

Joanna Baillie and the Anxiety of Shakespeare's Influence

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Abstract

Joanna Baillie, a drama critic as well as a dramatist, began during the last decade of the eighteenth century to develop her own theory of tragedy and comedy, based on human emotions, the elemental instincts that prompted Shakespeare's characters to action over two hundred years before. Baillie could not escape Shakespeare's early influence; even if she had tried, critics and colleagues regularly reminded her of her debt. While Baillie admitted her poetical debt to Ossian and to Robert Burns, her Romantic "naturalness" was indeed fresh and original. Her dramatic writing, however, followed many of the themes of Shakespeare — love, hate, revenge, jealousy, ambition — and she defended and defined her focus on such passions in her "Introductory Discourse" to *A Series of Plays*, whereas Shakespeare was tacit about his scheme if, in fact, he had one.

Introduction

"Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another? . . . twisting, and untwisting the same rope?" — Laurence Sterne, Tristram Shandy

"The most important playwright in nineteenth-century Scotland," writes Adrienne Scullion in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, "is Joanna Baillie" (1997, 160). A poet, playwright, and theatre theorist, Baillie (1762-1851) was the child of enlightenment parents, the niece of the famous Hunter physicians, the sister of Dr. Matthew Baillie — one of George III's physicians — and a close friend of Sir Walter Scott and other Romantic writers. With little formal schooling, she taught herself the fundamentals of drama by reading indiscriminately, acting out parts, and attending plays. And for her early dramatic experience, she thanked Shakespeare. Like other Romantic women writers, Baillie sought to balance what she had inherited from the past with a fresh perspective and a personal artistic identity. The result of such unification was clearly an artistic anomaly — a woman writer whom Scott deemed in *Marmion* our "own Shakespeare" (Scott 1995, 69).

In the Preface to *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception*, Lucy Newlyn defines what she calls the complicated series of intersecting concerns for English Romantic writers, which include:

the equivocal relationship between a writer and his or her audience during the age of criticism; the ways in which writers construct an authentic identity for themselves from the materials of the past, when the past's authority is under question; and the need to accommodate authorial rights alongside interpretative freedoms, at a time when the emerging power of the subject is politically and philosophically desirable, but contentious. (Newlyn 2000, vii)

Further, Newlyn argues, while Harold Bloom's focus on authority, tradition, and canon formation have "celebrated" the "anxiety of influence," he lays "emphasis on one side of the polarity, writer-reader, and works in a single temporal direction," subsequently "ignoring the duality of the writing-reading subject, who looks both before and after" (Newlyn 2000, vii). An additional emphasis on the writing-reading subject also leads to implications regarding the "anxiety of reception" and the "divided self," the condition that R. D. Laing defined as an individual's personality "profoundly modified even to the point of threatened loss of . . . identity" (quoted in Newlyn 2000, viii). For purposes of this discussion, I am most interested in employing three parameters that Newlyn outlines in order to interpret (1) how Baillie responded to the critical audience who insisted on aligning her with Shakespeare, (2) how she "re-replaces" Shakespeare with her dramas and (3) how, in the face of the "rise of the reader" in early nineteenth-century Britain, she constructed her own identity from Shakespeare's plays and from other materials of the past. As Newlyn suggests, male Romantic writers were less burdened with the past than they were "preoccupied with the combined threats of modernity and futurity." Newlyn's concern is "with authorial anxiety as it manifested itself in the Romantic era, and specifically with the threatened status of poetry as it dealt with the challenges posed by the rise of the reader." She offers "a new reading of Romanticism by reversing the temporal direction of Bloom's model of influence and applying it to a particular nexus of personal circumstances and historical condition" (x).

Romantic women writers were far less concerned about threats of futurity, but Baillie did address concerns about the quality of past and present playwrights in her 1798 "Introductory Discourse" to *A Series of Plays: in which it is attempted to delineate the stronger passions of the mind, each passion being the subject of a tragedy and a comedy*:

[I]n presenting to us those views of great characters, and of the human mind in difficult and trying situations, which peculiarly belong to Tragedy, the far greater proportion, even of

those who may be considered as respectable dramatic poets, have very much failed. (Baillie 1851, 8)¹

What Baillie hoped to accomplish was a more realistic, characteristic drama than that promoted by Shakespeare and earlier dramatists and by her peer Richard Brinsley Sheridan and his Drury Lane company. What she did accomplish, I argue, was the development of strong women characters — justifiably wary of relationships with men — and of psychologically motivated characters, often obsessive and violent. Certainly, something she accomplished as well was a wish stated in her "Introductory Discourse": "It was the saying of a sagacious Scotchman," writes Baillie, "Let who will make the laws of a nation, if I have the writing of its ballads" (Baillie 1851, 14). While she never realized the level of dramatic representation that Shakespeare enjoyed and enjoys, Baillie's poems and song lyrics, particularly her work with music collector George Thomson, proved a considerable legacy for her native Scotland. Along with contemporaries such as Burns, Scott, and others, Baillie today represents Romantic Scotland as "King Shakespeare" represents England.

Baillie's Early and Mature Experience with Shakespeare

In an 1838 memoir written for her nephew William Baillie, Joanna Baillie, then nearing her eighties, traced her initial interest in drama. She was living at Long Calderwood in Scotland at the time and was probably a teenager when she was acting out scenes from Shakespeare for her family and friends:

Our two maid servants were summoned from the kitchen and they with my Mother & Sister made the audience. First when we began, they all laughed without restraint at our strange appearance but, as I proceeded in my part, they became grave and ended by shedding [*sic*] tears, and this was a great triumph for me. Every one praised me but my Mother who, very wisely did not like to give me any kind of encouragement. At another time too I acted Hamlet in the Ghost scene with great commendation. (Slagle 2002, 53)

But Baillie's interest in drama had peaked even earlier, and she related that after her father's election to the Divinity Chair in Glasgow in 1775, a gentleman of the town often stayed at the house of her friend Miss Graham and owned a copy of Bell's Theatre, with engravings of Shakespearean actors and actresses in stage costumes.² This work, along with her own inclination to act out in play, furthered her interest in tragedy and comedy. Even as an adult living in London, Baillie regularly documented in letters her presence at theatrical performances, often to see adaptations of Shakespeare's plays or to witness the debut of actor friends such as George and Sarah Bartley or

Fanny Kemble.³ In a September 1816 letter to Sir Walter Scott, for example, Baillie recounted a performance of *Hamlet* that she had just seen in Paris:

Night before last we went to see Talma act Hamlet. I was much disappointed. His expression of feeling appeared to me exaggerated & harsh, and tho' the action of his arms is often very good yet he is upon the whole neither dignified nor graceful. He is not Hamlet Prince of Denmark [*sic*] to my fancy but a good Bourgeois of Paris thro'out. I ought not however to judge so severely from one character only, and my imperfect knowledge of the french language — or I should rather say my not being accustomed to hear it spoken prevents me from being sensible of many excellencies in speaking his part which others might be sensible of . . . I suppose you know this French Play of Hamlet. It is an old Play I find & quite after the French School. There has been so much pains taken to make poor Hamlet well-bred that the whole character & spirit is extracted from it. That Goth Shakespear[e] has no notion how a Prince & a Lover ought to speak. (Slagle 1999, 361-62)⁴

This telling critique from a spectator and Romantic playwright implies that the Romantics were not necessarily anti-theatrical, but were moving toward a concept of dramatic experience as an intellectual and emotional engagement. And this modern audience was interested in the psychological responses of characters — just what Baillie was offering in her plays on passions — with added emphasis on women's position in society.

As Baillie's letters often describe performances she attended, most of them point to the theatrical Shakespeare, always fluid, rather than to the literary Shakespeare. On the other hand, she also attended private readings of Shakespeare by acting friends such as Sarah Siddons and George Bartley.⁵ "How many passages of s[h]akespear," Baillie wrote her friend Margaret Holford in 1824, "we admire because we know the whole interest of the Play from which they are taken which we should otherwise read with comparative indifference" (Slagle 1999, 707). That she was critical of both text *and* performance is revealed in such commentary.

Baillie, a drama critic as well as a dramatist, during the last decade of the eighteenth century began to develop her own theory of tragedy and comedy based on human emotions, elemental instincts that had prompted Shakespeare's characters to action over two hundred years before — and she could not escape his early influence on her. Even if she had tried, critics and colleagues regularly reminded her of her debt. While she admitted her poetical debt to Ossian and to Robert Burns, her Romantic "naturalness" was indeed fresh and original. Her dramatic writing, however, followed many of the themes of Shakespeare — love, hate, revenge, jealousy, ambition — but she

defended and defined her focus on such passions in her "Introductory Discourse" to *A Series of Plays*, whereas Shakespeare was tacit about his scheme if, in fact, he had one. An explanation like Baillie's, after all, was not unusual for a Romantic writer embarking on a new venue, especially a woman writer:

From that strong sympathy which most creatures, but the human above all, feel for others of their kind, nothing has become so much an object of man's curiosity as man himself . . . Every person who is not deficient in intellect, is more or less occupied in tracing among the individuals he converses with, the varieties of understanding and temper which constitute the characters of men . . . If man is an object of so much attention to man, engaged in the ordinary occurrences of life, how much more does he excite his curiosity and interest when placed in extraordinary situations of difficulty and distress? . . . It is not merely under the violent agitations of passion, that man so rouses and interests us; even the smallest indications of an unquiet mind . . . will set our attention as anxiously upon the watch, as the first distant flashes of a gathering storm. (Baillie 1851, 1-3, 5)

This desire, as Baillie says, "to know what men are in the closet as well as in the field" is the same fascination that Shakespeare counted on for an audience watching Macbeth, Hamlet or Othello agonize over and lose control of *their* passions.

Unfortunately, the term "closet dramatist" has often been misused in relation to Baillie; while she focuses on passions that men might display in their "closet," that is, in *private*, she clearly intended her plays for the stage and repeatedly noted her disappointment at seldom being represented there. Her characters are motivated by passions and/or by their own psychoses. Privy to the medical scholarship of her famous uncle John Hunter (and the work of his older brother William Hunter, whom she never met), Baillie was also familiar with the medical studies of her brother Dr. Matthew Baillie; and her plays, argues Alan Richardson, rely "on the new neurophysiology summarized four years earlier by her brother in the Gulstonian lectures" (Richardson 2001, 77). Baillie, then, succeeded in combining Shakespeare's genius with the psychological and neurological studies of her day to create volatile characters often destroyed by their own unhealthy minds — not only by their external circumstances.

Nevertheless, if Baillie repeated the themes of Shakespeare, they were themes unoriginal to him as well, for even he had been accused of copying from romances, earlier tragedies, and historical chronicles. Baillie's critics, however, suggested that she should strive to become even more like the earlier playwrights. While the act of borrowing from previous literary works prevailed from the Renaissance through the eighteenth century, explains Laura Rosenthal, "dramatic writing [still]

raises particular ambiguities of intertextuality and originality": "As a commercial genre, theater had since the Renaissance been under some pressure to offer something that the audience had not seen the previous week; still, retelling familiar stories had also been customary and rarely understood as plagiarism" (Rosenthal 1996, 7). Baillie, who had grown up reading early dramas, could not escape the "retelling" of familiar stories enhanced by her own philosophical bent. Renaissance influence was probable, but in an original and systematic way, she strove to analyze the human passions in her own way — with Shakespeare as signifier in the Romantic theater and literature. Intrigued by human behavior when she was a young woman, Baillie explained her curiosity to friend and writer Mary Berry in an 1831 memoir:

Traits of human nature whether in Books or in real life have always had most power in arresting my attention & keeping place in my recollection. This has often made me a watcher of children at play or under any excitement, and a frequenter in early life of the habitations of labouring & country people which happily for me I had many opportunities of doing. I might forget the dialogue in which it was displayed and could not therefore make a truthful anecdote of it, but the trait itself remained perhaps for ever. (quoted in Slagle 2002, 71)

Thus was the stage set for her dramatic emphasis, and Baillie's focus on the passions was outlined and represented in her very specific agenda.

Baillie's Critical Reception

In the early nineteenth century, two critical giants had emerged to review the magnitude of published material being introduced to the reading public: *The Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review*. If Baillie did not feel justifiably threatened by the critics early on, she certainly did after the emergence of her third volume of *A Series of Plays* (1812). Shortly before Scottish reviewer Francis Jeffrey attacked Baillie's third volume, he had noted in 1811, after the success of her *Family Legend*, that "Southey, and Wordsworth, and Coleridge, and Miss Baillie have all of them copied the manner of our old poets; and, along with this indication of good taste, have given great proofs of original genius" (quoted in Greig 1948, 194).⁶ But his review of volume three was brutal, and Baillie never forgot it. In February 1812 the *Edinburgh Review* printed his remarks:

It is now, we think, something more than nine years since we first ventured to express our opinion of Miss Baillie's earlier productions; and to raise our warning voice against those narrow and peculiar views of dramatic excellence, by which, it appeared to us, that she had imprudently increased the difficulties of a very difficult undertaking. Notwithstanding this

admonition, Miss Baillie has gone on (as we expected) in her own way; and has become (as we expected) both less popular, and less deserving of popularity, in every successive publication . . . Miss Baillie, we think, has set the example of plays as poor in incident and character, and as sluggish in their pace, as any that languish on the Continental stage, without their grandeur, their elegance, or their interest; and, at the same time, as low and as irregular in their diction as our own early tragedies, — and certainly without their spirit, grace, or animation. (Jeffrey 1811-12, 265-66)

While Jeffrey's "as we expected" condemned Baillie for what he clearly considered her "unfeminine" independence, his criticism that her plays were "poor in incident and character" was not unlike the criticism he leveled toward other successful playwrights of the time. He moved on to give Baillie *some* praise but focused on non-threatening traits such as her pleasing lyrical verse and her intelligent morality. Baillie would thereafter refer to herself as a "burnt child" for ever having revealed her authorship at the beginning of her career:

[Miss Head] would fain have kept her name & sex unknown, if her friends would have allowed it, and they were not very wise friends who thwarted her on this point. I speak feelingly on this subject like a burnt child. John any-body would have stood higher with the critics than Joanna Baillie. I too was unwisely thwarted on this point. (Slagle 1999, 438-39)

In contrast to Jeffrey's estimation of Baillie, however, Lord Byron, who could not have been more opposite from Baillie in disposition, saw her as a dynamic playwright and was both intrigued and intimidated by her ability to portray what he considered "masculine" passions, passions that Shakespeare perfected and that other *male* writers imitated.⁷ In 1815 Byron reflected the prejudice of his culture in two letters, speculating that "Women (saving Joanna Baillie) cannot write tragedy. They haven't the experience of life for it" (Marchand 1982, 4:290). And in 1817 he concluded, "When Voltaire was asked why no woman has ever written even a tolerable tragedy, 'Ah (said the Patriarch) the composition of a tragedy requires testicles.' If this be true, Lord knows what Joanna Baillie does — I suppose she borrows them" (Marchand 1982, 5:203). Clearly, the critical conflict over Baillie was steeped in issues of gender — she was simply addressing issues too masculine for a nineteenth-century woman — the dark recesses of the mind, the passions only revealed in one's "closet." But while often subtly echoing Shakespeare's themes, Baillie's plays are also distinctive in their focus on women acting in and reacting to a patriarchal culture — a culture that forced them to live with the results of war, marriage, legal systems, and so on, developed by men. Baillie's subjects were far too "unfeminine" for the early nineteenth-century critics, but what many failed

to understand was that showing the mental decline of her characters was meant to be cautionary rather than sensational.

"In women's writing, across the full discursive range in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries," explains Newlyn, "it is difficult to distinguish between a genuine 'anxiety of reception' and a culturally induced rhetoric of self-deprecation" (Newlyn 2000, 224). Like many early women writers, Baillie is an ironic figure of modesty and anonymity. Even though her first two books appeared anonymously, she still apologized for her "attempt" at drama in the "Introductory Discourse" to volume one of *A Series of Plays*:

It is natural for a writer, who is about to submit his works to the Public, to feel a strong inclination, by some Preliminary Address, to conciliate the favour of his reader, and dispose him, if possible, to peruse them with a favourable eye. (Baillie 1851, 1)

Likewise, she apologized for the "influences" from which she allegedly suffered and, unjustly, for her lack of form:

situated where I have no library to consult; my reading through the whole of my life has been of a loose, scattered, unmethodical kind, with no determined direction, and I have not been blessed by nature with the advantages of a retentive or accurate memory. (Baillie 1851, 17)

Ironically, these are the very imagined "failings" which made her poetry and drama fresh and exciting. In spite of her early apologies, Baillie did secure critical acclaim for her work, but she also suffered from some severe external criticism. Unfortunately, she seems to have internalized that criticism later on and to have become anxious about her work's reception; and this anxiety surely struggled with her ambition. In addition, Baillie was concerned about the proliferation of new material being introduced to the public, believing that her own work would suffer from readers' "overexposure" to new texts and their resultant inability to assess genuine literary merit. While novels were becoming the preferred genre for many readers in the nineteenth century, an increase in readership may have actually served to promote writers like Baillie, writers who could imitate a national treasure like Shakespeare.

Echoes of Shakespeare

Whereas several of the dramas contained in Baillie's three-volume *A Series of Plays* represent similar passions revealed in Shakespeare's plays, four plays in particular epitomize Shakespeare's themes and sometimes even his characters. Volume 1 of *A Series of Plays* closes with Baillie's most enduring drama, *De Monfort: A Tragedy*, set in "a town in Germany" (Baillie 1851, 76). The

five-act structure and blank verse are similar to Shakespeare's, but the gothic setting makes this play much more contemporary.⁸

This play about hatred and revenge was just suited to the impassioned acting styles of Kemble and Siddons and, along with Baillie's *Family Legend*, was the most performed of her plays.⁹ Sarah Siddons even asked Baillie to write her more parts like Jane De Monfort's, evidence that she tired of constantly being cast in the same Shakespearean roles. Although, according to Baillie's letters, *De Monfort* was altered by John Kemble for performance, it was still a gothic masterpiece. From the opening act, a mystery enfolds De Monfort, raising questions about why he has left his sister Jane, why his personality has changed, and why he is dark and melancholy. He is a haunted hero, pre-Byronic with his tortured soul.

De Monfort learns of his wife's death at the beginning of the play, and in Hamlet-like fashion laments that "There are [those serpents] who . . . sting the soul — Ay, till its healthful frame is chang'd to secret, fest'ring, sore disease, / So deadly is the wound" (Baillie 1851, 79). His soul has become Hamlet's "unweeded garden," in which "things rank and gross in nature" fester, though the cause is more mysterious than it is for Hamlet (1.2.135-36).¹⁰ De Monfort's sister Jane urges him to confide in her, but he fears that she will despise him if he does, for his hatred for Rezenvelt is obsessive. Rezenvelt, like Claudius, has gained "wealth and new-got titles" that he does not deserve (Baillie 1851, 86). De Monfort's hatred eventually clouds his reason when he sees — but misinterprets — Rezenvelt holding the hand of his sister Jane De Monfort, later compounded by a false rumor that Rezenvelt is Jane's lover:

Hell's direst torment seize the infernal villain!
 Detested of my soul! I will have vengeance!
 I'll crush thy swelling pride — I'll still thy vaunting —
 I'll do a deed of blood! (Baillie 1851, 94)

These words, as well as many others in Baillie's play, echo Hamlet's. In act 4, for example, Hamlet attempts to boost his courage in much the same way as De Monfort: "O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (*Hamlet* 4.4.55-56). Baillie's Gothic play contains "Radcliffean" elements as well and an over-romanticized implication that the protagonist dies of grief after he finally murders Rezenvelt,¹¹ but the protagonist's smoldering hatred and inability to act also mirrors Hamlet's psychological stagnation — and Claudius' inability to pray. In addition, the tragic ending with Freberg's Fortinbras-like speech echoes Hamlet's closing scene:

Unhappy men! Ye, both in nature rich,

With talents and with virtues were endued.
 Ye should have lov'd, yet deadly rancour came,
 And in the prime of manhood of your days
 Ye sleep in horrid death. O Direful hate! (Baillie 1851, 102)

Fortinbras expresses grief for the prince in a similar way: "For he was likely, had he been put on, / To have prov'd most royal" (*Hamlet* 5.2.341-42).

Unlike Shakespeare's play, however, *De Monfort* shifts more from external action to internal passion. Both Jeffrey Cox (1992) and Catherine Burroughs point out that even though the play is titled *De Monfort* the title should not "compel readers to focus solely on the way in which the dramaturgy moves the male sibling of the De Monfort family through the culture of the play"; for Jane De Monfort "also wrests from De Monfort's murder of Rezenvelt an interpretation that maintains the illusion of his heroic stature" and continues to distinguish him from more common criminals. Additionally, most critics agree that Jane is the "epitome of perfect womanhood by the standards of late-eighteenth-century middle-class London society, the character . . . written to be performed in the world of the play with a carefully controlled gesture and speech" (Burroughs 1997, 119). Contrarily, Deirdre Gilbert analyzes Jane De Monfort as extremely manipulative, a Lady Macbeth in her ability to control the dramatic action but far more sinister than Lady Macbeth in her motives for doing so (Gilbert 2002, 79-80). However we interpret Jane De Monfort, in fashioning a *Hamlet*-like revenge play, Baillie reassigns "control" and rationality to a woman — a woman unlike *Hamlet's* Ophelia or Gertrude.

Following volume one in 1802, volume two of *A Series of Plays* contained four dramas: *The Election*, *Ethwald* (parts 1 and 2), and *The Second Marriage*. The most Shakespearean of these, *Ethwald: A Tragedy, In Five Acts, Part First and Part Second* is set in "England, in the kingdom of Mercia, and the time near the end of the Heptarchy" (Baillie 1851, 134).¹² Here Baillie focuses on ambition, a passion, she argues, far less transient than others and requiring exposure in more than one situation:

Ambition alone acquires strength from gratification, and after having gained one object, still sees another rise before it to which it as eagerly pushes on; and the dominion which it usurps over the mind is capable of enduring from youth to extreme age. To give a full view, therefore, of this passion, it was necessary to show the subject of it in many different situations, and passing through a considerable course of events. (Baillie 1851, 105)

Baillie's *Ethwald* opens on a scene in a Saxon castle where young Ethwald languishes, wishing to make a name for himself and lamenting his low birth. Taking his fate into his own hands, Ethwald disappears from home and joins a group of soldiers fighting for King Oswal of Mercia. He is instrumental in winning the battle, and the King rewards him with an earldom. This initial taste of fame excites his ambition, and he finds his current status as heroic warrior still lacking:

The noble ethling greatly honours me
With precious tokens; nay, the very soldiers
Do rear their pointed weapons as I pass;
As though it were to say, "there goes the man
That we would cheerly follow."
Unto what end these fair beginnings point
I know not — but of this I am assured,
There is a course of honour lies before me,
Be it with dangers, toil, or pain beset,
Which I will boldly tread. (Baillie 1851, 143)

All this before Ethwald has heard the mystics' prophecies — Macbeth questions his fate in a similar way just after his encounter with the witches:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? (*Macbeth* 1.3.129-32)

Hungering for more recognition as well, Ethwald asks the deceitful Alwy to help him incite another battle, distraught at the notion of peace:

What, peace! Peace, sayst thou, with these glorious arms,
In conquest red, occasion bright'ning round us,
And smiling victory, with beck'ning hand
Pointing to future fields of nobler strife,
With richer honours crown'd? What, on the face
Of such fair prospects draw the veil of peace! (Baillie 1851, 143-44)

Ethwald even wishes the captured British prince will escape so that they can continue the war. But Alwy's immediate plan is to start a different conflict, rumoring to the ruthless thane Woggarwolfe that his Wessex foes have taken Boruth. The ploy succeeds, and in the ensuing battle scene Edward,

heir to the Saxon throne, retreats as Ethwald rises to save his army. Only the noble thane Ethelbert seems to understand that the war-torn landscape is the result of Ethwald's ambition, although Ethwald denies his accusations:

I am a man aspiring to be great,
But loathing cruelty: who wears a sword
That will protect and not destroy the feeble. (Baillie 1851, 150)

But, of course, everyone suffers from war; and in this play Baillie delineates the horrors of war, *not* the honor of it. By act 4, just before he consults the Druidesses for a look into the future, Ethwald again laments his un-royal birth, and we understand that fame as a warrior is just the beginning of his obsession for power:

I see my path:
But what is that to me? My steps are chain'd.
Amongst the mighty great, and earth's high lords,
There is no place for me! (Baillie 1851, 152)

As he consults the Druid mystics, he envisions a specter wearing a crown, which provides the impetus he needs to manipulate the future and advance from soldier to king. In the process of "aspiring to be great," Ethwald's passions prove "hostile to public good," as he leaves particularly the women characters unable to survive in his patriarchal wasteland (Baillie 1851, 150, 162). Ethwald, Alwy, and conspirators eventually storm the castle, where King Oswal faces them bravely. Ethwald has given Alwy orders to assassinate the king but retreats himself to another room, returning to see the dead king and feigning surprise: "What sight is this? / Ah! Ye have gone too far. Who did this deed?" (Baillie 1851, 159). With the king dead and his heir Edward imprisoned, Ethwald, like Macbeth, takes the throne and then marries the king's proud daughter, Elburga.

Deirdre Gilbert explains that in *Ethwald* Baillie, in a cross-coupling of characters, "releases two Shakespearean heroines, Ophelia and Lady Macbeth, breathing new life into them through the transfiguration of Bertha and Elburga" (Gilbert 2002, 177).¹³ Bertha, Ethwald's childhood friend and prospective wife, eventually goes mad and, Ophelia-like, wanders around singing songs. Elburga, argues Deirdre Gilbert, shares her husband's ambition, but Ethwald, "unlike Macbeth, shuts his queen out from 'things of moment'" (Gilbert 2003, 154). Further, as Nina Auerbach explains, Anna Jameson — in *Shakespeare's Heroines: Characteristics of Women, Moral, Political, and Historical* (1832) — like Baillie, "allows these heroines to 'exist perennially,' giving them a 'larger life than their plays allow'" (Auerbach 1982, 211). *Ethwald, Part First*, closes

as the protagonist questions his motives for conquest, which provides him an opportunity to redeem himself or to follow the path of Macbeth.

Ethwald: A Tragedy, In Five Acts, Part Second opens with an unrepentant King Ethwald, however, and ultimately proves that a leader's ambition and thirst for glory in battle destroys his citizens, just as Macbeth's ambition destroys himself and those around him. Catherine Burroughs explains that *Part Second* culminates in "a lengthy scene that forecasts Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*, as women, babies, the sick, and the elderly flee the horrors of a war created by Ethwald's rage for glory" (Burroughs 1997, 130-31), depicting a battle field strewn with the slain. In act one Ethelbert casts his eyes to heaven and exclaims:

Ah, Mercia,
Mercia! On red fields of carnage
Bleed thy remaining sons, and carrion birds
Tear the cold limbs that should have turn'd thy soil. (Baillie 1851, 173)

Recurrent images of blood also recall *Macbeth*. And a report from a scout in act two reveals war's affect on women and children:

The armies, at this moment, are engaged
In bloody battle. On my way I met a crowd of helpless women, from their homes
Who fly with terror, each upon her back
Bearing some helpless babe or valued piece
Of Household good snatch'd up in haste. (Baillie 1851, 174)

So much for Ethwald's promise not to "destroy the feeble" — and Baillie's point is that everyone suffers in war. Of course, Shakespeare was aware of this also, as Macduff says to Malcolm:

Each new morn
New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows
Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds
As if it felt with Scotland. . . . (*Macbeth* 4.3.4-7)

Like Macbeth, Ethwald loses his life in act five to a noble thane. Unlike Macbeth, however, Baillie's play is ultimately about more than ambition; in the end it is a play "about female solidarity — albeit tenuous — and survival" (Gilbert 2002, 154), a gender twist central to Baillie's plays.

Concerned that the large cast of *Ethwald, Part Second* might not be able to sustain the "expression of strong passion" (quoted in Burroughs 1997, 112), Baillie altered the play in 1815 and wrote to Scott in October:

I have been busy of late putting my house — that is to say my chest of papers in order, not expecting to die the sooner for having done so, but being better prepared (in this respect at least) for that event if it should please God to bring it suddenly upon me. I have altered Rayner so as to make it an acting play if any manager of any Theatre should hereafter wish to produce it; and I have done or think I have done the same good turn for the 2d part of *Ethwald*. Oh how I wish you were my next door neighbour that I might run in to you with my papers in my hand! (Slagle 1999, 341)

In December of that same year, she reiterated her revisions to Scott and made clear that she wanted *Ethwald* to be an "acting play" and was willing to alter this play about ambition accordingly, a reflection of her *own* ambition.

Long after the emergence of volume 3 of *A Series of Plays* in 1812, Baillie ventured on another multi-volume work, entitled simply *Dramas*. Though Baillie felt by now that she had exhausted her audience's curiosity in the passions, this 1836 three-volume collection contained two plays still relating to her earlier focus, both with similarities to Shakespeare's *Othello*. Volume 1 of *Dramas* opens with *Romiero: A Tragedy, In Five Acts* that focuses on jealousy. The setting is Romiero's castle on the shore of the Mediterranean, and the time is the fourteenth century. When Zorada, Romiero's wife, finds her father Don Sebastian shipwrecked on their shore, she hides him and plans his escape, for he is a political fugitive whom Romiero has sworn to return to the king of Castile. Like *Othello*, Romiero is a jealous husband, but his suspicions need no fueling from an Iago; he is sufficiently paranoid on his own. When he finds Zorada missing from their bedchamber, he at once suspects her of an intrigue with young Maurice, who is actually in love with Zorada's friend Beatrice. While Zorada is distressed but passive in the face of Romiero's verbal attacks, Beatrice, on the other hand, actively defends her sex:

Bea. Are you not well, my lord?

Rom. No damsel; *well* was banish'd from the world,
When woman came to it.

Bea. Fy! say not so.

For if deprived of women, what were men?

Like leafless elms stripp'd of the clasping vine;

Like unrigg'd barks, of sail and pennant bare;

Like unstring'd viols, which yield no melody.

Banish us all, and lay my life upon it,

You will right quickly send for us again. (Baillie 1851, 331-32)

Emilia has a similar conversation with Othello in act four, yet she is far less aggressive than Beatrice:

Oth. You have seen nothing then?

....

Emil. I durst, my lord, to wager she is honest;
Lay down my soul at stake. If you think other,
Remove your thought; it doth abuse your bosom. (*Othello* 4.2.1, 4.2.13-15)

Here Baillie moves away from Shakespeare: her heroine is aggressive in defending a woman friend, while Shakespeare's heroine is passive. Like Othello, though, Romero is intolerant and controlling, and Baillie suggests that he has married too young a wife for his insecurity. His possessive, unhealthy love for Zorada is accentuated by Maurice's healthy love for Beatrice. Zorada is only trying to save her father, but in one of several volatile scenes, Romero rants at her:

Thou'st played me false; thou art a worthless woman;
So base, so sunk, that those whose appellation
Brings blushes to the cheeks of honest women
Compared to thee are pure. — Off! do not speak! (Baillie 1851, 331)

Othello focuses on the visage of his accused as well:

Turn thy complexion there,
Patience, thou young and rose-lipp'd cherubin,
Ay, here look grim as hell! (4.2.64-66)

While Othello's jealous rage leads to his deliberate murder of Desdemona, Romero *accidentally* murders his wife in an attempt to stab her father; and Baillie emphasizes the dangers of women's subjugation to their husbands, especially irrational ones. Further, according to Betsy Bolton, Baillie, along with contemporaries such as Mary Robinson, "echoes Shakespeare's Shylock in denouncing customs that forbid women to defend themselves" or to manipulate the social order (Bolton 2001, 117). As a result, although Romero is tragic, he fails to elicit the reader's sympathy, a fact of which Baillie was well aware. From modern audiences, Othello often evokes the same contempt.

Shortly after the appearance of *Dramas*, Baillie felt it necessary to defend her flawed hero in an essay entitled "On the Character of Romero" for *Fraser's Magazine* (vol. 14). She recommended the essay to her friend Margaret Holford Hodson and to Harvard divinity professor Dr. Andrews

Norton in November of 1836, stating that those who disliked and condemned the character of her jealous man ought to read her defense of him, an excerpt of which follows:

I am not presumptuous enough to suppose that I can altogether vindicate Romiero; but in simply laying before the reader my own intentions in delineating this character, something very near a vindication may, perhaps, be found. I have endeavoured to represent him as a man fastidiously delicate in everything connected with the affections of the heart. This is shown by his former concealed attachment to a Lady which was only discovered after her death — by his being so distressed at the idea of Zorada's love having passed from him to another, that he at first thinks the further personal criminality scarcely worth considering — by his not enduring when that criminality is from circumstances made to appear probable or presumptive, even in his aggravated agony, to have her name coupled with any gross epithet. This, it appears to me, is a jealousy dealing particularly with the affections of the heart, not being afraid or suspicious of more ignoble wrongs; and therefore jealousy that (as its frailty indeed) might belong to a noble nature. (Slagle 1999, 719)

Ultimately, however, Baillie was not so successful in drawing sympathy for what she deemed Romiero's "noble nature," flawed like Shakespeare's original but not guilty of premeditated murder. She was still lamenting the critics' misinterpretation when she wrote to Mrs. Norton in January 1837:

I lately had inserted in Fraser's Magazine, — a short defense of the Character of Romiero from the censure cast upon it by my very friendly critic in the Quarterly Review. . . . I should not thought it worth while to have noticed it publicly at all, but I found the high Shakespearean Critics of the Literary Coteries had adopted the same notions, calling Romiero a self-instigated Othello (out of rule of course) and the story a broken backed plot. (Slagle 1999, 939-40)

The *Quarterly* critic believed that because Romiero was instigated to jealousy by his own observations and his suspicious nature, and not by an outside agency, he did not deserve sympathy. A more observant critic, however, might have noted how Baillie was attempting to distinguish her character from Shakespeare's.

Completing volume 1 of *Dramas* is Baillie's final play on passions, again an Othello-like tragedy entitled *Henriquez: A Tragedy, In Five Acts*. This tragedy on remorse is set in the thirteenth-century town of Zamora. Henriquez is one of the plays that Victorian critic Fred Rowton estimated in *The Female Poets of Great Britain* as well designed for the stage and that he argued

"clearly shows that with performers sedulously bent on carrying out the author's design, and willing to sacrifice momentary applause for ultimate appreciation, Mrs. Baillie's Plays would be as forcible in action as they are striking on perusal" (quoted in Burroughs 1997, 200). This play about remorse is just as clearly about jealousy, for the protagonist Henriquez murders his friend Don Juan de Torva because he believes his wife Leonora is in a love relationship with Juan. Basing his rash suspicions on a private letter from Leonora, which he has no business reading in the first place, Henriquez never even questions his wife; instead, he believes the worst of her and seeks out Juan to murder him outside the castle. Baillie's discovery scene comes in act two, when readers learn that Don Juan has been on his way to beg for the hand of Mencia, Leonora's sister, and Leonora has innocently gone to meet Juan to let him through the gates in order to plead his case. Henriquez does not immediately admit to the murder, and young Antonio, who is also in love with Mencia, is imprisoned as the only suspect. When it is clear that his friend Don Juan has left all his property to Henriquez, the general cannot bear his guilt and remorse, and in the end he saves Antonio through his confession.

Like *Othello's* Desdemona, Leonora is never given a chance in this tragedy to plead her innocence. In fact, her husband, like Shakespeare's Othello and Browning's later inarticulate Duke of Ferrara, will not, or cannot, communicate his insecurity — he can only make unkind insinuations at the king's gathering:

Leo. Doubt not we shall be gay; but we expect
Some merry masquers here to join our revels;
They should have come ere now.

Hen. Wait ye for such? Are they not come
Already?

Leo. How so, my lord?

Hen. The world is full of them:
Who knows the honest unclothed worth of those
That by your side may stand, drink from your cup,
Or in your bosom lie? We are all masquers. (Baillie 1851, 367)

As Othello reacts to Iago, Henriquez reacts to insinuations made by his young servant Blas, searches his wife's private quarters, kills his best friend, and subsequently alienates his wife. While his later remorse is convincing, it does not seem to come until the reading of Juan's will, after which is revealed the "dark mysteries of human nature" (Baillie 1851, 375) which occupy his mind. Oddly, Henriquez does not spend the night before his execution with his wife Leonora; so even though

he may be exonerated as a person, he is never exonerated from his role as an uncommunicative, possessive, and cruel husband. Like Shakespeare's protagonist, Baillie's elicits tragedy through jealousy and failed communication.

Baillie had written at least the first two acts of *Henriquez* as early as 1812, for she promised Scott in April that she would send him a copy of her tragedy, "The story of which I have scetched [*sic*] out in the form of an anecdote taken from an old chronicle" (Slagle 1999, 301). After reading the draft, Scott asked Baillie how she presumed to prevent the audience from anticipating the conclusion and suggested that she read the notes to Robert Southey's *Cid*. Clearly, she struggled with creating Henriquez's character without "telegraphing" his eventual actions, as suggested in her letter to Scott in November of 1812:

It never was my intention to declare the purpose of the Hero till the very end of the Play, but now I shall be particularly careful that it shall not be at all understood or divined till the very last. My greatest difficulty will be in making him, circumstanced as he is and shunning all confidence or communication with any body, sufficiently discover the dreadful picture of his own mind without loading the play with soliloquy which could be a great fault. I must try to get over it the best way I can. I wish I were better acquainted with the manners of Spain in those days. (Slagle 1999, 313)

By 1815, artist Sir Thomas Lawrence was also reading her draft, and she valued his opinion of it as an "acting play" in particular. When the play finally appeared in *Dramas* in 1836, Baillie happily notified her friend Margaret Holford Hodson on March 19 that *Henriquez* was being performed that very evening at Drury Lane. According to the author, actors George and Sarah Bartley had been reading scenes from the play aloud at social gatherings. This play ended Baillie's calculated focus on the human passions and diminished her echoes of Shakespeare, for several possible reasons. First, after praising her first two volumes of *A Series of Plays*, critic Frances Jeffrey had been brutal in his estimation of her third volume in the *Edinburgh Review* of February 1812, calling these plays "poor in incident and character" (Jeffrey 1811-12, 265). Second, in these later years of her life, having lost her brother Matthew and her trusted friend Scott, Baillie was turning her thoughts to more philosophical and religious works and moving away from psychological and feminist revisions of Shakespeare.

A Personal Identity

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries introduced a large reading public, although, according to Newlyn, not necessarily an educated one; this resulted, for many authors,

in an "anxiety of reception" (Newlyn 2000, 29). Baillie clearly felt enough anxiety to publish her first volume entitled *Poems* (1790) and her first volume of *A Series of Plays* (1798) anonymously. And, of course, constantly being compared to Shakespeare couldn't have inspired confidence. In a *Critical Review* article of September 1798, as a critic praised her first anonymous volume of *A Series of Plays*, he also insisted that the writer study the versification of Shakespeare and others from the Renaissance so that "*He* may soon versify with their facility," for "*he* has already avoided the faults of our modern theatrical authors" (Anonymous 1798, my emphasis). Following the emergence of volume 2 of *A Series of Plays* in 1802, now bearing the author's name, yet another critic persisted in linking Baillie to Shakespeare:

Miss Baillie's dramatic powers are of the highest order. With the miserable stage-writers of the day, it would be insult to compare her; nor is it much commendation to rank her above Young, and Rowe, and Southerne . . . She has a near approach to Shak[e]speare. (Anonymous 1803, 200-12)

Further, in 1808, Scott's dedicatory opening to the third canto of *Marmion* began with a tribute to Baillie, whose readers "Awakening at the inspired strain, / Deemed *their own Shakespeare* lived again," clinching the comparison (Scott 1995, 69).¹⁴ From Scott this was high praise, because, writes Wilmon Brewer, "where Scott thought of the merits of drama, he thought always of Shakespeare . . . To Shakespeare's inspiration he attributed what was best in most of his favorite English dramatists from Ben Jonson to Joanna Baillie" (Brewer 1974, 197).¹⁵ Baillie, clearly Scott's favorite contemporary dramatist, manifested for him, argues Brewer, the potential to renew "the unequalled tragic poetry of Shakespeare" (Brewer 1974, 167).

Likewise, in her *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, Laetitia Barbauld devoted ten lines to her friend Joanna Baillie and only a couplet to Shakespeare:

Then, loved Joanna, to admiring eyes
Thy storied groups in scenic pomp shall rise;
Their high soul'd strains and Shakespear's noble rage
Shall with alternate passion shake the stage.
Some youthful Basil from thy moral lay
With stricter hand his fond desires shall sway;
Some Ethwald, as the fleeting shadows pass,
Start at his likeness in the mystic glass;
The tragic Muse resume her just controul,

With pity and with terror purge the soul,
While wide o'er transatlantic realms thy name
Shall live in light, and gather *all* its fame. (Barbauld 2001, 65)

Baillie's friend William Sotheby also christened Baillie "Sister of Shakespeare!" in his poem "To Joanna Baillie" (Burroughs 1997, 2000). According to Lucy Newlyn, Baillie clearly risked an imbalance of praise — in listing Britain's achievements in the arts, Barbauld ranks Shakespeare and Baillie as the great dramatists, upholding the ideology of empire and a continuation of perfection (Newlyn 2000, 25, 165). The comparison continued, and even as late as 1836, after the emergence of Baillie's *Dramas*, her friend Lady Byron noted that the playwright showed concern that one of several articles in the *Edinburgh Review* had compared her to Elizabethan writers and noted her "inferiority" to them (Slagle 2002, 252). A critic for *Blackwood's* January 1836 issue, on the other hand, vowed that "on laying down Volume First [*Dramas*], which we read through . . . we felt that Scott was justified in linking her name with that of Shakespeare" (Slagle 1999, 655n). Repeatedly compared to a dramatic giant like Shakespeare, Baillie was almost certain to fail with readers and critics eventually. However, what most of them failed to see was how she was *changing* Shakespeare's plays, giving the power of choice and reason to women characters and combining action with psychological introspection.

Baillie's Romantic Legacy

Ultimately, in the face of endless comparisons to Shakespeare, occasional venomous criticism, and copious literary competition, Joanna Baillie managed to construct her own Romantic feminine theory and identity — shaped partly from materials of the past — in the face of this "rise of the reader" in early nineteenth-century Britain. In defense against the critics, and in an attempt at a posthumous reputation, during her last years Baillie began to construct what she called her "monster book." Nearing the end of her life, she labored zealously to compile one last collection of her complete works, *The Dramatic and Poetical Works of Joanna Baillie*, published in 1851 shortly before her death. Edited mostly for her sister Agnes and heirs, niece Elizabeth Margaret Baillie Milligan (1794-1876) and nephew William Hunter Baillie (1797-1894), it was also one final move to leave her mark as a woman writer. In her last contract with Longman dated 13 April 1850, the publisher agreed that "Messrs. Longman and Co. shall publish at their own expense and risk The works of Joanna Baillie in one volume" (Slagle 2002, 284). Her publisher was hardly afraid of failure at this point in his long years of dealing with Baillie. After the 1851 first edition, *The Dramatic and Poetical Works* appeared in two subsequent editions from Longman, Brown, Green,

and Longmans, one later in 1851 and another in 1853. Baillie died on 23 February 1851 at eighty-eight, surrounded by her family.

Joanna Baillie left a great legacy in songs, poems, plays, and letters; but by the early twentieth century, biographers such as Donald Carswell had dismissed her as an "old-maidish" scribbler, a fate similar to that of many other early women writers. "In Baillie's case," argues Catherine Burroughs, "this neglect is all the more striking given that her contemporaries readily acknowledged her significance as both a playwright and theater theorist":

Mary Berry, to whom a copy of Baillie's first volume of plays was sent in 1798, summarized the tone of the early responses to Baillie's work by saying, "everybody talks in raptures (I always thought they deserved) of the tragedies and of the introduction as of a new and admirable piece of criticism." (quoted in Burroughs 1997, 98)

Fortunately, interest in Baillie's dramas began to reemerge in the 1980s. Between that time and the present, Burroughs' *Closet Stages* has addressed Baillie's theater theory, dozens of insightful articles have emerged, a collection of essays has been devoted to her, and her letters and a biography have been published.

Joanna Baillie, admittedly a child of Shakespeare's artistic lineage, was ultimately successful in supplementing what she learned about language and form from the Renaissance playwrights with her own very original dramatic critical theory and feminist understanding of the human passions. Reinventing Shakespeare in many of her plays, Baillie breathes new life into formulaic characters, especially women characters, often dismissing cultural myths and reassigning control. After more than a century's neglect, she has once again found a voice.

Notes

1. Citations for Baillie's plays and criticism come from *The Dramatic and Poetical Works of Joanna Baillie* (1851).
2. *Bell's Edition of Shakespeare's Plays, As they are now performed at the Theatres Royal in London* (1774) prefaced each play with a picture of actors in full costume.
3. George Bartley (1782?-1858) acquired early stage experience in Cheltenham in 1800 as Orlando in *As You Like It*. He debuted in London in 1802 and in 1809-11 managed the Glasgow theatre, also acting with increasing reputation. His second wife, Sarah Smith, a successful tragic actress, appeared in 1814 as Ophelia at Drury Lane while George played Falstaff. The loss of his son at Oxford led to his retirement after a 50-year career (*DNB* 1:1255-56). In 1818 the Bartleys made a successful trip to America and were instrumental in getting Baillie's plays performed there.

4. François Joseph Talma (1763-1826) was a French tragic actor educated in England. A friend of Napoleon, he made his debut in Paris in 1787 in Voltaire's *Brutus* and first introduced on the French stage the custom of wearing costumes of the period represented in the play.
5. Sarah Siddons (1755-1831), actress and eldest child of Sarah and Roger Kemble, was a young beauty and lady's maid to Mrs. Greathed, where she often recited Shakespeare before aristocratic company. She married actor William Siddons in 1773. Hearing of her talent shortly thereafter, Garrick sent one of his men to see her in *The Fair Penitent* and hired her at £5/week for Drury Lane, where she became the foremost tragic actress. Siddons played the role of Jane in Baillie's *De Monfort* in 1800 (*DNB* 8:195-202; many biographies are available).
6. There were literally dozens of reviews on Baillie's publications; while I cite or quote from only a few in this essay, there could be a separate study on them alone.
7. See William Brewer's "Joanna Baillie and Lord Byron" (1995) for a more complete study on Byron and Baillie.
8. *De Monfort: A Tragedy* was first performed in 1800 at Drury Lane and at least 28 other times in various places during Baillie's lifetime. Later performances of this and *The Family Legend* are addressed in *Joanna Baillie: A Literary Life* (Slagle 2002).
9. John Philip Kemble (1757-1823), one of England's most famous actors, began playing parts in his father's company in childhood. His sister, Sarah Kemble Siddons, recommended him to the Chamberlain's company as Theodosius in Lee's tragedy in 1776, with dozens of parts to follow. Kemble wrote prologues for institutions in York and Leeds, where he appeared for the first time in Hamlet; he is said to have written out the part over forty times. He managed the Edinburgh Theater briefly in 1781, and first appeared at Drury Lane as Hamlet in 1783; on 29 April 1800, he played De Monfort in Baillie's play (*DNB* 10:1260-66).
10. All Shakespeare quotations come from *The Norton Shakespeare* (1997).
11. However, Aloma Noble argues that because "over 135 Gothic plays, of which ten are by Joanna Baillie, were written and produced in England between 1768 and 1810" the success of *De Monfort* was almost certain (see Noble 1983, 131).
12. See Baillie's account of her inspiration for *Ethwald* in Chapter 1 of *Joanna Baillie: A Literary Life* (Slagle 2002).
13. Gilbert also explains that while
 Baillie does repeat some of the moral ambiguity found in the character of Macbeth in *Ethwald*, her hero is a far less conflicted "butcher." Her portrayal of Queen Elburga, counterpart to Lady Macbeth, loses almost all semblance to Shakespeare's heroine, particularly when we consider John Kemble's and Sarah Siddons's interpretation of the

couple. Donohue emphasizes that the performance Baillie and her contemporaries would have known "[elicited] a great amount of sympathy from the audience despite the overt evil of the characters' actions." (2003, 137)

14. This inscription also appears on a monument erected in Baillie's honor by James Donald in the 1890s at St. Bride's Church, Bothwell, Scotland.
15. Two dramatic poems that Scott submitted for Baillie's edition of *A Collection of Poems, Chiefly Manuscript, and from Living Authors* in 1823, *Halidon Hill* and *Macduff's Cross*, recall Shakespeare's characters and events of history.

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