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WORKING AND WEEPING
WOMEN'S ORAL POETRY IN IRISH AND SCOTTISH GAELIC

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Irish and Scottish Gaelic are both rich in oral tradition and there exists in each a large body of anonymous oral literature, mostly stories and poetry. A considerable amount of this poetry is known to have been composed by women and is associated with aspects of traditional culture which were always women's particular responsibility. It is the purpose of this paper to compare the women's poetry of Ireland and Scotland and to examine the integration of 'literary' creativity with traditional life in both cultures.

Until the seventeenth century, Ireland and Scotland shared a common language and a common social structure. There was a privileged elite of male poets whose power and prestige were fundamentally linked to political stability. Their poetry, mostly praise of kings and chieftains, is called Bardic poetry or Syllabic poetry, after the kinds of metres it employed and in it the poets maintained, over several centuries, a classical literary standard language (Knott 1966; Bergin 1970). With the social and political upheavals of the seventeenth century, the prestige of the poets declined and so also did formal literary activity. The use of English spread and by the present century Irish and Scottish Gaelic were spoken only in relatively remote rural areas, chiefly along the west coasts, and on islands; dialects were mutually comprehensible only with difficulty and there was little literary activity, though revival was under way. By contrast, oral literature was thriving.

Oral literature—stories of various kinds, proverbs, prayers, poetry—is found in all societies, but perhaps most richly in those communities and languages where literacy is not widespread. The serious study of folklore, which includes oral literature, began in the nineteenth century. The literate, urban, English-speaking world of the romantic period had interested itself in the 'wild Celtic' music and song of Scotland and Ireland and cultivated varieties had been made available for drawing-room consumption; now with the rise of nationalism the systematic study of oral traditions gathered momentum in various parts of Europe.

By the early twentieth century archives had been established in many countries and when James H. Delargy and others pioneered the collection and archiving of Irish traditional material they looked to Scandinavia and particularly to Sweden, for models. The Folklore of Ireland Society and its journal Béaloideas were founded in 1927; in 1930 the Government established the Irish Folklore Institute, which was replaced in 1935 by the Irish Folklore Commission. In 1971 the Commission was replaced in its turn by the Department of Irish Folklore at University College, Dublin, which continues the work of collecting and archiving along with teaching and research. When the School of Scottish Studies was founded in 1951 at the University of Edinburgh many of its structures were modelled on those of the Commission and close cooperation continues between the two bodies.

Irish and Scottish Gaelic in the twentieth century are two different languages in two different countries, but they have much of their heritage in common. Furthermore both the Gaeltacht of Ireland and the Gaidhealtachd of Scotland share with other regions on the periphery of Europe survivals of cultural features which were once widespread but have died out elsewhere.
In the study of Irish tradition it has not been customary to distinguish between women's and men's folklore, though James Delargy, writing in 1945 did note differences of repertory:

The recital of Ossianic hero-tales was almost without exception restricted to men. 'A woman fiannai or a crowing hen!' the proverb runs. There are exceptions to this rule, but still the evidence is unmistakeable that the telling by women of Finn-tales was frowned on by the men.

Seanchas, genealogical lore, music, folk-prayers, were, as a rule, associated with women; at any rate they excelled the men in these branches of tradition. (The Gaelic story-teller, 7)

In a full-length study (Partridge 1983) I have demonstrated that the Irish cycle of religious songs associated with Good Friday is almost exclusively the property of women who take a special interest in the theme. It seems likely that further studies of specific genres will reveal them too to be more gender-specific than has been apparent until now.

Two genres of oral poetry which have long been recognised as belonging particularly to women are the waulking songs of the Scottish Highlands and Islands and the traditional laments of Ireland. A comparison between them reveals many features in common, throwing light on some functions of oral poetry and the techniques of its composition and offering a stylised picture of certain aspects of Gaelic society as seen through the eyes of women in a period which roughly centres on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Both these kinds of poetry were composed and sung by women, both belonged to specific communal occasions, both were performed by a soloist and chorus and, at the time when new texts were still being produced according to the demands of the tradition, both were extemporary compositions.

The majority of our texts of waulking songs appear to have been composed during the seventeenth century while the most elaborate Irish texts of caoineadh or lament poetry date from the eighteenth century. Waulking was the hand-finishing or fulling of cloth by groups of women and the songs, which are now more or less fixed texts, were in the seventeenth century composed by solo singers as they worked. Like the 'keening' or public lamenting of the dead in Ireland, the custom of waulking cloth in Scotland died out in this century. In both countries however, there continues in the singing tradition a great deal of poetry whose themes and diction were formerly associated with the traditions of waulking cloth and keening the dead.
WAULKING SONGS

Waulking songs are work songs, and like the sea-shanties and chain-gang songs which they resemble in function, they consist of a series of lines, half-lines or couplets, sung with strong rhythm by a soloist and answered by the other workers in chorus. Work songs are usually sung by groups of people engaged in heavy, repetitive work. Sometimes the words sung comment on the work being done; often they offer an imaginative escape from it. At its most basic a work song helps the people who sing it to establish the rhythm of their work and to coordinate their effort and breathing; at its best it can give a feeling of solidarity and cohesion to the group and introduce an aesthetic element which transforms a tedious and back-breaking task into an occasion of excitement and celebration.

A waulking or luadh in Gaelic Scotland, the occasion when a new piece of cloth was 'waulked', or shrunk so as to be thick and warm enough to be made into clothing or blankets, was not only a time of cooperative labour, but an eagerly-awaited and much talked-of social occasion. It was described by successive travellers in Scotland from the time of Martin Martin, whose Description of the Western Islands of Scotland was written in the last years of the seventeenth century; and more recent accounts have been published by collectors of traditional song such as Margaret Fay Shaw and John Lorne Campbell. In 1983 Alexander Fenton's article 'Waulking the cloth' (see References) synthesised the information available from these sources and others, including tape-recordings made by the School of Scottish Studies with informants who were familiar with the process.

Invitations were sent out and food and drink prepared. There might be six, eight or more women in a waulking team and there are accounts of as many as sixteen or eighteen working together. Women known to be particularly good workers or singers were especially in demand, and young women hoped for an invitation as a token of adult status. They took their places at either side of a long table or board, sometimes a door taken off its hinges, but originally a frame of wood or wicker specially made for the purpose. The cloth to be shrunk was first soaked in a mixture of hot soapy water and urine, which had been collected over several days, and their work was to handle it around the table from one to the other, pulling and pounding it so as to work the liquid well into the fibres, where it would thicken the pile and set the dye.

The work was heavy, as the cloth was wet and the rhythm was a brisk four-time, and there are vivid descriptions of the pungent smell of ammonia which hung over everything. 'Every action', says Alexander Fenton, 'was in time to singing' (p.131), and Francis Collinson has described the intimate connection between the rhythm of the work and the rhythm of the music:

...The thumping invariably commences before the singing of the song, and this preliminary rhythmic pulsing may vary in duration from the equivalent of a bar or two of the succeeding tune, to perhaps nearly a full minute before the song begins. Such a setting up of pure rhythm becomes almost hypnotic in its insistence and excitement, accumulating to the point when one feels that it positively demands a song to go with it; and the spectator has the feeling that the soloist calculates the psychological moment to raise the tune with a sense of 'timing' that forms an artistic element of performance. (Campbell & Collinson Hebridean Folksongs [hereafter HF] Vol.I p.220)
In Argyllshire in the late eighteenth century (Fenton 131), and in South Uist in the Hebrides in the 1930's (Shaw 6), the women estimated their work not by time but by the song. Towards the end of the job the width of the cloth was measured at intervals and if it had not yet shrunk by half the length of the middle finger another song was sung. Each song, with its repetition of the soloist's lines as well as the refrain or fonn sung by the chorus, lasted about eight minutes, and no song was sung twice.

Hundreds of waulking songs have been collected and a great many have been published in collections such as those of Alexander Carmichael, Margaret Fay Shaw and Campbell and Collinson. In 1972 the School of Scottish Studies issued an LP record called *Waulking Songs from Barra* with transcriptions of music and text, an English translation and copious notes by Peter Cooke, John MacInnes and Morag MacLeod. 'On Barra', they write, '...no genuine waulking of cloth appears to have been done since the Second World War. But because of the social significance of the luadh and the vividness of the poetry of the songs, memories of the skills of the work and the singing have remained.'

The seven songs on the record were recorded on the island of Barra in the Outer Hebrides between 1965 and 1967 from women who set up a simulated waulking for the purpose, pounding a dry blanket in the way they remembered working the wet tweed. Their energy and enjoyment can be clearly heard, in their singing and laughter and the exhausted sighs of satisfaction at the end of a particularly vigorous song.

Men were not usually admitted while cloth was being waulked, though they were always invited to the party which followed the work, so that this was one of the principal occasions when young single people met in mixed company. The exclusion of men from the work room—and stories are told of the rough handling of any who tried to insinuate themselves—meant that a waulking was an occasion private to women and that the songs sung were women's songs.

Of course this is not to say that all the song themes were exclusive to women, but they do reflect a women's perspective on the issues treated. This is borne out in the traditions of Newfoundland and Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where men in Gaelic-speaking communities traditionally took part in the fulling of cloth. There, the repertoire of 'milling' songs, as they are called in Canada, includes sea-songs and love-songs addressed to women, as well as the more familiar woman's-voice songs brought from Scotland before 1835.

Love, praise and nostalgia are the main themes of the Scottish waulking songs. A comprehensive survey of all of them would be impossible in an article of this length, and the reader is referred to the chapters on 'The subjects of the songs' (HF [I] 17-23), and 'Some motifs and formulas of the older waulking songs' (HF III 16-33), in Campbell and Collinson. The language is vivid, simple and often sensuous:

Mo mhil, mo mhil, mo mhil fhlu thu,
Mo shiucar is mo cheal fidiile,
Mo cheal clàrsaich 'n àird 's an iséal,
Mo dhìthneanan eadar ghtartaibh .

'You are my honey, my own honey,
My sugar and my violin music,
My harp music, high and low,
My marigolds in the cornfields.'

(HF II 146-7)
The imagery is often aristocratic, and even fantastic, with the noble lover riding his horse on the mountain, sailing his boat on the sea or shooting the stag or the swan; bridles may be silver and horseshoes gold, and the ship's rigging may be made of silk, while the singer describes her childhood home as a place of music and wine, of white-palmed women and fine needlework. The lyric beauty of the songs is in striking contrast to the real hard work being done as they are sung.

They are not all light-hearted, however, and there are many songs which do seem to be private to women. Particularly interesting are those which taken together can be seen as texts through which women's attitudes towards relationships with men, towards sex and towards childbearing are expressed and transmitted. These attitudes are presumably those current in the seventeenth century, but they have reached us through the living tradition of the twentieth.

Outdoor life and the natural history of the Highlands, which were so much a feature of descriptions of the ideal, nobly-born lover, are celebrated again in fantasies of being alone with him in a remote and beautiful place:

'S truagh nach robh mis' is tusa, 'fhleasgaich,
Aig bun nan craobh fo bhàrr nam preasan,
'S truagh nach robh mise 's an t-òg gasda
Am mullach beinne guirme caise...

'Alas, young man, that you and I were not
At the foot of the trees beneath the bushes,
Alas that I and the fine youth
Were not on top of a steep blue mountain...' (HF II 64-5)

John Lorne Campbell says:

It should be noted that nowhere in the songs is there any suggestion that making love is sinful; it is considered as something entirely natural... . This takes us back to the days when owing to the great scarcity of clergy of any kind in the Highlands, and the dislike of Highland Catholics of being married by the official Protestant clergy, the réiteach or formal betrothal was considered to be the real binding ceremony. What is considered sinful in these songs is the deception of a girl after a betrothal or promise of marriage .... incest..., or rape... . False accusations of pregnancy are resented. (HF III 22)

Pregnancy is mentioned often, particularly the pregnancy of unmarried women, and this is frequently described, as it is also in Irish songs, in terms of the belt which cannot be tightened, but which steadily rises. If her lover is a noble huntsman or a 'brown-haired scholar of English' (HF II 154-5), the woman proudly repudiates all criticism; only if he is a rapist, a deceiver or her own brother, is the pregnancy a disaster:
'S truagh nach mise bh'ann an Éirinn
Fo chlacha troma nach Éirinn,
'Smi 'm màireach a' dol dha'n t-seisein
'S gura gann tha luchd mo leithsgell.

'Pity 'tis I was not in Ireland
Under heavy stones a-lying [i.e. dead, in my grave].
Tomorrow I go to the kirk session,
Few there'll be there to defend me.'

(HF II 82-3)

In these songs too, we find the common irony that while one woman may feel herself destroyed by having a child, another is embittered by having none:

A bhean a chuir orm an a'lis
Gun robh mi ri call nan leanabh,
Mo chlochan län 's mo ghùn falamh--
Cha n-iarr mise pian ad anam-sa
Ach a bhith agad fios mo ghalaír-sa
Chuir mi cóigear anns an talamh dhiu...:

'I'll wife who cast it up in scorn to me
That I lost the children born to me--
I wish her soul no other torment than
That she have my ill a knowledge of,
Her breast be full, her knee hold no fosterling:
Five laid I down with earth to cover them...'

This last example, with its curse on the evil-tongued gossip, shows some of the range of invective available to those who composed within this tradition. In other songs, sexual jealousy is expressed in violent terms:

Chuala mi gun d'rinne réiteach...
Nan cluininn gum b'hior an sgeula.
Dhòirtinn ful is ghearrainn fèithean
'S bheirinn sic a cinn o chèile

'I heard that he had been betrothed...
If I heard the tale confirmed
I would shed blood and sever sinews
I would tear her scalp to pieces.'

(HF II 66-7)

or:

Nan cluininn tè eile luaidh riut
Spionainn bun is bàrr mo chailein.
Gu falbhadh m'feòil 'na ceò uaine.

'If I heard another girl name you
I'd tear my hair out my the roots,
My flesh would turn into green vapour.'

(HF II 146-7)
and the murderous rage of a woman whose brothers have been betrayed takes the form of a fantasy of revenge:

'S truagh, a Ríph! nach fhaicinn-ís iseo,
A taobh leáinte 's a glón briste.
'S gun aon leigh fo'n shréin ach mise!
Chuirinn creuchd an beul gach niosgaid.
Air mo lámh gun deargháin misnéach!
Bhristinn cnámh 's gun tairinn sílteach.
Chuirinn dír air bruach do lice.
Gus an cárinn thu 'san islig.
'S gus an dúninn thu 'sa chiste.

'Alas, o God! I cannot see her,
Her body wounded, her knee shattered,
Myself the only leech to heal her!
Each sore's mouth a gash I'll pierce in,
By my hand, I swear I'll flinch not,
I'd break her bones and make her blood flow,
I'd heap the earth upon your gravestone,
Till the death-planks hold you stiffened,
Till I close you in your coffin.'

(1960:63)

As with the descriptions of gold bridles and silken sails, the same themes and the same images of love and pregnancy, jealousy and anger are found from song to song, often in almost the same words, for oral poetry of this kind is formulaic (Ross 1959). The young singer in a productive tradition learns not fixed texts, but a 'grammar' of metrics and music and appropriate combinations of ideas, together with a 'vocabulary' of traditional phrases or 'formulas'. The creativity of the individual is expressed, as it is in patchwork and other traditional arts, in the felicitous combining of elements to make a whole which is far greater than the sum of its parts. In the words of Albert Lord, 'All singers use traditional material in a traditional way, but no two singers use exactly the same material in exactly the same way' (1960:63). We might add that no singer uses exactly the same material in exactly the same way twice, because the 'whole' which is created in the composition of poetry such as the waulking songs of oral tradition is the performance: the singing of the song as the work is being done—not the text on the page.

Within the conventions of waulking the cloth women are free to sing about violence and poverty as well as about social and sexual fantasy, and a rich inheritance of formulas and imagery gives them the means to do so. There is loud protest in these songs at women's subjection to men and men's decisions, but it is contained protest: a sort of safety-valve which lets off steam in an environment where cooperation, not individual expression is the important thing. Recently, Joan Radner and Susan Lanser have suggested that it is also secret protest, audible only to those who listen for it, since the cheerful thumping rhythms of the songs will be more readily heard than their often bitter message. We shall see that in Irish lament poetry also, women have an opportunity to protest at injustice and indignity and to express a level of anger which would in other circumstances incur severe censure. It is worth asking, in the context of both poetic traditions, to what extent women are liberated by this sort of freedom of expression and this limited opportunity to transmit an independent, female view of the world, or whether in fact, like other oppressed groups, they are merely offered illusory freedoms which will make their continued oppression possible.
The most obvious link between the Scottish waulking songs and the Irish laments is the use in waulking songs of lament-themes.

**Lament themes in waulking songs**

Some of the examples quoted above touched on the theme of death. A woman who had given birth to her brother's child wished to be 'fo chlacha troma', 'under heavy stones', and another dreamed of heaping earth on the grave of her enemy, closing her into her coffin. The mother who grieved for her dead babies contrasted her full breasts with her empty lap.

Many waulking songs speak explicitly of death, often the death by drowning of a young person, and they deal with it in these same terms. If someone is buried on land there is an almost obsessive concern with the details of burial: stout wooden planks, damp earth, heavy, dripping stones:

'S iomadh long is bàrc is biaqirlinn
Is luingeas a tha 'm bial Chaol fie
Tighinn a dh'arraidh Cairistiana;
Cha n-ann gu pùsadh mhic righ leat,
Gus do chur san talamh Iseal,
Fo leaca troma na dileann.

'Many a ship and bark and galley,
Islay's kyle with shipping teemeth,
Come to fetch thee, Cairistiana;
But 'tis not to wed a king's son,
To put you in the earth beneath us,
Heavy leaking flags to keep thee'.
(HF [I] 54-5)

In the case of a drowned lover the same attention to nightmarish detail is found:

Gura mise th'air mo léireadh
Cha n-e bàs a' chruidh 'sa Chéitein,
No tainead mo bhuaille spréidhne,
Ach a fhlichead 's tha do léine,
'S tu bhith 'm bàrr nan tonn ag féirigh
Mucan mara bhith 'gad reubadh,
Bhith 'gad ghearradh as a chéile ;

'Truly I am sore tormented,
Not by death of stock in springtime,
Nor by th' fewness of my cattle,
But by thy clothing's dampness,
And that thou art on wavetop floating
While sea monsters rend thy body,
And are tearing thee asunder.'
(HF [I] 44-5)

Stark contrasts are drawn between the beauty of the living body and its grotesque fate:
'S e mo ghradh do chùl clannach
Anns an fheamain 'ga luadh',
'S e mo ghradh do chùl ceutach
'Ga reubadh 'san stuaidh

'The long hair that I care for
Midst the seaweed is toss'd,
The fine hair of my loved one
Is torn by the waves.'
(HF [I] 122-3)

Shocking contrasts, as between weddings and funerals, full breasts and empty lap, the breast-milk of women and the briny juice of crabs, are particularly common and particularly effective in poetry like this, where each line is sung by the soloist and then repeated, with refrain, by the chorus before the next line is sung. Often, as in the next example, suspense is built by the use of parallel images so that the shock when the truth is revealed is all the greater:

Dh'Olainn deoch, ge b'oil le càch e,
Cha b'ann do bhùrn no do shàile,
No do dh'fhlon dear na Spàinte,
Ach fuil do chuim 's tu 'n dèidh do bhàthadh

'I'd drink a drink, though all abhor it
Not of the sea, nor of fresh water,
Nor of the red Spanish claret
But thy heart's blood, after thy drowning' (HF [I] 46-7)

The images and the poetic techniques used to treat lament-themes in the waulking songs are very similar to those found in the Irish lament tradition.

LAMENTS IN IRISH

Irish lament-poetry, like that of Finland (Honko 1974) and of Greece (Alexiou 1975; Chaves 1980; Danforth 1982), is part of an international tradition. Poetry composed and sung in praise of the dead person constitutes an important part of funeral ritual in many societies:

...The custom of such wailing and singing is age-old and world-wide, and the attendant beliefs and practices are markedly similar—whether the singing is Russian or Australian, African or Polynesian, Irish or Corsican, American Indian or Arabic. Laments at the most primitive level (which is not necessarily consonant with the general level of the culture) are little more than howls and screams of actual or ritually obligatory grief; at the other extreme (which may be found among peoples called 'primitive') the songs achieve a high order of poetic and musical expression, approaching the lyric elegy and the epic lay. Frequently both types occur side by side, the formless outcry of the death wall being consciously distinguished from the more organized cadences of the mourning song. (Leach 1949 II 755 s.v. Mourning songs)
Howls and screams were certainly part of the Irish lament tradition. Visitors to Ireland from the time of Elizabeth I commented acidly on these disturbing sounds and on the practice of hiring women to lament the dead. Writing about the accounts of these travellers, Diarmaid Ó Muirithe (1978:22), quotes from *A Gentleman's tour of Hybernia* (1699) 'They do hire a whole herd of these crocodiles to accompany the corpse, with their counterfeit tears and sighs'.

Less accessible than the tears and sighs to the visitors who knew no Irish was the rich poetic tradition which was also a part of the keening of the dead.

The *caoineadh* (lament or 'keen') was traditionally composed and sung over the body of the dead person by a close woman relative. If no relative was talented in this sort of composition another woman was appointed. It was understood that she might be a woman who had suffered many bereavements and that she would recall her own grief in order to express that of the relatives. She was a sort of semi-professional and might be paid for her work with whiskey, tobacco, salt or money. She might also be a midwife.

The keener composed as she sang, and several accounts say that she rocked back and forth at the same time, accustoming herself to the rhythm of the metre.

Like the poetry of the waulking songs, lament poetry is formulaic. It is composed, not in quatrains (as almost all songs in Irish are), but in irregular groups of short, rhymed lines. Neither is it sung to the sort of tunes usually associated with songs, but chanted, in what has been described as a 'plaintive recitative' (P.W. Joyce, quoted by Ó Madagáin 1981:312). Almost every group of lines begins with a traditional phrase such as a direct address to the corpse: *Mo ghrá is mo rún tú!* , 'My love and my darling!', or to some of the people present, or a cry of grief: *M'fhada-chreach léan-ghoirt!* , 'My long, bitter sorrow!' These first lines determine the number of stresses in each line of the following group (two, three or four), establish the vowel-sound of the end-rhyme, and set the tone, which can range from tender reminiscence to bitter invective. They usually also indicate whether the following lines are addressed to the dead person or to someone else.

Most groups of lines consist of praise: lavish praise of the dead (who is almost always a man in the texts which survive), for his beauty, his generosity, his skill as a horseman, his fine clothes or his silver-hilted sword. The idiom is very much the same as that in which the noble lover is praised in the waulking songs. He is reproached for dying and called on to get up, as in *Caoineadh Airt Ó Laoghaire*, the famous lament for Art O'Leary, who was shot dead on May 4, 1793, by his wife Eileen O'Connell.
Mo ghrá thu go daingean!
Is éirigh suas id sheasamh
Is tar liom féin abhaile,
Go gcuirf eam mairt a leagadh,
Go nglaofam ar choisir fhairse,
Go mbeidh againn ceol a spreagadh,
Go gcóireod duitse leaba
Faoi bhairlíní geala,
Faoi chuilteanna bréitha breaca,
A bhainfidh asat allas
In ionad an fhuachta a ghlacaí.

My own beloved dear!
Now get up on your feet
And come on home with me,
And we will slaughter beef
And we'll organise a feast,
And we'll have music playing,
And I'll make you a bed
With clean white sheets,
With coloured patchwork quilts
To make you sweat with heat
Instead of this awful cold.
(Ó Tuama 1961 ll.85-95. Translation mine)

There is hardly any reference to religion in these poems, and none to the Christian afterlife. Death is seen as final and treated as an outrage. Instead of the invocation of God or the saints which we might expect to find in a tradition as strongly Catholic as the Irish, the lament is addressed to the living, and to the dead person as one of them, but one who is about to defect.

This is consistent with the function of the lament and the role of the lamenter in many societies. In The Rites of Passage (Les Rites de passage 1909), Arnold van Gennep writes: 'During mourning the living mourners and the deceased constitute a special group, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead...' (1960:146-7).

The lamenter is the mistress of ceremonies, the psychopomp who presides over the transition in which the whole community finds itself. Several commentators have compared her to the shaman, for she is an intermediary between the living and the dead. Her role is also perhaps similar to that of a great tragic actress whose ability to express severe emotion followed by catharsis may be shared in by those who watch her.

Lament texts, songs about death and other traditions about funerary custom give us a picture of the 'ideal' lamenter as someone whose words and whose voice moved others to express their grief. There are formulaic lines in the caoineadh tradition in which the lamenter explicitly demands that other women join in and abuses anyone who will not, who laughs or who attempts to leave. (A common 'first line', also found in the Scottish waulking songs, is A bhean úd thall a rinne an gáire!, 'Woman over there who laughed!')

In her appearance (as described in these stylised accounts), the lamenter embodied disorder and disarray: she was barefoot and dishevelled and travelled across country, oblivious of hardship, discomfort and pain. She is sometimes said to be crazy or mad and is often described in the same terms as Mad Sweeney and similar characters in Irish
literature (Partridge 1980). Sometimes, as in our last example from the waulking songs, she drinks the dead man's blood (Partridge 1980:30-1; 1983:96,291).

The lamenter's wild behaviour and appearance betoken her marginal status, but although she is marginalised, she is not outcast. At this time of disruption in the community, attention is focussed on the marginal, and the lamenter helps to define the boundaries of human culture and experience. Occasionally she is ridiculed, but she is a sort of holy fool, and reverence is seen as a more appropriate reaction. This assertion is supported by the large body of religious song in Irish in which the Virgin Mary laments her crucified son. In these songs, sung by thoughtful and devout people (most of them women), the Virgin is described in exactly the same terms as the lamenter in the secular tradition: she runs barefoot through the wilderness; she screams at the soldiers who are crucifying Christ, and she leaps high into the air 'like a madwoman' (Partridge 1983:97-8 & passim). Singers explain that it is right (despite opposition from Church authorities) to lament the dead in the traditional way, because the Virgin Mary did so. Sometimes they say that it was she who invented the custom (ibid 99-101).

Laments, like waulking songs, were made up of traditional themes, sung in a traditional way to a traditional metre. The lamenter composed as she sang, incorporating details of the dead person's life: his name, his genealogy, a description of his life and the manner of his death. She was able to do all this when required because she was expert in the 'grammar' of the metre and the topics that must be treated and because she had heard and learnt since childhood a large 'vocabulary' of traditional lines and phrases. In addition to praising the dead man, she lavishly cursed his enemies or the inanimate objects responsible for his death, and entered into battles of wits and words with other women who might assert a prior right to mourn. Disagreement between in-laws could be aired in this way, with the wife and the mother or sister of a dead man trying to outdo each other in his praise and often insulting each other memorably in the process.

One function of the poetic lament was to stock the community's memory with praise of the dead person and even to redeem his reputation if he had died in some disgrace (as in the case of Sir James Cotter, hanged in 1720 for rape!). It could also work the other way, however, as for a woman who had no reason to cherish her husband's memory:

Mo chreach is mo chás trím!  
Is minic a chuir sé orm lásaí  
Le bata den mbáin-righín,  
Ach moladh leis an Ard-Rí,  
Táim schartha lena pháirtigheacht!

'My grief and misfortune!  
He often beat me  
With the stoutest stick  
But thanks be to God,  
I am done with his company!'  
(O hAilín 1971 (i) 10. Translation mine)

Traditional formulas mean that lines about marital violence may be used, with great attention to detail, but with a covering negative, so that the woman is heard to say not 'My husband beat me', but 'My husband didn't beat me', or 'He didn't beat me much'.
References to pregnancy are common and a lamenting mother will often recall for her dead son the nine months she carried him, while a grieving wife will talk of the children she has borne him and often of the one she now carries.

The lamenter's role may be seen in terms of opportunity and of duty. She has permission to express the concerns of her own and other women's lives in a vehement and uninhibited way. She is also allowed to demand the attention and support of the community at a time of great stress in her own life: as she makes the transition, for instance, between wifehood and widowhood.

Her opportunity is private—either personal to her or private to the world of women—but her duty is public. She sees to it that honour is done to the dead person and she faciliates others in grieving and in coming to terms with death.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, after extensive experience working with people who are terminally ill, has identified in On Death and Dying and other works, five stages which must be gone through in order to adjust to a loss as great as death, whether one's own death or that of a loved one. They are denial (and isolation), anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. All of these stages can be identified in texts of the Irish caoineadh, from Eileen O'Connell's call to her dead husband to get up and come home, to the vitriolic anger, directed at various people, which is expressed by her and others, to the lines at the end of her poem (found in other laments as well), which give the sense of time having passed and of a sorrow which although still painful, is tolerable:

\[ \text{Ní staipfidh ar mo chumha} \\
\text{Atá i lár mo chroif á bhrú,} \\
\text{Dúntha suas go dlúth} \\
\text{Mar a bheadh glas a bheadh ar thrunc} \\
\text{'S go raghadh an eochair amú.} \]

My grief will never leave me,  
It is pressed into my heart,  
Shut up tight inside  
Like a trunk locked up  
Of which the key is lost.'

(Ó Tuama 1961 11379-83. Translation mine)

It is worth noting that laments were remembered and sung at subsequent funerals and that one lament echoes another. This meant that the process of grieving, which normally takes many months, did not have to be accomplished all at once. The skill of the lamenter lay partly in her experience of all the stages.

Kübler-Ross writes in On Death and Dying (p.4) of the guilt that follows death, and refers to:

...the old customs and rituals which have lasted over the centuries and whose purpose is to diminish the anger of the gods or the people as the case may be, thus decreasing the anticipated punishment. I am thinking of the ashes, the torn clothes, the veil, the Klage Weiher of the old days—they are all means to ask you to take pity on them, the mourners, and are expressions of sorrow, grief and shame. If someone grieves, beats his chest, tears his hair or refuses to eat, it is an attempt at self-punishment, to avoid or reduce the anticipated punishment for the blame that he takes on the death of a loved one.
This grief, shame and guilt are not very far removed from feelings of anger and rage. The process of grief always includes some qualities of anger.

Modern psychotherapists, drawing on the work of Kübler-Ross, will use grief therapies whose object is to enable a bereaved person to acknowledge and express these disturbing feelings of guilt and anger, among others.

Many commentators in different societies have been scandalised to see lamenters accept payment. It is clear, however, that they, no less than the women who waulked the cloth, were providing a valuable service: working on behalf of the community.

If the lamenter is a sort of grief therapist, or a tragic actress, whose object is to work on the emotions of those present, it is not surprising that she should use shock techniques such as the stark contrasts we noted in the waulking songs. In the Irish laments too, a series of lines will begin with 'It is not...', as the lamenter rejects image after image of reassuring, living normality, only to introduce suddenly an image of death: planks, stones or the salty sea. This technique, so effective in breaking through emotional barriers, is also ideally suited to the formulaic composition of both laments and waulking songs.

The images used are traditional but their intensity in the performance is helped by the intensity of the poet's concentration. In accounts of waulking and of keening, there are many references to hypnotic rhythm and to the possibility that the poet composes in some sort of meditative trance. The whole question of altered states of consciousness in the production of oral poetry in these traditions needs further study.

The analogy of patchwork, used earlier in this paper to illustrate the place of creativity in traditional art, is useful again here. Just as an excellent quilt will be both beautiful and functional, delighting the eye with its colours and the mind with its pattern, awakening the memory with its scraps cut from familiar clothing, and also keeping the body warm, the performance of waulking songs and of laments involves the aesthetic and the functional together.
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