
BOOK REVIEWS

Deborah A. Symonds. *Weep Not for Me: Women, Ballads, and Infanticide in Early Modern Scotland*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997. 289p.

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Many will immediately recognize the title of Deborah Symonds' book as a line from the refrain of the Scots ballad "Mary Hamilton":

"Ye need nae weep for me," she says,
"Ye need nae weep for me;
For had I not slain mine own sweet babe,
This death I wadna dee."

And many will be eager to discover the circumstances that lay behind the familiar lament. In Symonds' treatment, the lives of Mary Hamilton and dozens more like her are revealed in a thoughtful combination of ballad literature and research from legal archives. Scholars and critics with an interest in social history as well as in literature will find a carefully researched, heavily annotated text dealing, first, with the place of the Scots ballads in the emergent modern Scotland and ending in the use made of the Scots ballads by novelists such as Sir Walter Scott. Here, her account of the transformation of the ballad heroine from a labor-hardened woman to a comfortable, though impetuous, bourgeois daughter is remarkable.

Symonds begins with the methods and politics of the nineteenth-century ballad collectors, who, she points out, were blind to the possibility that ballads were women's literature, and, though they held firmly to the "belief that ballads had originated in a male bardic tradition," were unable to "erase the importance of women" (37). In an especially effective move to clarify the politics and economics behind the urgency of the collecting and publishing of ballads, which, she holds, was often driven by a nostalgia for an aristocratic, warrior past, she sets the peak of collection history in the context of Sir Walter Scott's Tory sentiments. Emphasizing the differences between the collector/singers, which were mostly women, and collector/publishers, which were largely men, Symonds' revisionist scholarship gives her readers a history of women singing to women about women, their impossible loves and their lives squeezed by poverty in rapidly changing social structures.

Symonds' subtle and finely articulated analysis allows her readers to see in the minutiae the complexity of life in early modern Scotland, where, for example, population growth and improvements in agricultural production were met with an upswing in infanticide. Pressed by local poverty and dowry-dependent marriages, the life of the rural Scots woman was not too far from that of the ballad heroine. For, as subsistence and tenant farming gave way to larger land holdings, rural women's lives were increasingly solitary affairs. Living in relentlessly cruel circumstances that gave her physical as well as mental stamina, the ballad heroine "uses desire to find value in men who appear ordinary, which must have been something of a radical proposition" (51). As few men could promise marriage and few women would find options outside marriage, her sexual independence had to exist in an uneasy tension with her desire to marry. The resultant unwanted pregnancies had to be disguised, and the children who were born in secret died, often quite brutally. The women who stayed on in the countryside, hoping for a productive rural life were the ones most likely to appear in court facing infanticide charges, where prosecution was especially high among single women. Increasingly, women were expected to bear witness against women, for only women knew the intimacies of childbearing and the physical signs that accompanied the birth and loss of a child. Mother/wives acted as forensics experts, detailing the marks of delivery and the possible ways a child might appear to have died unnaturally. In most of the proceedings, the suspect's body became public evidence against herself. Acquittal depended solely upon the advocacy of male members of the community.

The reader can almost feel the ground shift as Symonds details the economic pressures, where, by law and capital, lawyers and businessmen were able to acquire vast rural estates. The hope of the farmers that they, too, would one day own their own estates was not to be realized. Symonds is at her best when providing the complex reasons why these hopeful men and women would fail and be forced to leave for urban labor in the textile mills, a life that produced independent, tough-minded women whose sexuality was not managed by the domestic sphere. It was also a life that saw the demise of the ballad tradition.

The most interesting shift that Symonds describes, however, is a conceptual one. In the seventeenth century few courts questioned the ability of a woman to kill her illegitimate infant. Within a few decades, legal rhetoric would be laden with the utter incomprehensibility of the act. Symonds attributes this change to several historical factors from early in the century. She credits Hunter's 1783 essay "On the Uncertainty of the Signs of Murder, in the Case of Bastard Children" with finally overturning the 1690 Act Anent Child Murder, an act that had con-

victed scores of women for infanticide. Hunter, a “midwife to his Queen [who] actively negotiated his status” with men (149), gained authority in the courtroom by demonstrating his knowledge of women in their most intimate moment of childbirth. It was here, in his courtroom accounts, that the “essential maternal nature of women” overshadowed the material realities of women in labor. According to Hunter, only the father of illegitimate children could be conceived of as criminal; mothers were “weak, credulous, and deluded” (145). Symonds observes that Hunter is the “only male allowed to speak from the experience [of birth and infanticide], and his is the controlling consciousness, for those women,” she further notes, “who spoke to him in secret and in fear of death were rapidly replaced, in his narrative, by women unable to speak” (145). Enlightenment empiricism and sentimentality come together in Hunter’s authoritative accounts of women’s bodies in labor and in his presumption that women were incapable of managing their passions in the throes of childbirth. The only explanation that saves the maternal nature of women is the one that makes her incapable of her own delivery; the explanation that makes a woman naturally incapable of infanticide necessitates making her an infant. Symonds’ argument is based upon a precise and sophisticated use of historical sources. She is careful to lay out the intricacies of social and economic moments, and spends a good deal of time in the archival evidence of specific court cases, recording the changing rules of evidence, as well as in the more popular treatments found in ballads and novels.

That Symonds begins with women fully capable of struggling unprotected in the rural hardships of Scotland and ends with Sir Walter Scott’s novels suggests that the emergence of “maternal essence” discourse and the bourgeoisie happened simultaneously in Scotland. Returning to her earlier work on the politics of collecting and publishing, Symonds asserts that the problem of authorship and authenticity — the scandal of the ballads — can easily be attributed to the sentimental, bourgeois canons of taste. Just as the bourgeoisie seem incapable of recognizing women as authors and authenticators of ballads, bourgeois sentiment cannot tolerate the “bluntness, fury, and calculating canniness” of the ballad heroine (37). As Scott relocates this creature of the ballad into his novels, he moves her to the periphery and chooses, instead, a rules-abiding lesser figure — a sister, in one case — as his protagonist. His novels, and those of his fellows, feature the level-headed domestic manager managing the passions and sexuality of the once heroic woman of the ballads in the same way that bourgeois management of the passions of the rural and laboring classes expected to return social order to a mythological past of aristocratic order and blissful tenants. Ironically, to justify the old aristocratic order, Scott and friends call upon the discourse of natural rights

in their construction of bourgeois womanhood. Symonds remarks that “Scott’s great accomplishment was to fit out a village woman with the virtues of an earnest bourgeoisie, thus offering bourgeois women the model of a working woman” (197-198). The ballad heroine and her fellow Scots women have been tamed in the service of the capital that initially sent her scurrying from the now Romanticized rural life into the mills and shipyards of Edinburgh. Her industry, once in the service of mere survival, is transformed into a capitalist, bourgeois virtue, while her desperation is transformed into unnaturalness.

Symonds’ *Weep Not for Me* is a provocative cultural history, thick with detail and careful analysis. Her narrative is clean and strong and able to handle the labyrinthine twists and turns necessitated by the combination of material from high and low culture and from a mix of disciplinary sources. Her notes alone are worth the price of the book and, in fact, read like a second text. If the notes do not inspire further research in the reader, they ought to, at least, inspire respect for the depth of research committed to a complex history. But, above all, Symonds recreates a compellingly poignant story. ✨