THE FOSTER-MOTHER AS PRAISE-POET IN GAELIC TRADITION

INTRODUCTION

There can be little doubt but that the practice of fosterage was once of immense importance in the organisation of Gaelic society. Sources from the early Irish period describe in considerable detail the rights and responsibilities of foster-parents, foster-children, and those whose children were fostered (see Kelly 1988, 86-90). We know that the practice was still current until at least the 1770s in the south-west of Ireland (MacDonagh 1988, 7ff), and until at least the 1790s on the Scottish islands (Buchanan 1793, 114, 171-2); however, we have little concrete evidence as to the nature and prevalence of fosterage customs after the medieval period. This paper will focus on the evidence of fosterage from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century – in particular, the evidence of the oral tradition – with a view to examining the content and context of poetic compositions attributed to the foster-mothers of various members of the Gaelic nobility.

The exact nature of the foster-mother’s fundamental duties in this period is far from clear. English-language sources often use the word ‘nurse’ to denote a woman who took care of children who were not her own – a term which perhaps suggests wet-nursing, but of this we cannot be entirely certain. Gaelic sources can be equally ambiguous in their terminology; according to Peter Parkes, in his discussion of fosterage in medieval sources, ‘infant suckling, nursing, and child fosterage were lexically conflated by this time, [but] medieval Irish legends seem to have retained a moral partitioning of differential degrees of adoptive kinship’ (Parkes 2004, 602). One source demonstrates that a separation between fosterage and wet-nursing certainly survived, at least in some cases, until the eighteenth century in Scotland:

When a son is born to the chief of a family, there generally arises a contention among the vassals which of them shall have the fostering of the child when it is taken from the nurse. (Burt 1822 [1754], 58)

An earlier sixteenth-century Irish source seems to imply that no distinction is to be drawn between wet-nursing and fosterage, however:

1In particular, there is a dearth of evidence originating from the written – as opposed to the oral – tradition in the post-medieval period. It should also be noted that a large proportion of the written historical sources from this period were produced by observers who were outside the Gaelic-speaking community. We do, however, have a small number of valuable contracts from the early modern period which were drawn up by those who participated in the institution of fosterage, and which tell us much about the obligations pertaining to fosterage in Scotland (see Innes 1855, 179, 223; Parkes 2006, 376, 385-7); these arrangements are doubtless related to those which were current in the Irish context at the same time, but unfortunately these sources do not shed much light on the question of the foster-mother’s role.
Women, six days after their delivery, return to their husband’s bed, and put out their children to nurse. Great application is made from all parts to be nurses to the children of these Grandees, who are more tender to their foster-children than to their own […] The Foster-fathers take much pains, spend much more money, and bestow more affection and kindness upon these children than their own. (Good 1566, quoted in Parkes 2006, 368)

Another Scottish source from the eighteenth century also seems to conflate wet-nursing and fosterage:

The lower order of people value themselves much on their connections with the rich. Connections often arise from the time that a mother, wife, or sister, gave suck to the gentleman’s child; whence they call them coald, co-fostered, or fosterlings. This appellation is used by all the family, as well as by the child whose mother’s milk suckled the great man’s child. (Buchanan 1793, 114)

We cannot, therefore, determine whether the words buime and muime refer in our period to a woman who was exclusively a wet-nurse; or to a foster-mother who took charge of a child after weaning; or to a woman who was wet-nurse to an infant who then remained in her care throughout childhood. What is certain, however, is that there was at least some disparity in status between Gaelic nobles and those who fostered their children; and it is evident in the sources above that the care of a child or infant of noble birth was considered a great privilege – so much so, indeed, that the honour was often bought (Morley 1890, 296-97; Ware 1809, 19; Buchanan 1793, 171-2).

The evidence of both the Irish and Scottish contexts also supports Peter Parke’s assertion that fosterage was a means by which the Gaelic nobility encouraged the affection and loyalty of those below them in the social scale (2006, 360, 365).

The present study will, as far as possible, examine the evidence of both the Irish and Scottish contexts in an attempt to further our understanding of poetic compositions attributed to the foster-mothers of nobles. It must be noted, however, that the distribution of the evidence is somewhat uneven; the bulk of the relevant evidence survives in Scottish Gaelic oral tradition, but we shall see that elements of Scottish practice are echoed in Irish Gaelic tradition, suggesting that there may once have been a degree of common understanding throughout Gaeldom as to the role of the foster-mother of a noble family.

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2 Buime is most commonly used in modern Irish, and muime is the usual form in modern Scottish Gaelic. Both these forms are listed in the Irish Grammatical Tracts (Bergin 1916, 44).

3 It should also be noted that a child of noble birth could have had multiple foster-parents during our period; see Morgan 1993, 124.

4 In a remarkable contract dated 1641, we even have evidence of a case where a noble family was paid 6000 merks in order that a prospective foster-father, Donald Campbell of Ardnamurchan, might have the privilege of saying he fostered Neill Campbell, the son of the Earl of Argyll: ‘I have been earnistlie desiring to have the fostering of Neill Campbell […] but in regard of the troubles of the tyme, the said Neill could not convenientlie be in my cumpany, lykeas now he is to be put to the schoolies; alwayes the said noble lord, his fathar, is content that he be repute as my fostar, whereof I do verie gladlie accept’ (‘The Iona Club’ 1847, 19-20).
‘A Mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais’ AND SIMILAR SONGS

As has been noted by Derick Thomson (1990 [1974], 58), various praise-songs, in song collections and in current tradition, are ascribed to the foster-mothers of Scottish nobles; most of these songs are probably seventeenth-century in date, and while their transmission in oral tradition has undoubtedly led to adaptation and variation of the song-texts, there are certain recurring traits in the evidence which may well be significant in advancing our comprehension of this question.

Perhaps the best-known of the songs attributed to foster-mothers is A mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais – ‘O son of Iain son of Seumas’ – which has been discussed in detail in a 1968 paper by John MacInnes. MacInnes summarises the traditional account of the circumstances of the song’s composition as follows:

The oral tradition of Uist has preserved the memory of a small clan battle fought in North Uist in 1601. In the battle, Dòmhnall mac Iain ‘ic Sheumais, the leader of the victorious side, was wounded. His foster-mother, so it is said, gathered a band of girls and set off for the scene of the battle, composing a panegyric on the way. This she sang to the wounded man, while the girls sang the refrain. [...] The song which she is said to have composed is still known and it is a choral song [entitled A mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais]. (MacInnes 1968, 38)

The song’s salient feature is the praise of the fosterling, as is evident in the following lines, collected by Frances Tolmie:

’S è Mac-Iain ‘ic Sheumais
Duine treubhach smiorail.
Gruaidh ruiteach na féile
Mar éibhleag ’ga garadh.
Bu cheannard roimh shluagh thu
Dol suas troimh thir ain-iùil
Le claidheamh geur cruadhach
’S dé! cha d’fhuaireadh sgann’ air.5
(Tolmie 1911, 257)

‘The son of Iain son of Seumas is / a valiant courageous man. / Ruddy cheek of generosity / as though an ember [were] warming it. / You were a leader before a throng / going up through unknown terrain / with a sharp sword of steel / and indeed6 a fault was not found on it’.7

5 Each line is followed by a vocable refrain.
6 Presumably ‘dé!’ here is to be connected with the sense given by Dwelly 1994 (1901-11), s.v. Dia : ‘used as an emphatic particle’; the lack of capitalisation appears not to ascribe any religious significance to the phrase.
7 All translations are the author’s unless otherwise indicated.
Other versions of this praise-song also contain a highly interesting reference to the drinking of the hero’s blood in the aftermath of the battle (likely to have been a custom of considerable antiquity even in the early seventeenth century):

bha fuil do chuim uasail
air uachdar an fhearainn,
bha mi fhèin ga sùghadh
gus na thùch air m’anail. 8

‘The blood of your noble form / was all over the ground, / I myself was drinking it / till it made me gag’. (Gillies 2005, 130; Gillies’s translation)

Allusions to this practice are made in a significant number of keens in both Ireland and Scotland (see Ó Tuama and Kinsella 1981, 204; MacRury 1891, 144; Shaw 2005 [1977], 259; School of Scottish Studies, Log 217), as well as in historical and folkoric accounts of violent deaths (Culhane 1969, 76; Spenser 1997 [1663], 66). There is no certainty as to the reason for this custom, but perhaps it is to be connected to the perceived nobility of the hero’s blood; this understanding is seen in A mhic Iain ’ic Sheumais above, as well as in Spenser’s famous 1663 account of a woman who drank her dead fostering’s blood, ‘saying, that the earth was not worthy to drink it’ (Spenser 1997 [1663], 66).9

John MacInnes also notes the importance of A mhic Iain ’ic Sheumais in the context of another intriguing historical custom:

Now, this isolated fragment of clan tradition, transmitted merely as an incidental item in the account of a clan battle, would seem to be the only circumstantial description we have in Scottish Gaelic of the widespread practice of women singing a praise song to a victorious warrior [...].[F]rom Ireland we seem to have in the tantalisingly brief reference to the cepóc mentioned in Scéla Mucc Meic Dathó an allusion to the same type of composition.10

It may be worth looking briefly at the context of the cepóc, as it sheds some light on the nature of A mhic Iain ’ic Sheumais as a praise-song. The editor of Scéla Mucc Meic Dathó, a tale composed around 800 AD, explains the cepóc as ‘some kind of choral-song’ (Thurneysen 1969 [1935], iv, 39), and the Dictionary of the Irish Language provides the meaning ‘panegyric sung in chorus’ (eDIL s.v. cepóc).11 In addition to the Scottish evidence concerning

8 Each line is followed by a vocable refrain.
9 See also the reference to the beauty of a drop of the nobleman’s blood in the oral lament for Hector MacLean (d. 1651) (MacLean 1986, 91).
10 MacInnes 1968, 38.
11 This word is attested in modern Gaelic in both Ireland and Scotland: ‘The word cepóc survives in at least one dialect of Scottish Gaelic in the form ceapag, ”an improvised song, ditty”’ (MacInnes 1968, 38); see also the Irish ‘ceapóg’: O’Reilly 1817, s.v. ceapóg: ‘song, music’; Ó Dónaill 1977, s.v. ceapóg: ‘extempore verse’.
A mhic Iain 'ic Sheumais, it is possible that something like the cepóc may also have survived in Ireland into the seventeenth century. Its use was not confined to the praise of living persons; it seems to have been connected to the lament tradition as well: ‘Freq. of the eulogy of the dead: ro haghadh a cepóc γ a cluichi cainteach’ – ‘her cepóc and her keening-game were performed’ (eDIL s.v. cepóc). It is noteworthy that the cluichi cainteach certainly survived into the seventeenth century in Ireland (see Bretnach 2003). The cepóc, therefore, appears to have been a type of praise-song which was sung to celebrate both living persons and the dead.

The praise-song attributed to the foster-mother of Dòmhnull mac Iain mac Sheumais is not, however, primarily remembered in Gaelic tradition as a panegyric, although MacInnes’s innovative study reveals it to be just that. It is rather explained as a waulking-song; one source tells us that ‘his foster-mother set women to waulk a web of cloth’ at the scene of the fosterling’s injury (Tolmie 1911, 257) and the song is even used as ‘evidence of the extempore composition of waulking songs at the waulking board’ (Campbell and Collinson 1981, 254). Given that the song’s context is said to have been the aftermath of a battle, it seems highly unlikely that there would be any need (or indeed any opportunity) to set up a waulking-board under these circumstances; these explanations are likely to be due to the fact that the song was absorbed into the waulking tradition, and does not survive in any other context. It is interesting to note, however, that the oral tradition may preserve a hint of the song’s origins outside the waulking context. Frances Tolmie, although she states that the song was performed during a

12 Bunting tells us that Thugamar féin an samhradh linn (‘We brought the summer with us’) ‘was sung by the band of virgins that went out of Dublin to welcome the duke of Ormond when he landed in Ireland [as Lord Lieutenant in 1662]’ (Bunting 1996 [1796], iv). There is a strong correlation between this ‘band of virgins’ (that is, marriageable women) and the women who performed the cepóc in Scéla Macce Meic Dathó: that is, mná òentama Ulad ocus a n-ingena macdacht (Thurneysen 1969 [1935], 19) – ‘the single women of the Ulaid and their marriageable girls’. Thugamar féin an samhradh linn belongs to the tradition of May-time choral songs (see Ní Uallacháin 2003, 96-130); given that the refrains of such choral songs were not fixed and could be transferred from one song to another (see Costello 1919, 67-8), the seasonal refrain could well have been the basis for a new composition (perhaps improvised? – see fn. 9) in the context described by Bunting. Indeed, the use of a seasonal refrain may in fact have been appropriate on this occasion: Martin (2008, 131) has speculated on the possible connection between songs in praise of a hero and seasonal celebration. This evidence is far from conclusive, but we must at least consider the possibility that the cepóc or a similar type of song was still being performed in Ireland well into the seventeenth century.

13 My thanks to Dr Elliott Lash for his assistance in clarifying the verbal form used in this quotation. The eDIL citation is taken from Stokes 1903: 282; the most recent edition of this tale (Tochmarc Luaine ocus aided Athaire – ‘The wooing of Luaine and the death of Athaire’) has been published by Liam Bretnach (1980). The connection between (women’s) panegyric and keen evidently survived long after the early Irish scribes recorded references to cepóc ocus cluichi cainteach. The parallels between women’s praise-songs (mostly preserved in the Scottish waulking tradition) and women’s laments are often striking (see Nic Lochlainn 2010, 271-4, 295-6; I hope to discuss this question in a forthcoming paper).

14 We shall see that, in a parallel with this type of panegyric, the praise-songs attributed to foster-mothers sometimes concern a living subject and in other cases were composed after the subject’s death.
waulking after the battle, says that this was a song ‘which [the foster-mother] had once composed in her nursling’s praise [my emphasis]’ (Tolmie 1911, 258) – suggesting that this supposed waulking was not the location of its composition. It seems, at any rate, that the waulking function of A mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais is, in Anne Lorne Gillies’s phrase, ‘obscurring even more interesting origins’ (2005, 131); and this is far from being the only praise-song which is attributed to a foster-mother and which survives only in the context of duties primarily associated with women.

Beinn a’ cheathaich – ‘The misty mountain’, for example, is ascribed to Nic Iain Fhinn, reputedly the foster-mother of the powerful MacNeil family of Barra (see below). The song, which survives in the waulking tradition, describes a great ship belonging to the MacNeils, making its way to Ciosamul an aighir – ‘Joyful Kisimul [Castle]’, the ancestral home of the MacNeils:

far am faight’ a’ chuirm ri ghabhail,
’g òl an fhion bho oidhche gu latha,
caithream nam fear ag òl an leanna,
piobaireachd nam feadan árd’ laghach,
’s clàrsach bhinn ga piobadh mar ris,
sioda donn ga chur air na mnathan.15

‘[Kisimul], where the feasting takes place, / drinking wine from night to day, / the sound of the men drinking ale, / the piping of the tall, lovely drones, / and the sweet harp piping alongside, / russet silk being worn by the ladies’. (Gillies 2005, 133; Gillies’s translation)

This description of the chief’s residence clearly corresponds with the conventional rhetoric of the ‘Panegyric Code’ discussed by John MacInnes (1978, in particular, 456, 489-90). MacInnes has commented on the remarkably consistent imagery used by male and female poets in the panegyrics of Scottish Gaelic tradition, and suggests that the influence of such rhetoric was inescapable and pervaded poetic expression at all levels of society (MacInnes 1978, 482).

Another panegyric attributed to a foster-mother, Fear Bhàlai – ‘The man of Valey’ – also survived in the waulking tradition, and likewise corresponds with the ‘Panegyric Code’ suggested by MacInnes:

An raoir chunna mi ’n aisling,
’N âm dùsgadh cha cheart i
Thus ’a ghraidh [sic] a thiginn dhachaidh.
Ogh’ Shir Shéumais nam bratach
Leatsa thogta na creachan
Leatsa dh’ eireadh na h-eachruidh
Leatsa dh’ òlta fion [sic] frasach16
(MacDonald 1895, appendix, p. 22)

15 Each line is followed by a vocable refrain.
16 Each line is followed by a vocable refrain.
‘Last night I saw the vision, / at waking-time it is [proven] untrue / you, [my] love, coming home. / Grandson of Sir James of the banners / by you forays would be undertaken / with you the cavalry would rise / by you (or along with you) abundant wine would be drunk!’

Tolmie (1911, 255) tells us that this song dates from the seventeenth century. If so, it is likely to have been composed late in the century, because the subject’s grandfather is said to have fought in 1645; the subject’s nobility is evident in the reference to his grandfather, ‘Sir Séumas [MacDonald]’. At any rate, the fact that these praise-songs attributed to foster-mothers were preserved as clothmaking songs is of great interest; and we shall see that other foster-mothers’ panegyrics were associated not only with the women-only context of waulking, but also with the lullaby tradition, which was another song-type specifically associated with women.

_Tàladh Choinnich Òig and Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm_

_Tàladh Choinnich Òig_ – ‘Young Kenneth’s lullaby’, reputed to have been composed for Coinneach MacCoinnich by his foster-mother17 – is included among the lullabies in Margaret Fay Shaw’s song collection (2005 [1977], 152-3). In other sources, it is ambiguously described as a _luinneag_ – ‘refrain-song’ (Mackenzie 1888, 118; MacInnes 1963, 228); such a term possibly suggests communal performance,18 but the only specific evidence as to function is in Shaw’s categorisation of the song as a lullaby. The prestige involved in being chosen as the foster-mother to a child of the nobility is evident in this song, as indeed is the implication of competition between prospective fosterers, remarked upon by various commentators, as seen above:

’S gur e mise fhuair an cùram
Nach d’fhuair aonan riamh mo dhùthaich;
Gu’n cheannaich thu dusan gun dhomh,
’S each ’us diollaid gu mo ghiùlan!
(Mackenzie 1888, 118)

‘And it was I who got the responsibility / that no-one else in my area ever got; / you bought me a dozen dresses, / and a horse and a saddle to carry me!’

Given that the song’s title states that this is a lullaby, the above lines are perhaps a little surprising; a child who was young enough to be in need of a lullaby would be unlikely to purchase such lavish gifts for his foster-mother.

17 A number of sources (see Shaw 2005 [1977], 153) tell us that Coinneach Òg was born in 1569, and that his foster-mother was a MacRae. See, however, the exploration of other possibilities in MacInnes 1963.

18 See MacDonald 2004 [1784], 10.
The following excerpts, given their eulogising of martial prowess, also appear to indicate that the song was in fact composed for a grown man:19

A Mhic Coinnich nan stròl farsaing,
mhic an t-seòid nach fulingeadh masladh,
bheireadh am fion d’a chuid eachaibh,
cruidhean òir a chur fo ’n casan! […]

Dar théid Coinneach ’na chiaid deise
’s lionmhор fear a bhios ’na fhreasdal,
ciad ’na suidhe, ciad ’na seasamh,
dà chiaid deug ’s a’ ghualainn deis dha.

’S lionmhóir duilleag th’ air an draigheann
eadar Bealltainn agus Samhuinn;
’s lionmhoir’ na sin sgiath is claidheamh
’n gualainn Choinnich Oig am Brathainn.
(Matheson [A.] 1952, 319)

‘MacCoinnich of the many banners, son of the hero who would not tolerate taunt, who would give his horses wine and put horse-shoes of gold under their feet! […] When Coinneach goes forth, first in comeliness (?) numerous are the men in his attendance / a hundred sitting, a hundred standing, twelve hundred at his right shoulder. There are many leaves on the thorn between Mayday and Hallowe’en; more numerous than that are the shields and swords at the shoulder of young Coinneach in Brahan.’

O Mhic Coinnich fhuair thu’n t-urram
Théid thu mach gu làdir ullamh
Dh’òladh leat fìon Baile Lunnain
Mach go Loudie le d’ chuid giullan.

‘O MacKenzie, you have gained precedence you will move out strong and well-equipped you have drunk the wine of London Town you go out to Lothian with your young men’. (MacInnes 1963, 226-7; MacInnes’s translation)

Why, then, is this song entitled a Tàladh – ‘lullaby’? In order to attempt an explanation of this apparent disjunction between title and content, we must examine another song of the same type in Scottish Gaelic tradition: a song which was reputedly composed by a woman for her noble foster-son; which was ostensibly a lullaby (Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm – ‘Donald Gorm’s lullaby’); 19

The variant collected by Shaw (2005 [1977], 152-3), however, was categorised by her as having a lullaby function, and there are no references in this version which can be connected with certainty to the adult Coinneach. Were such references omitted in order to rationalise the title? Or perhaps there were two songs attributed to the foster-mother – one a lullaby (as in Shaw), one in praise of the adult Coinneach – which were later conflated? Most versions contain a reference to Coinneach as a leanabh – ‘child’ – who has not yet attained his grandfather’s age; this may indeed have had its origins in a lullaby composed for him, but the word leanabh is sometimes ambiguous (see below).
but which, judging by its internal evidence, seems to have been composed for a grown man. Various scholars have cast doubt on the function of Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm as a lullaby (Ó Baoill and Bateman 1994, 66; MacInnes 1968, 483; Thomson 1990 [1974], 59); indeed, MacInnes (1978, 482-3) has suggested that in fact this song may belong to the same category of panegyric as A mhic Iain 'ic Sheumais, and Thomson (1990 [1974], 59) contends that it was probably composed in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century – at around the same time as the composition of A mhic Iain 'ic Sheumais. The following excerpt appears to confirm the suggestion that Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm is a panegyric addressed to a grown man who, like Coinneach Òg above, is ready and able to engage in armed combat:

Ar leam gur a h-i  a’ ghrian ’s i ’g èirigh,
’s i gun smal oirre  no air na reultan;
nuair thèid mac mo rìgh-sa  fo làn èideadh.
No cò ’n long ud?  Cò ach long Dhòmhnaill –
long mo leinibh,  long mo rìgh-sa.

‘It seems to me like the sun rising, / without a cloud on her, or on the stars / when my king’s son goes out in all his battle array. /
But whose is that ship? Whose but Donald’s – / my child’s ship, my king’s ship’. (Gillies 2005, 10-11; Gillies’s translation)

Only the word leinibh (genitive singular of leanabh – generally meaning ‘child’) allows any room for ambiguity as to the age of the panegyric’s subject. However, it ought to be noted that the narrator of A mhic Iain ‘ic Sheumais, likewise describes an adult male as mo leanabh (Gillies 2005, 129), as do the composers of Tàladh Choinnich Òig (see fn. 19 above) and the foster-mother’s lament for Iain MacNeil of Barra (Carmichael and Matheson 1954, 24; see below); this is perhaps unsurprising, given that the relationship between poet and subject would have been forged during the subject’s childhood. Unlike Tàladh Choinnich Òig, I have seen no evidence that Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm was ever actually sung as a lullaby; it was preserved in the waulking tradition, which is a context generally associated with women. There is also a hint of some folk memory that Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm was ever actually sung as a lullaby: it was preserved in the waulking tradition, which is a context generally associated with women. There is also a hint of some folk memory that Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm was neither a lullaby nor a waulking-song in origin; Frances Tolmie (1911, 239) makes no reference to its having been a lullaby, and states that the song was in fact composed as an iorrám – ‘rowing-song’, a more public type of composition, in that its audience was not confined to women (see fn. 26 below).

20 It should also be noted that certain versions of Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm and Tàladh Choinnich Òig contain some shared lines (see Matheson [A.] 1952, 319; Tolmie 1911, 239); the songs’ composers may have drawn on an established set of stock images, or the songs may have been conflated in oral tradition. In either case, the shared text suggests that these two songs are of the same type.

21 I have rearranged Gillies’s layout in order to demonstrate how the lines have been split. Each half-line is sung twice and is followed by a vocable refrain. The split lines of this song are very like those of the lament for Iain MacNeil (see below); perhaps this suggests that the songs were forced into a different refrain-structure (and, probably, melody) following their absorption into the waulking tradition.
At any rate, it appears that both *Tàladh Choinnich Òig* and *Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm* were composed as panegyrics to grown men, and that for some reason the explanation of their function changed. In fact, the panegyric function of *Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm* is in a sense doubly hidden from full public view: firstly, in its recategorisation as a lullaby, and secondly, in its application as a waulking-song—both of which were in general sung in a semi-private, women-only context. This recategorisation seems to have been accepted by the modern tradition-bearers from whom these songs were collected; only in scholarly sources (see above) have I seen any uncertainty expressed as to the lullaby function of *Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm*.

That a praise-song could be doubly hidden in this manner is intriguing. Angela Bourke (1992a) has commented extensively on the ability of women’s folk-song to encode and communicate covert messages; and given that women’s poetry was often the target of suspicion and hostility during our period (see Ó Baoíl 2004), it certainly seems reasonable to suggest that some kind of concealment of *Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm* and other panegyrics may have taken place.

Remarkably, we do have folk evidence of a foster-mother recategorising one of her own panegyrics in order to render it acceptable. The well-known story of Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, a seventeenth-century poet who was foster-mother to the noble MacLeod family of Skye, states that she composed a praise-song in honour of her chief’s son—which she had been expressly forbidden to do (Tolmie 1911, 262-3). In her own defence, she stated that her song was merely a *crònan*—‘a croon’, which in the context of the song tradition is often associated with lulling, as well as with lamenting (Dwelly 1994 [1901-11], s.v. *crònan*). It seems, therefore, that such a song-form was permissible for a woman, whereas (as in Ireland) a panegyric was not; this is likely to correspond with the redesignation of *Tàladh Choinnich Òig* and *Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm* as lullabies.

**Women’s praise-songs and lullabies: some similarities**

That the supposed lullaby function could be chosen as a ‘cover’ for a praise-song may not be due merely to the lullaby being a type of song which women were permitted to compose. As demonstrated in Barbara Hillers’s comprehensive study (2006), multiple layers of meaning are common in the lulling tradition, and there is abundant evidence that the lullaby was often used as a means of saying the otherwise unsayable; this feature of the lullaby lends itself to the potential redesignation of women’s panegyrics. In addition, there are some similarities between the supposed ‘lullabies’ above, and the songs which can more plausibly be supposed to have the function of encouraging small children to sleep. *Tàladh Choinnich Òig* and *Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm* contain much praise of their subjects, some of which is quoted above; and

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22 It will be noted that other foster-mothers’ panegyrics such as *A mhic Iain ’ic Sheumais* and *Fear Bhàlai* (see above) were also preserved as waulking-songs.
praise of the child being lulled to sleep is also common in the lullaby tradition (Hillers 2006, 40).

As well as the fulsome praise of the subject, protective invocations are a distinctive feature of *Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm*:

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<td>neart sheachd cathan</td>
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<tr>
<td>neart na stoirrm ’s na</td>
<td>toirmghaoith reubaich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neart nan dùl is</td>
<td>chlanna-speura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bhi idir Dòmhnull</td>
<td>Gorm ’s a lèine.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘May you have the strength of the universe: the strength of the bull [. . . ] / [may] the strength of the seven battles of the Fenian army / the strength of the storm and of the rending cyclone / the might of the elements and the heavenly hosts / be between Dòmhnull Gorm and his shirt’. (Gillies 2005, 12-13; Gillies’s translation)

A version of *Tàladh Choinnich Òig* found among the Dornie manuscripts contains similar wishes that the fosterling be protected:

| Na dhèan an gobhainn an claidheamh, |
| na dhèan an ceard an ceann reamhär, |
| na dhèan an leisdear an t-saighead |
| chuireas MacCoinnich ’na laighe.  |

(Matheson [A.] 1952, 320)

‘May the smith not make the sword / may the craftsman not make the thick point [of a sword] / may the arrow-maker not make the arrow / that will fell MacCoinnich’.

We also have a good deal of evidence as to the use of poetic expressions of protection in the lullaby tradition (see Hillers 2006, 41-2, 47) – supporting the supposition that it was logical for tradition-bearers to recategorise as lullabies these foster-mothers’ songs addressed to Dòmhnull Gorm and Coinneach Òg. Indeed, the foster-mother or nurse of a noble family could have had a recognised role as the singer of protective lullabies, as illustrated by Frances Tolmie’s anecdote about a sung poetic ‘charm’:

One day in the island of Skye, many centuries ago, a woman of wonderful aspect – in point of fact a fairy or ‘banshee’ – appeared suddenly at the door of Dunvegan, the castle of MacLeod of MacLeod. She entered the castle without invitation, and went straight into the room where the infant heir lay asleep. Taking him in her arms, she sang a song [. . . ] Her fairy lullaby was ever after regarded as a charm to protect the young heir of MacLeod from every evil. No woman was allowed to be his nurse who could not sing it over him. (Tolmie 1911, 176)\(^{23}\)

\(^{23}\) Unlike *Tàladh Choinnich Òig* and *Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm*, the internal evidence of this song does show that its subject is a small child, who is referred to as having been beneath his mother’s girdle the previous year (Tolmie 1911, 174-5).
As well as protective incantations – *Obh, ìrinn obh-o! Na cluinneam do león! / Obh, ìrinn obh-o! Gun liath thu air chòir!* (‘[lullaby vocables] Let me not hear of your being wounded! / [(lullaby vocables] May you [survive to] become grey as is proper!’) – the MacLeod lullaby also has some of the traits of the panegyric, expressing praise of the child’s ancestry – *Siol nan Leodach nan lann ’s nan lùireach* (‘the descendants of the MacLeods of the swords and the armour’) (Tolmie 1911, 175).

The traditional Gaelic understanding of the magical protective power of poetic invocations has been discussed at length in Dáithí Ó hÓgáin’s *An file* (1982). It should also be noted that the aesthetic quality of the song-poetry seems to have been seen as an important factor in the effectiveness of such poetic charms:

Dhearbhaigh an Dr Seán Ó hEochaidh dom gurbh í tuiscint cuid de na seanmhná le linn a óige féin i dTír Chonaill [ná gurbh é a bhí i loinneog ’seoithín seó’ na suantraí cá] ortha chosanta i gcóinne na sióg, ‘agus dá dheise is dá bhinne is dá uaigní is dá bhrónaí a chanfá i is mó an buaí a bheadh inti mar chosaint.’ An dearbhú céanna agham ó Annie Eoghain Éamoinn (Ní Ghallchóir) as Dobhar in iarthuaisceart Thír Chonaill, go raibh an tuiscint sin ag daoine aimsir a hóige féin. (Ó Madagáin 2005, 33)

‘Dr Seán Ó hEochaidh confirmed to me that it was the understanding of some of the old women during his own youth in Tyrconnell [that the “seoithín seó” lullaby refrain was] a protective charm against the fairies, “and the nicer and the sweeter and the more plaintive and the more mournful the manner of its singing, the greater its protective effect”. I got the same statement from Annie Eoghain Éamoinn (Ní Ghallchóir) from Dore in north-west Tyrconnell, that people had the same understanding during her own youth’.

It is highly likely that the singing (and possibly, by extension, the composition) of lullabies was an accepted part of the foster-mother’s or the nurse’s role, in cases where the care of an infant was involved (see p. 119 above). The frequent references in Scottish oral tradition to the foster-mothers of nobles who possessed the gift of poetry may betray a folk understanding of the protective effect of poetry: if one of the lullaby’s functions was to shield the child from harm, and if the protective power of the lullaby was connected to the quality of its poetry, it is conceivable that a woman who was known to possess the gift of poetry might well have had an advantage in the above-mentioned competition to secure the coveted role of foster-mother to a child of the nobility.

‘*Tuireadh Iain Ghairbh*’ – THE LAMENT FOR IAIN GIRBH

This is not to say, however, that the folk tradition implies that the foster-mother who possessed the ability to compose poetry was always
entirely trusted. Nor, indeed, were women poets in general, as demonstrated by Colm Ó Baoill (2004), who discusses in detail some women in our period whose poetic talents often engendered mistrust and hostility. We have folk evidence that on at least one occasion the foster-mother of a nobleman was suspected of having put her powers to malign use, rather than using them to shield her foster-child from harm.

The story of Iain Garbh of Raasay (d. 1671) and his foster-mother demonstrates the strong link between poetic ability and supernatural power in Gaelic tradition (examined in detail in Ó hÓgáin 1982). It is said that one of Iain Garbh’s rivals, MacDonald of Duntulm,

bribed Iain Garbh’s wet-nurse, a witch, to drown him. She got to help her some of the great perennial witches of Gaelic tradition, Gormshuil Mhór Mhoghaidh, Bean an Lagain, An Doideag Mhuileach, Cas a’ Mhogain, Riabhaich from Ardnamurchan, and one from Tiree whose name I have forgotten, much the same company as the Doideag had before convened to sink the Spanish Armada. The witches alighted on gunwale, yards, or similar. Iain Garbh made a cut at the nearest of them, missed and split the galley from the gunwale to keel. His nurse, repenting, made the famous lament ‘‘S mi ’nam shuidh’ air an fhaoilinn’’. (MacGill-Eain 1985, 302)

We can perhaps read this folklore as demonstrating an understanding that Iain Garbh’s drowning was due to a dereliction of the foster-mother’s duty to use her poetic (and therefore magical) gifts to protect him. As Anne Frater (1996, 337) has pointed out, in this society where noblemen were exalted to an extraordinary degree, the blaming of the foster-mother may indeed have been preferable to drawing attention to factors such as Iain Garbh’s consumption of drink and probable poor seamanship. Certainly the foster-mother’s ‘repentance’ looks like a folk rationalisation of the existence of a lament composed to mourn the fosterling for whose death she had supposedly been responsible.

THE FOSTER-MOTHER AND THE POETRY OF LAMENT

We have a significant corpus of evidence concerning lament-poetry attributed to women poets on the deaths of their noble foster-children; this corpus spans both Gaelic Ireland and Gaelic Scotland, although, as before, the bulk of the evidence comes from the Scottish tradition. The preservation of lament-poetry in the Scottish waulking context is a salient feature of the tradition; it is perhaps worth noting that there are strong parallels between the waulking-song and the keen, in that both are choral refrain-songs primarily associated with women. MacInnes (1968, 38) has also posited the suggestion that another choral refrain-song – the cepóc, discussed above – is likely to be structurally related to the choral songs in modern tradition, and indeed,
as mentioned above, the association between cepóc (‘choral panegyric’) and cluichi caínteach (‘keening-game’) is confirmed in early sources.

The warrior trope – a common element of the panegyric – is evident in the following excerpt of a song reputed to have been composed by the foster-mother of Iain MacNeil, heir of MacNeil of Barra, who died violently in 1610:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Dheagh mhic Mhic Néill} & \quad \text{Bho’n tür ’s bho’n Chaisteal,} \\
\text{Mharbh thu ’n coirneal} & \quad \text{Leòin thu ’n caiptean;} \\
\text{Thug thu do shluagh} & \quad \text{Fhéin leat dhachaigh,} \\
\text{Luchd nan cul donn} & \quad \text{’S nan leadan clannach.}^{24} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Carmichael and Matheson 1954, 24)

‘Good son of MacNeil from the tower and from the Castle, / you killed the colonel, you wounded the captain; / you brought your own throng home with you, / those of the brown hair and the curled locks’.

Likewise, Cairistìona – an unusual song in that it was reputedly composed by a foster-mother for a high-born female fosterling – contains references to the subject’s nobility, which unsurprisingly was a favourite subject for panegyrists. Cairistìona’s family name is not known, although there are hints that she may have been a MacDonald;\(^{25}\) however, her presence at the king’s (i.e. chief’s) court, her education, and the references to fine needlework clearly indicate that she was certainly of high social status:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Bha mi bliadhna ’n cuirt an rìgh leat,} & \quad \text{’S ged chanainn e, bha mi a trí ann –} \\
\text{’S a’ cur gràinne air léintean riomhach […]} & \quad \text{Fuaigheal anairt, ’g gearradh shioda,} \\
\text{’S a’ cur gràinne air léintean riomhach […]} & \quad \text{Csàinn na céille, beul na comhairl’,} \\
\text{Sgriobadh ’s a leughadh an leobhar;} & \quad \text{Bhiodh na h-uaislean ort a’ tadhail.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Campbell and Collinson 1969, 54)

‘I spent a year in the king’s court with you, / and truth to tell, I spent three [years] there, / sewing linen, cutting silk, / and finely embroidering costly shirts […] Head of wisdom, mouth of counsel, / who’d write and who’d read the book; / nobles used to visit you’.

\(^{24}\) I have rearranged Carmichael’s layout in order to demonstrate how the lines were split (see fn. 19 above). Each half-line is followed by a vocable refrain.

\(^{25}\) The narrator refers to her fosterling’s journey to Glencoe (after her death); Anne Lorne Gillies (2005, 30) points out that this could be a clue as to Cairistìona’s kin-group: ‘Though its historical significance has been somewhat eclipsed by Iona, Eilean Munda – a tiny island in Loch Leven, just opposite Glencoe – was the burial isle of the MacDonalds’.
Like most of the keens in Scottish Gaelic, Cairistiona and the lament for Iain MacNeil were preserved in the waulking tradition.\textsuperscript{26}

The keening form is, however, not the only structure used in foster-mothers’ lament poems. One little-known lament ascribed to a foster-mother uses the refrain and melody of a popular love-song, Óganaich an òr-fhuilt bhuidhe – ‘Youth of the golden yellow hair’ (see the love-song version in Meek 2003, 248, where it is attributed to one ‘Fionghal a’ Ghobhainn’). The lament version was composed Do Chaimbalach a Chnuic Ann a Muile [sic]– ‘for Campbell of Knock in Mull’ (MacDonald 1895, appendix, 30); the nobleman in question was one of the main landowners on the island (see Knox 1787, 64):

\begin{quote}
Oganaich an or-fhuilt bhuidhe,
Leis an cinneadh sealg ‘us sithionn.
’S ann nad ghrualdhean a bha ruthadh,
Nuair a bhiodh tu siubhal ghleann. [. . .]
Na ‘m bitheadh é air m’ ordan,
Bhiodh tu ‘sa Chnoc an comhnaidh
Mise marbh ‘us tusa beò do
Thigh do chéile, ‘us do chlann.
\end{quote}

(MacDonald 1895, appendix, 30)

‘Youth of the golden yellow hair, / for whom venison hunting\textsuperscript{27} was successful. / In your cheeks there was ruddiness / when you used to traverse glens. [. . .] / If it were [dependent] on my orders, / you would still be in Knock / I to be dead and you to be alive for / the house of your spouse, and your children’.

A more famous lament, ‘S daar a cheannaich mi ’n t-iasgach – ‘Dearly did I pay for the fishing’ – is attributed to the foster-mother of a nobleman\textsuperscript{28} who drowned on a fishing trip. Its structure is somewhat more complex than that of the keen; it is composed in regular quatrains, where the final stressed syllables of lines A and C correspond with the first stressed syllables of B and D respectively; in addition, the final vowels of B and D correspond throughout:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{26} Anne Lorne Gillies has suggested that ‘[Cairistiona] also seems closely connected to the male work-song genre, the rowing-song, or \textit{iorram}’ (2005, 29). In addition, W. J. Watson commented on the similarities between laments and rowing-songs: ‘that the \textit{cumha} and the \textit{iorram} should often be identical in form is easily understood: the noble dead were usually conveyed to their last rest – often in Iona – by sea, and the oar-chant was the lament also’ (Watson 1918, xlvi). We have seen (p. 9 above) that the foster-mother’s panegyric Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm was likewise described as an \textit{iorram}; and Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh is also remembered as the composer of a praise-song designed to be sung while rowing, which was later adapted to waulking (Matheson [W.] 1952, 22-24). Although each of these songs became a waulking-song (performed in a women-only context), from this evidence it certainly appears possible that women poets’ panegyric compositions could at one stage have been sung in the more public environment associated with rowing.
\textsuperscript{27} The literal meaning of the text is ‘hunting and venison’.
\textsuperscript{28} Neither the nobleman’s name nor that of his foster-mother appears to survive; however, his high status is evident in the references to his mansion and the descriptions of his physical prowess, which conform to MacInnes’s panegyric code (Gillies 2005, 46).
\end{quote}
‘S daor a cheannaich mi ’n t-iasgach –
seo a’ bhliadhna chuir às dhomh;
‘s daor a cheannaich mi ’n stòp
a bh’air a’ bhòrd an Taigh a’ Chladaich.
Chaill mi snàmhaich’ a’ chaolais –
’s tu nach gladadh an t-aiseag –
agus coisiche beinne
nach bu deireadh air feachd thu.29

‘I paid dearly for the fishing – / this is the year that has destroyed
me; / I paid dearly for the drinking-vessel / that was on the table
in the Inn of the Shore. / / I lost the swimmer of the kyles – / you
who never had to call on the ferry – / and the trampler of hills, / 
you who were never at the rear of your army’. (Gillies 2005, 45;
Gillies’s translation)

A number of laments attributed to Mairghread nighean Lachlainn (Ó Baoill
2009, 56-8, 64-108) and to Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh (Watson 1934, 14-
20, 26-35, etc.) are also composed in metres which are rather more regular and
often much more complex than that of the keen; these two poets are often cited
as exponents of poetry of the ‘sub-literary’ type. Interestingly, however, both
these women poets are also remembered in oral tradition as having composed
extempore poems of lament30 as well as their more formal elegiac composi-
tions; Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh is remembered as having engaged in an
improvised poetic conversation with a professional keening-woman (Matheson
[W.] 1952, 15), and Mairghread nighean Lachlainn was likewise remembered
in Mull as a bean-tuirimh – ‘lamenting-woman’. A couple of sources tell of her
performing an impossible leap, or travelling impossible distances (Ó Baoill
2009, 14, 23), as are often associated with both the keener and the gealt – ‘fool’

Colm Ó Baoill, however, has made the case that, although she is called a
bean-tuirimh, ‘there is no good reason to think that Mairghread belonged to the
much-despised and largely plebeian group of professional mourners: she was
above all a “sub-literary” song-maker close to the leadership of the Macleans’
(Ó Baoill 2009, 33). Certainly it is possible that the folk evidence of keen-
ing associated with Mairghread nighean Lachlainn and Màiri nighean Alasdair
Ruaidh may represent an attempt to redesignate these poets as ‘mere’ keen-
ers on the margins of society, rather than as panegyристs at the centre of their
kin-groups’ power structures. However, the evidence as to keening is often
contradictory; in addition to the numerous accounts of the marginalisation of
keening and of keeners, we have evidence of a number of high-born women to

29 These are presented as two distinct stanzas; as sung, however, there would be an additional
quatrain between these two, which would comprise lines C and D of the first stanza above, fol-
lowed by lines A and B of the second stanza above. This pattern is repeated throughout the song
(Gillies 2005, 46-47).
30 Extemporaneous or near-extemporaneous composition is of course a feature of the keening
tradition; see the account in Ó hAilín 1977, 9.
whom keens are attributed, and a class distinction between the composers of ‘sub-literary’ and ‘non-literary’ laments need not have been universal during our period.  

We also have Irish evidence of a foster-mother poet who composed in both keening style and in a more formal elegiac style. The nurse of Séamus Mac Coitir – who, like many of our foster-mother poets, is not identified by her own name – is reputed to have expressed in verse her grief at the violent death of her aristocratic fostering; her composition in keening style contains an interesting echo of the gifts granted to the foster-mother of Coinneach Og MacCoinnich (see above):

Mo ghrá ’s mo thaisce thu!
’s niorbh é sin agairt liom,
do bhronntá orm acra
ór agus airgead
’s chuirteá cóiste sé gcapall chugam
nuair a théidhinn drig aifreann
’s a’ teacht arís abhaile dham.
(Breatnach 2010, 149-50)

‘You are my love and my darling! / and it wasn’t [due to] an entreaty from me, / you granted me service (or an acre) / gold and silver / and you used to send me a coach and six horses / when I went to mass / and on my way back home again’.

The more formal stylistic traits of another section of the same poem stand in marked contrast to the keening style above (and see also Breatnach 2003 for an example of two styles of lament-poetry being combined in the same performance):

31 These terms and their definitions are certainly rather problematic (see Ní Dhonnchadhha 2002, 209, fn. 4, 5; Nic Lochlainn 2010, 239-46); however, there is no doubt but that there are some differences of style and register between the oral keen and the more formal elegy. The mother and wife of Alasdair mac Colla, both of whom were of noble birth (Hill 1873, 57, 114), are said to have been inclined for him in the traditional manner (Breatnach 1969, 85); the mother of Diarmaid Mac Cáithghaigh, who composed a well-known keen for her son and laid great emphasis on his noble status (see Ó Murchadha 1939, 24-7), is very unlikely to have been of humble birth herself; the keen for Art Ó Laoghaire is attributed to his high-born wife Eibhlín Dubh (although this ascription is not universally accepted (see in particular Ó Buachalla 1998), it is nonetheless significant that the folk tradition had no difficulty with the attribution of a keen to a noblewoman). The sister of the drowned nobleman Iain Garbh of Raasay is reputed to have been ‘so heart-broken that she composed a different lament for him every Friday for a year’ (Gillies 2005, 20; and see Synge 1907, 158 for another account of recurrent keening outside the immediate context of death); Annie Campbell, to whom is attributed the famous Ailean Donn keen, was of noble birth (MacLean Sinclair 1892, 251); and a keening-style composition mourning those lost in the 1645 Battle of Inverlochy is attributed to Fionnghal Chaimbeul, a noblewoman (baintighearna) from Coll (MacLean Sinclair 1907, 239). In addition, the ‘sub-literary’ poet Caitlín Dubh participated in a ‘keening-game’ with another performer who used traditional oral material (Breatnach 2003, 56; related oral texts in Ó Duilearga 1940, 3; Ó hÓgáin 1980, 57; Shaw 2005 [1977], 220; Mackenzie 1888, 74-5); and the foster-mothers of Séamus Mac Coitir and Muircheartach Og Súilleabháin are both reputed to have composed in keening style and in a more formal elegiac style (see discussion below) – which also suggests that any distinction between the practitioners of these two types of lament-poem may not have been a clear one.
A Shéamuis Mhic Coitir, a ghéag bhreá oirdheirc,  
is móir an dochma tú d’Éirinn,  
A ghaol na gCormac sciathach gclogadach  
riach gcasantach éigsibh  
Bráthair Dhonncha ‘triail ar chogadh thú  
is Fhínín Eochaidh na gcaol-each  
Is móir an osna so bhual am chodladh me  
an uair chuala crochta thú a n-éitheach.  
(Breatnach 2010, 145)

‘Séamus Mac Coitir, fine eminent scion, / you are [i.e. your death is] a great hardship for Ireland, / relative of the Cormacs bearing shields and helmets / providing for [and] protective of poets / you are the brother of Donncha heading for battle / and of Fínín Eochaidh of the slender steeds / this is a great sigh which struck me in my sleep / when I heard of your being hanged through falsehood’.

In addition to this evidence concerning Séamus Mac Coitir’s foster-mother, there are indications that other Irish women poets, in their role as foster-mothers, also composed lament-poetry for nobles. Three women – one from Ulster, one from Munster and one from Connacht – are reputed to have been the chief keeners for Alasdair mac Colla, and among them was his foster-mother; according to Breandán Breathnach, Tá sé ráite gur rug caoineadh na buime nó na banaltra barr le binneas agus le brón ar na mná eile (Breathnach 1969, 85) – ‘It is said that the keen of the foster-mother or the nurse surpassed [those of] the other women in sweetness and in sorrow’ – suggesting at the very least that the foster-mother was remembered as the most gifted composer of the three in terms of the aesthetic quality of her poetry. It may also be worth noting that his foster-mother is said to have had prophetic powers, and to have foretold the manner of his death (School of Scottish Studies: SA1969.005); there is, of course, a close correlation between poetry and prophecy in Gaelic folk and literary sources.

Unfortunately, the text of the keen for Alasdair mac Colla does not survive, although it is still played as an instrumental melody. We do, however, have evidence of other lament texts attributed to Irish foster-mothers. One such poem is ascribed to Muirn Ní Shuíleabháin on the violent death of her fosterling, Muircheartach Ó Suíleabháin, in 1754; this composition, fifteen stanzas in length, fits the pattern of other literary elegies of its time (Breatnach 1997, 182), and deals with the grief of the community following the nobleman’s death: Sin tubaist is milleadh ar an gcine go deo bunscionn – ‘That is disaster and destruction on the kin-group forever in disorder’ – as well as with the praise of his prowess, the circumstances of his death, and the hope that his soul might be free gan chiach – ‘without sadness’ (Breatnach 1997, 183-5). An additional quatrain is, possibly erroneously, ascribed to the same poet (see O’Mahony 1892, 124, where it appears without any source; and Breatnach 1997, 179, 222, where it is suggested that the quatrain may in fact belong to a
longer composition by a different author). This quatrain, in its expressions of anger (see Bourke 1992b), is perhaps closer to a keen than to a literary elegy:32

A Thadhaig Í Sgulluídhe, diog tríd’ chroidhe sdeach;
Nár théir d’on t-saoghail go n-deuntar gniomh ort,
Do theang’ as do cheann, ’s do bhrannra sinte
’Gus tu ’d dhoghadh ’s do’d loscadh a bhfulus do dhaoínbh.
(O’Mahony 1892, 124)

‘Tadhg Scully, a last spark of life through your heart; / may you not leave life until an act [of vengeance] is done to you / your tongue out of your head, and your collarbone stretched, / and you being burnt and scorched in people’s view’.

The same vituperation is to be seen in the lament attributed to the nurse of Toirdhealbhach ‘Láidir’ Ó Briain, who is likely to have lived in or near Bansha, Co. Tipperary, and to have been murdered c. 1760-1780 (see the detailed examination in Ní Dhonnchadha 2002):

a T[uthil]l ’s a B[ouch]er33
más sibhse is ciontach
nár bheire bean clann déibh,
nár bheire bó gamhain déibh,
nár thige gort geomhair déibh,
nár bheirig an tSamhain oraibh
ná an tEarrach ina dheaghaladh sin.
(Ní Dhonnchadha 2002, 201)

‘T[uthil]l and B[ouch]er / if you are guilty / may no woman bear offspring for you / may no cow bear a calf for you / may no field of corn ripen for you / may you not survive until Hallowe’en / nor [until] Spring after that’.

A reference to what seems to have been a similar type of composition appears in an anonymous anecdote – taken, we are told, exclusively from oral narration – which was published in Duffy’s Hibernian Magazine in 1861. This account of a woman poet’s lament on her noble foster-son’s violent death survived in Co. Meath folklore; the foster-son in question was reputedly killed in the seventeenth century by the Plunketts of Gibbstown. Certainly the details of

32 See the discussion in fn. 31 above. A number of lines in verse (in English) lamenting the death of Ó Súilleabháin are to be found in Croker 1824, 178. The composition is placed in the mouth of his nurse, but the name ‘Jeremiah J. Callanan’ appears beneath it; it is unclear whether Croker intended that the reader understood Callanan to be the piece’s author or its translator. B. G. MacCarthy (1946, 394-6), however, has done valuable work in establishing that Callanan’s contribution to Croker’s publication was in fact a composite of a number of translated texts, including his foster-mother’s poetic expressions of grief. MacCarthy also suggests that elements of the poem were Callanan’s own composition.

33 ‘T—l’ and ‘B—er’ in the source manuscript. These suggestions as to the missing elementsh are provided in Ní Dhonnchadha’s comprehensive discussion (2002,186-190)
this composition, although unfortunately preserved mostly in translation, seem to tally with the typical traits of the keening tradition;\textsuperscript{34} the only surviving Gaelic fragment of the keen refers to the nobleman’s killers:

\begin{quote}
Uch! uchon! is truaigh gan biorr neime [?’n]a gcroid[h]sa
Mar a c[h]uir Walter\textsuperscript{35} am chroid[h]sa.
(anon. 1861, 88)

‘Uch! uchon! alas that there is not a poisoned dart in [?their] heart[s] / such as Walter put in my heart’.
\end{quote}

In addition, Edmund Spenser’s oft-quoted description of the actions of a nobleman’s foster-mother is consistent with the behaviour of a keening woman – again, implying that this woman is likely to have had some knowledge of the composition of poetry:

\begin{quote}
\indent at the execution of a notable traytor at Limericke, called Murrough O-Brien, I saw an old woman, which was his foster mother, take up his head, whilst he was quartered, and sucked up all the blood that runne thereout, saying, that the earth was not worthy to drinke it, and therewith also steeped her face and breast, and tore her haire, crying out and shrieking most terribly. (Spenser 1997 [1663], 66)
\end{quote}

It is noteworthy that all these accounts of Irish foster-mothers’ laments have their origins in the violent deaths of fosterlings. While not all of the texts have survived until the present day, it does appear that, with the (possible) exception of the keen for Murrough O’Brien, each of these laments was transmitted in oral tradition after its initial performance – which, of course, is a sign of tradition-bearers’ recognition of poetic skill; not all keens would have been accorded the same respect. As observed by Roxanne L. Reddington-Wilde,

\begin{quote}
A particularly well-composed lament will be picked up by others and repeated, thus entering the repertoire of many […] To be remembered, the lament’s words had to capture the unusualness of the situation. Death in battle or execution through beheading could hardly be termed natural death. (Reddington-Wilde 1999, 271)\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} Despite the somewhat flowery English rendering of the lament, it does have thematic similarities with other keens: ‘She stood at the head of the corpse, pointing to the marble features, and exclaiming in Irish, with deep pathos, “So young, so beautiful! cut off so soon, so cruelly!” She dwelt upon his virtues, on the blessing his life would have proved to all around, and the irreparable loss they had sustained in his untimely death; she displayed the fatal wound by which he died’ (anon. 1861, 88). It is worth noting that this author also comments on the function of fosterage as a means of ensuring the loyalty of the community to the nobility (anon. 1861, 88).

\textsuperscript{35} ‘Walter’ is the foster-son; we are told that he was ‘probably a Burke’ (anon. 1861, 88), although whether or not this is the author’s own deduction is unclear.

\textsuperscript{36} My thanks to Dr Mícheál Ó Mainnín for bringing this source to my attention.
It must be acknowledged, however, that our Irish evidence is not particularly strong, in that it has so far been possible to trace only the texts of the foster-mothers’ laments for Toirdhealbhach Ó Briain, Séamus Mac Coitir, and Muircheartach Óg Ó Súilleabháin, as well as the fragments of the keen for the ‘Walter’ of Co. Meath folklore; but if these are taken in conjunction with the Scottish evidence, it would appear that the foster-mother may have had a recognised role in the Gaelic lament tradition. It is worth noting that Croker (1824, 172) pointed out that the foster-mothers of Irish nobles were given particular honour in the ceremonies surrounding a foster-child’s funeral; this evidence of Croker’s certainly supports the assertions (quoted above) that there was a high degree of affection between foster-parents and those they fostered. It must also be significant that the Gesto collection of 1895 contains a lament for one ‘Ailean’, identified only by his first name, with the remarkable comment (Oran luadhaidh) mar a dheanadh muime – ‘(A waulking-song) such as a foster-mother would compose’ (MacDonald 1895, appendix, p. 16).

We have evidence of one particularly interesting Scottish lament mourning the deaths of a woman poet’s own son and her high-born foster-son in the same tragedy. The song is attributed to Màiri NicPhàil of Tiree; her foster-son, Eachann Óg MacGillEathain, is very much the primary focus of the lament:

\[\text{Gur h-e mise 'tha fann,} \]
\[\text{Tha mo shuil gu bhi dall,} \]
\[\text{'Caoidh an fhiurain gun mheang} \ldots \]
\[\text{Gun robh gabhail mhic righ} \]
\[\text{Air deagh dhalta mo chich.} \]
\[\text{(MacLean Sinclair 1892, 130-1)} \]
\[\text{‘It is I that am weak, / my eye is becoming blind, / weeping for} \]
\[\text{the hero without blemish} \ldots \]
\[\text{/ The booty (?) of a king’s son /} \]
\[\text{belonged to the fine fosterling of my breast’.} \]

The song contains nine verses, but the editor’s notes tell us that only the final stanza refers to her own son – and even this stanza is actually addressed to the foster-son:

\[\text{Gun robh cuilein mo ruin,} \]
\[\text{Fear nan camagan dluth,} \]
\[\text{‘S e a seoladh ri d’ ghluin,} \]
\[\text{Gus 'n do dhalladh a shuil.} \]
\[\text{(MacLean Sinclair 1892, 132)} \]
\[\text{‘My beloved darling, / the man of the tight curls, / was sailing at} \]
\[\text{your [the foster-son’s] knee, / until his eye was blinded [in death]’}. \]

\[37\] Croker (1824, 172) also drew attention to the fact that such occasions were rare at the time of writing; and that the traditional funerals for the Gaelic nobility were in the main ‘confined to the county Kerry’; certainly the Gaelic order had almost disintegrated in Ireland by this time.
As noted by Anne Frater,

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. (Frater 1999, 75)

**Recognition and restriction of foster-mothers in their role as praise-poets**

The possible implications of Frater’s contention are intriguing. It would appear that the expression of individual sorrow may not have been the sole aim in the composition of laments for high-born fosterlings, and that the upholding of convention was at least as important as the articulation of personal grief. Can we perhaps suggest that the folk tradition implies some kind of recognised, quasi-formal role (however limited in scope) for our foster-mother poets in their praise of the nobles of society? It appears, for example, that Maighread nighean Lachlainn was maintained by her chief, which suggests some acknowledgement of her role among her patron’s attendants: *[Bha i] dìreach da na daoine cumanta, ach gu robh i air a biadhadh agus air a cartadh aig tighearna Chola – ‘[She was] just one of the common people, except that she was fed and housed*\(^38\) by the laird of Coll’ (Ó Baoill 2009, 19).

Calum Johnston of Barra, a respected tradition-bearer, gave a further account that seems to support the possibility that the role of the foster-mother poet was a recognised one:

* Bha bana-bhàrd aig Mac Nìll Bharraidh uair air an robh Nic Iain Fhinn mar aímn, agus […] [b]ha bana-bhàrd aig Mac ’ic Ailein cuideachd. (Campbell and Collinson 1977, 112)

‘MacNeil of Barra had a woman poet once whose name was Nic Iain Fhinn, and […] Mac ’ic Ailein [of Uist] also had a woman poet’.

Nic Iain Fhinn is said to have been the foster-mother of the MacNeils of Barra (Campbell and Collinson 1977, 227), and – although I am not aware of any unambiguous reference to her being a foster-mother – Mac ’ic Ailein’s poet, Nic a’ Mhanaich, is described as Nic Iain Fhinn’s ‘counterpart’ in Uist

\(^38\) This meaning is unattested in the major dictionaries – the usual meanings of ‘cleansing, purging; tanning of leather; barking of trees’ make little sense here – but the context suggests that this usage of the word is to be connected with *cairteal* – ‘lodging’; both words are likely to be related to the English ‘quarters’.

\(^39\) This account was given by Dòmhnall Chalum Bàin Sinclair of Tiree, and an audio recording is to be found in the School of Scottish Studies, SA1966/07/A7. The transcription published in Ó Baoill 2009, 19 was provided by Professor Donald E. Meek.
(Shaw 2000, 26); these two women are reputed to have been the composers of the verse-contest An Spàidearachd Bharrach – ‘The Barra flying’ (Campbell and Collinson 1977, 112-21). This song contains much praise of the attributes, domiciles and territories of the composers’ respective chiefs; in common with many of the songs above, it was preserved in the women-only context of the waulking tradition, but although it is said to have been composed ‘at a great waulking in Barra for the Chief of Clan MacNeil’ (Tolmie 1911, 233), such a gathering seems rather unlikely. As observed by John MacInnes, Verse contests, which feature in Gaelic choral song, and are explained as improvisations at an actual luadh are much more likely to have been composed outside the work-song tradition altogether. (MacInnes 1968, 39)

It should also be noted that Frances Tolmie tells a very similar story of foster-mothers’ combative compositions, when explaining the context of Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm: ‘Donald Gorm was Chief of Clan Donald in the reign of James VI […] and a contemporary of Rory Mor MacLeod, with whom he had a feud resulting in raids and fierce combats among their followers, while the devoted foster-mothers fanned the flames of wrath with passionate songs [my emphasis]’ (Tolmie 1911, 239). This account implies that the foster-mothers’ songs were remembered as having had at least some influence in the public sphere at the time of their composition (and see fn. 24 above). Like the Spàidearachd Bharrach, however, Tàladh Dhòmhnaill Ghuirm was preserved only in the waulking tradition. Perhaps the compositions ascribed to these women poets veered dangerously close to fulfilling the functions of the praise-poems composed by the (male) bards who were granted official recognition; and it may be that the panegyrics attributed to foster-mothers were re-imagined as waulking-songs as a result.

Certainly women poets would never have attained the status of the highest grade of male panegyrist in the chiefs’ courts – although we cannot know just how far women poets’ official or quasi-official recognition extended. It is not entirely inconceivable, however, that women who were not of noble birth could have been given some kind of recognised role within the kin-group’s power structure. We have the following account from Mull of the Dòideagan, one of whom was reputed to have assisted the foster-mother (‘witch’) who supposedly caused the death of Iain Garbh of Raasay:

    From time immemorial, Mull has been famed as the nursery and home of a race of witches […] The people of Mull called the witches ‘Doideagan’, or frizzled ones. They belonged to the clan MacLean, and took that name, and regarded themselves as retainers of the family of Duard, swearing fealty to and claiming protection from the chief. (MacLean 1889, 330)

40 William Gillies (2006b, 168) has pointed out that these figures ‘are now no more than names in the tradition, or perhaps merely a cipher for a particular genre of poetry’. Certainly it is likely that songs of the ‘flyting’ type were misattributed to these women; nevertheless, the folklore surrounding these compositions betrays a folk understanding of the role of the foster-mother poet.
Fear of the woman poet’s or the witch’s supernatural abilities, as represented in the above story of Iain Garbh’s foster-mother, may have been a powerful motivating factor in enlisting the support of such women; keeping them close to the figures of power and ensuring their loyalty (whilst containing their influence as far as possible) could well have been seen as a wise course of action.

If, as I have suggested, there was an attempt to limit the influence of foster-mother poets, this attempt can be described as at least a partial success. As discussed above, we have ample folk evidence which can be read as foster-mothers’ compositions being forced into the clothmaking and lulling traditions; and the folklore surrounding the poetry of Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, in particular, suggests a woman overstepping the role which was considered acceptable, taking on some of the traits of an official poet, and encountering enormous hostility as a result. The paucity of evidence regarding many of these women’s personal names is also telling: some are defined solely by the names of their fathers or their kin-groups – ‘Nic Cóiseam’, ‘Nic Iain Fhinn’, ‘a MacRae’ (Gillies 2005, 129; Campbell and Collinson 1977, 112; Shaw 2005 [1977], 153) – while the names of others are not remembered at all. Ó Baoill (2004, 149) has noted that such refusal to identify women poets as individuals in their own right is ‘a strategy of deliberate denigration’; the dearth of evidence from the written rather than the oral tradition may likewise indicate that there was a certain degree of reluctance to grant any official recognition to the women whose poetry was held to have such potential power for good or ill.

CONCLUSION

The great majority of the evidence discussed in this paper has its roots in the flexible and innovative Scottish Gaelic oral tradition, and it is obviously necessary to treat our sources as folklore, rather than as authoritative evidence. Our sources are no less valuable for all that, however; an awareness of the information contained in the oral variants and accompanying narratives of poems is perhaps as important as any other element of scholarly analysis, as William Gillies has pointed out in his landmark essay ‘On the Study of Gaelic Literature’:

The seanchas that attaches to poets […] tells in its own way how a particular poet [or indeed a group of poets] operated within a framework of social imperatives that was just as compelling as (say) kinship or hospitality. These behavioural patterns have traditionally been ‘half-known’ by many Gaels and some scholars, but need to be explored more systematically and their ‘grammar’ understood more explicitly than hitherto. Questions of social coding arise too […] Questions like these need to be asked, to bring the poetry to life and shed daylight on the mentalité of poets and their audiences. (Gillies 2006a, 21)
Gillies’s observation as to the ‘half-knowledge’ of the community certainly seems apposite in the light of the present study. It is clear that a pattern emerges in the songs attributed to foster-mothers: the fact that so many women poets were reputedly foster-mothers to the nobility, particularly in Scotland, seems unlikely to be mere coincidence. However, we must tread carefully in our attempts to draw any kind of conclusion from this folk evidence. It is certainly possible that women poets in our period, by reason of their reputed power, were sometimes deliberately chosen as foster-mothers to nobles, in order that they might use this power to praise and protect high-born members of society. Is it, perhaps, also possible that female praise-poets were at times rationalised as foster-mothers in the folk tradition? Could their designation as foster-mothers, rather than panegyrists, be a sign of the marginalisation of female praise-poets – were they understood as composing poetry due to the bonds of affection, rather than as part of any recognised or quasi-official role? The internal evidence of some of these songs does admittedly make unambiguous reference to the relationship of fosterage between poet and subject (see, for example, Carmichael and Matheson 1954, 24; Gillies 2005, 46; MacLean Sinclair 1892, 131) – but the possibility, however slender, that such references were sometimes due to folk rationalisation ought not to be dismissed.

The disparity in evidence between Gaelic Ireland and Gaelic Scotland is also a matter of considerable interest. Certainly the Gaelic nobility lasted and thrived well into our period in Scotland, whereas it was crumbling in Ireland during the same era – possibly accounting for the much greater number of Scottish compositions attributed to the foster-mothers of nobles. In addition, the Scottish Gaelic tradition possessed the means of keeping praise-songs alive without their being performed in public view: the women-only context of the Scottish waulking tradition ensured the survival of much valuable evidence which would probably otherwise have been lost. Perhaps these factors alone are enough to explain the difference in the volume of evidence available from each side of the Irish Sea; it is also possible that the status of women poets in Scotland during our period may have differed from their status in Ireland – although at this stage, this suggestion can be no more than speculation.

At any rate, the question of the foster-mother as praise-poet deserves our attention, if only as a window on the world of Gaelic women poets between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Notwithstanding the gaps in the evidence, the available sources, particularly in Scotland, show the folk tradition’s understanding of the power of the foster-mother as panegyrist – and the limitations of that power. It is to be hoped that further evidence – particularly from the Irish Gaelic tradition – may emerge in future and cast more light on the history and context of Gaelic women’s poetry.

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*Sorcha Nic Lochlainn*

Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies