexes.<sup>4</sup>

It's amusing to note how much this passage is colored by the attitudes of the Victorian era, which quite obviously disapproved of such going-on, and the obvious striving of the author to dress the ideas up in euphemistic language. Nowadays such behavior would still be labeled an orgy, but not with the same degree of prurient horror. But this is the nightmare scenario that pops up in the Presbyterian mind whenever seduction ballads or something from Burns's *Merry Muses*<sup>5</sup> is sung. As a teacher I was struck by the fact that the ballads in the school poetry books (shorn of their tunes) featured poisoning, drowning and cutting up in pieces and all kinds of violence but absolutely no sex whatsoever, not even an elopement.

The Kirk has prettified some relics of the old religion like phallic Maypoles and Easter and the Resurrection which recall the rites of spring, but some it has completely suppressed, like bawdy song. One of the glimpses we can get of the crossover between the old and new religions is provided by the snake or serpent, which in the old religion was a phallic symbol and in the new was the means by which Adam and Eve were tempted in the Garden of Eden. This creature went from being the admired embodiment of male potency to being the accursed bringer of sin into the world.

Another perspective on how the transition between the old and new religions has taken place is very provided by A. L. Lloyd<sup>6</sup> in an article "Lady into Landscape," which he wrote for *Chapbook*, a Scots folk magazine of the Sixties:

The identification of women with the earth or a bit of landscape is a very ancient intuition that has probably been with us for something like ten thousand years—ever since plant growing began to replace hunting as man's chief source of food. Among primitive agricultural societies all over the world the Earth Mother was the great goddess from whose womb all blessings flow. The Greek tragedian Aeschylus glorifies her as 'the one who gives birth to all beings, feeds them and re-

---

<sup>4</sup>James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (London, 1926) The Magic Art, p. 97.

<sup>5</sup>*The Merry Muses of Caledonia; A Collection of Favourite Scots Songs, Ancient and Modern, Selected for the Use of the Crochallan Fencibles* was published in 1799, three years after Burns's death. This work has long been associated with the poet, although by no means are all of the songs collected therein by him.

<sup>6</sup>A. L. Lloyd was a leading singer and authority on folk song in the English Folk Revival of the Sixties, who greatly influenced Ewan MacColl.

ceives back from them the fertilised seed'. The Quecha Indians of the Andes and the horticulturists of Borneo worship their goddesses of the earth as the chief divinity, whose breasts are highlands and whose womb is a ravine. If to primitive man the earth is seen as woman, in later, more sophisticated times, woman is seen as the earth, as a landscape, as a field to be ploughed and mowed, as a spread of country where a man may go hunting for game... It is in the nature of things that as one religion replaces another, the attributes of the old religion linger on as comedy or burlesque.<sup>7</sup>

People remember the old gods, although what was once venerated as sacred is now only remembered in a hilariously profane way. A song that very well illustrates this is "Green Leaves Sae Green O" which I learned from Arthur Argo, great-grandson of Gavin Greig. In it an old ale-wife uses her pretty daughter to lure in customers, who soon find themselves "beddit" with the girl. A sailor finds himself in this not altogether unpleasant situation, and they start to get to know each other:

She drew her hand across his wime Green leaves sae green O.	[belly
"Whit's this I feel like a great harra tine?" An ye ken pretty weel whit I mean O?	[harrow prong
"That's my staigie that I ride on" Green leaves sae green O	[stallion
"And the bag that I cairry my confidence in" And ye ken pretty weel whit I mean O.	
He drew his hand across her wime Green leaves sae green O	
"Whit's this I can feel like the birse on a swine?" And ye ken pretty weel whit I mean O.	[bristle
"That's my wallie that I draw from" Green leaves sae green O,	[well
"And ye may water your staigie there". And ye ken pretty weel whit I mean O.	

Once again the symbolism comes from the world of nature and the countryside. The horse, as in the previous fragment, is the male organ and the female is represented as a well, a very ancient metaphor for the vulva. The image of the horse has particular significance in Scotland because of the secret cult of the Horseman's Word among ploughmen in the last century, which of course, in its turn, goes back a long way because of man's long dependency on the horse for transport, cultivation and warfare. It was from Hamish

---

<sup>7</sup>*Chapbook*. Aberdeen. 4. 5, (1966), p. 21.

Henderson I first learned about the Horseman's Word, as a sort of combined secret Masonic brotherhood, magic circle and embryonic trade union. To become a "made horseman" initiates had to undergo a midnight ritual that involved taking very solemn vows and shaking hands with the Deil. The late Jim Wallace, a singer from Fife, showed me his grandfather's notebook of horsemanship, in which these almost biblical vows are impressively set out along with several lessons of horsemanship that teach practical methods of managing horses. The Word itself was not revealed in the notebook because the vows forbade that or telling it to any other living soul. Women were excluded from the rituals but possessing the Horseman's Word, as well as giving power over horses, was supposed also to give power over women. There are certainly lots of songs about ploughmen which testify to their sexual potency:

Doon yonder den there's a plooboy lad,  
Some simmer's day he'll be aa my ain.  
An sing laddie-I and sing laddie-o,  
The plooboy laddies are aa the go.

I love his teeth and I love his skin  
I love the verra cairt he hurls in.

I see him comin thro the toun  
Wi aa his ribbons hingin roun and roun.

Noo she's gotten her plooboy lad  
As bare as ever he left the ploo.

Another song has the chorus:

The plooboy lads are gey braw lads  
But they're fause and decevin O.  
They'll tak aa an ging awa  
An leave a lassie grievin O.

Of course other creatures besides the horse have been used as a symbol of the male organ. A very popular one in Scotland has been the modiewark or mole, a burrowing creature that creates hummocks in the ground. This was exploited in *The Merry Muses* in a song entitled "The Modiewark":

THE MODIEWARK.

*TUNE—O for ane an' twenty Tam.*

THE modiewark has done me ill,  
And below my apron has biggit a hill;

I maun consult some learned clark  
 About this wanton modiewark.  
     An' O the wanton modiewark,  
     The weary wanton modiewark;  
 I maun consult some learned clark  
 About this wanton modiewark.

O first it gat between my taes,  
 Out o'er my garter niest it gaes;  
 At length it crap below my sark,  
 The weary wanton modiewark.  
     An' O, &c.

This modiewark, tho' it be blin';  
 If ance its nose you lat it in,  
 Then to the hilts, within a crack  
 It's out o sight, the modiewark.  
     An' O, &c.

When Marjorie was made a bride,  
 An' Willy lay down by her side,  
 Syne nocht was hard, when a' was dark,  
 But kicking at the modiewark.  
     An' O, &c.<sup>8</sup>

It can well be understood why the Kirk so disapproved of Burns when his name was associated with *The Merry Muses*! But it would not be quite fair to attribute nothing but narrow-minded attitudes to ministers and session clerks. Gershon Legman reports a sermon preached in the 1690s by a Scots Presbyterian minister called Kirkton, in which he said:

There be four kinds of Songs, Profane Songs, Malignant, Allowable, and Spiritual Songs. Profane Songs,

My Mother sent me to the Well,  
 She had better gone her self,  
 For what I got I dare not tell,  
 But Kind Robin loves me.

Malignant Songs, such as, *He, Ho*, Gillicrankie, *And the King enjoys his own again*; against which I have not much to say. *Thirdly*, Allowable Songs, like *Once I lay with another Man's Wife* [i.e. my mother]. Ye may be allowed Sirs to sing this, but I do not say, you are allowed to do this, for that's a great deal of Danger indeed.

---

<sup>8</sup>*The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (1799; rptd. Columbia, SC, 1999), pp. 68-9.

Lastly, Spiritual Songs, which are the Psalms of David...<sup>9</sup>

Just exactly what the dividing line was between profane songs and allowable songs is not clear, but since he actually quoted the first and gave the nod to the second, he seems to have been a fairly broad-minded guy. He seems to have more of a down on what he calls malignant songs, the two referred to be identifiable as political and Jacobite.

The female genitalia also has its imagery, as for example the well in "Green Leaves Sae Green O." Perhaps one of the oldest is that of the sheath, to which the dagger provides the phallic counterpart. This figures most memorably in the poignant Child incest ballad "Sheath and Knife." Virginity itself is often represented by a mantle or apron or, in some cases, a plaid:

There once was a butcher and he lived in by Crieff  
Alang cam a lassie an she was buyin beef.  
He gied tae her the middle cut and doon she did faa  
An the wind blew the bonnie lassie's plaidie awa.

#### CHORUS

The wind blows east, the wind blows west,  
The wind blew the bonnie lassie's plaidie awa.  
The beef was in her basket and she couldnae rise ava  
An the wind blew the bonnie lassie's plaidie awa.

The song also features metaphors from butchery; the beef symbolizing the phallus and the middle cut indicating intercourse, while the vulva becomes a basket. This exemplifies the saving grace of bawdry which is wit. The whole thing is an uproarious joke. Hearing this sung with an earthy chuckle by a Rabalaisian folksinger such as the late Hamish Imlach,<sup>10</sup> has an infectious humor about it that can offend only the determinedly prudish. The singer is of crucial importance, when considering bawdy song, because it is partly the singer's attitude which gives the song its character. I have heard "The Wind Blew the Bonnie Lassie's Plaidie Awa" sung by singers who think it is a dirty song and make in into one by the way they sing it.

Another metaphor for virginity is a sprig or bunch of thyme; this is found in a very popular song that exists in both Scots and English versions:

---

<sup>9</sup>Quoted from *The Merry Muses of Caledonia: Collected and in Part Written by Robert Burns*, ed. G. Legman (New Hyde Park, NY, 1965), p. 230. The passage is laid out differently in Legman.

<sup>10</sup>Hamish Imlach was born in Calcutta in 1940 and died in Motherwell in 1996. He was one of the leading singers and guitarists of the Folk Revival and toured the world, as well as remaining popular with Scottish audiences.

Once I had a sprig of thyme  
 I thought it never would decay  
 Till a saucy sailor chanced upon my way  
 And stole away bonnie bunch o thyme

The sailor gied tae me a rose  
 He said it never wad decay  
 He gied it tae me tae keep me weel mindit  
 O the nicht he stole awa my bunch o thyme.

In this beautiful song the bunch o thyme is matched with the rose, another symbol of the phallus, and some versions of the song continue the flower symbolism by mentioning rue for the sorrow that follows. This is echoed in another English song "The Seeds of Love."

*The Merry Muses of Caledonia* is well known and constitutes the best collection of bawdry we have in print, but in writing the biography of the late Arthur Argo, I have come across among his papers a large collection of songs, with a particularly full and flamboyant bawdy section. Arthur lived from 1935-81 and was one of the leading lights of the Folk Song Revival of the Sixties. He toured the States in 1960-61 and, while he was there, made a record on the Folkways label called "A Wee Thread o Blue." At that period he could never have recorded such material in Scotland and his friend the late Kenneth Goldstein told me that Arthur never told his parents about it at the time. That's typical of the Scot. One of the songs on that record is "Three Auld Hours," who boasted about the size of their vaginas. It is tremendously funny and if it were a folktale would come into the category of tall tales or boasting stories. The last verse, if I mind right, runs:

Then up an spak the third auld hoor  
 Sayin "Mine's as big as a quarry:  
 A horse an cairt can turn in it  
 An fucking near a lorry."

The full extent of bawdy song in any modern western tradition can never be known, because it is the one category of song that still exists mainly in oral tradition, and printed sources represent only the tip of the iceberg. In *The Greig-Duncan Folk Song Collection*, many of the bawdy songs appear in Vol. 7, which I have helped Emily Lyle to edit. Many of these are mere fragments whose sources are not easy to find. It is important for this category of song not to be neglected by modern collectors and editors, for it reveals so much of our innermost feelings and emotions.

*Perth*