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Obscurity and Affect in Anne Bannerman's "The Dark Ladie"

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[Poetry's] business is to affect rather by sympathy than by imitation; to display rather the effect of things on the mind of the speaker, or of others, than to present a clear idea of the things themselves.

-Edmund Burke, 1757

<1>At first glance, the poetry of Scottish Romantic writer Anne Bannerman—a Gothic ballad-poet whom many critics felt was too heavily influenced by Burke—might indeed appear to reject the “clear idea” in favor of a sympathetically-informed poetics of emotional influence. Upon further perusal, however, Bannerman’s poetry—albeit fundamentally invested in “the effect of things”—can be seen as participating in a different, more complex poetical agenda. To this end, this paper will examine “The Dark Ladie,” the first poem in Bannerman’s 1802 collection entitled *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry*. A famously frustrating read, the volume provoked the anger of critics for its “impenetrable obscurity.” To be sure, the text provides a wealth of mysterious, Gothic-influenced imagery, with little recognizable narrative; it ends with an unanswered (and explicitly *unanswerable*) question in place of a revelation. However, what so angered the critics—the fact that the reader is required to search for meaning and narrative cohesion where there might, in fact, be none—these criticisms seem to identify what I see as the very project of the poem. I argue that Bannerman’s obscure poetics asks epistemological questions about sense perception, about bodily affect, and about readability itself. What happens when meanings aren’t clear, and when ideas aren’t contextualized within narrative? How does the body respond to the unknowable? Who brings meaning to a text? Ultimately, Bannerman’s poetry complicates the notion of sympathetic relationships between poet and audience that Burke (and other eighteenth-century philosophers) postulate. Poetry is deliberately affective, Bannerman suggests—but it may affect in ways that frustrate rather than resolve. “The Dark Ladie” both depicts an interaction with the unreadable and enacts it on her readers.

<2>When Bannerman was writing at the turn of the century, Edinburgh was a prominent site for a number of literary movements, including the ballad revival, the Gothic, and romanticism; Bannerman’s poetry exists at an often unsettling intersection of these genres. The daughter of a street ballad singer, Bannerman had previously achieved some success with her first volume of poetry in the spring of 1800. Encouraged by Robert Anderson, editor of the *Edinburgh Magazine*, and the antiquarian Thomas Park, she published *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* anonymously in 1802; this volume, however, was widely scorned by critics, many of whom found her poetry to be unnecessarily obscure and lacking in narrative form.⁽¹⁾ My paper will explore these accusations in the context of “The Dark Ladie”—an obscure poem, to be sure, and one that frustrates traditional narrativity. I hope, however, to reevaluate these critical terms, for (as I see it) Bannerman’s fragmented text quite purposefully explores and interrogates the highly fraught concepts of narrative and readability.

<3>“The Dark Ladie,” the poem that opens the *Tales*, was originally published in the *Edinburgh Magazine* in 1800 as an explicit response to a poem by Coleridge printed in that journal earlier that year. Coleridge’s “Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie,” which was later published (in a revised form) as “Love,” narrates a balladeer’s attempt to woo his sweetheart, Genevieve. “O come and hear what cruel wrongs / Befel the Dark Ladie,” he offers, insisting intriguingly that Genevieve “loves [him] best, whene’er [he] sing[s] / The songs that make her grieve” (19-20). However, the grievous song that the “Introduction” proceeds to recount is not, in fact, the tale of the Dark Ladie but rather a tale of a woman’s cruelty to her lover, a “bold and lovely knight.” At the culmination of the tale-within-a-tale, as the dying knight is being nursed by his repentant lady, the narrator leaves off abruptly:

When on the yellow forest-leaves
A dying man he lay; —
His dying words—but when I reached
That tenderest strain of all the ditty,
My faltering voice and pausing harp
Disturbed her soul with pity!
All the impulses of soul and sense
Had thrilled my guileless Genevieve (63-70)

The denouement of the tale itself, then, is incomplete—unnecessary, in fact, once the narrative has reached its goal of eliciting sympathy from its in-text audience, the “guileless” Genevieve. And Coleridge’s readers, too, are brought abruptly from the narration of the innermost fiction to its contextual narrative, and left to substitute for the tragic conclusion of the song the happy culmination of the balladeer’s suit.

<4>This is, however, an unsettling substitution: it lays bare the manipulative power of the balladeer. Are we meant, like the guileless Genevieve, to be “thrilled” by the love story, or are we interpolated as a more savvy audience, one that remains distanced from a sympathetic response beyond giving a knowing wink of approval at the balladeer’s successful conquest? By providing a specific narrative context for an unresolved and fragmented tale, Coleridge seems to be questioning the nature and effect of narrative revelation: from where do we, as a poetic audience, derive satisfaction? For the quivering, highly sympathetic Genevieve, a yet unfinished tale affects “all the impulses of soul and sense”; for the readers of “Love,” the simplified version of the poem that removes all promise of the Dark Ladie’s tale from the text, the winning of Genevieve provides narrative closure. But in the original “Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie”—a poem that is, itself, a unfinished fragment—readers are once again frustrated, as the text both begins and ends with the unfulfilled promise of “a sister tale / Of Man’s perfidious cruelty; / Come, then, and hear what cruel wrong / Befel the Dark Ladie” (104-7). The repetition of this phrase, which frames the text, suggests that the balladeer has another narrative drive, distinct from any that are satisfactorily resolved in the poem itself: the unfinished tale of the Dark Ladie is what the balladeer must compulsively return to, a movement away from closure that ultimately thwarts even the narrator’s attempts to derive satisfaction from resolution. The prescribed effects of narration that the poem depicts—the physical sympathy elicited from Genevieve—are obscured in a system of increasingly unresolved and unpredictable interactions between poet and audience.

<5>Coleridge’s unfulfilled promise provides an entry point for my discussion of Bannerman. His poem was deliberately referenced by Bannerman when her own poem was printed in the

Edinburgh Magazine in March of 1800: she included a note that referred the reader to Coleridge’s poem. Bannerman’s “The Dark Ladie” provides for Coleridge that “sister tale of man’s perfidious cruelty,” and yet it does much more than simply tie up some narrative loose ends in Coleridge’s poem; in fact, this text is even more unsettling than Coleridge’s, as it explores more deeply the problems of readability and communicative interaction both within and without the text. In Bannerman’s poem, despite its seemingly straightforward narrative opening, the mysterious Dark Ladie remains nearly as unknowable as she is in Coleridge’s fragment. The poem opens in a banquet hall, where knights have gathered upon their return from the Crusades; Sir Guyon, the host, seems deeply anxious, and “often to the banner’d door / His straining eyes, unbidden, turn’d; / Above, around, they glanced wild, / But ever there returned” (13-16). We soon learn what Guyon watches for: a “Ladie, clad in ghastly white, and veiled to the feet,” enters the hall, and her presence has a profound effect on the onlookers. The knights are frozen, both figuratively and literally:

But, from the Ladie in the veil,
Their eyes they could not long withdraw,
And when they tried to speak, that glare
Still kept them mute with awe! (39-42)

With the entrance of the Ladie, speech as a form of communication is arrested; Bannerman insists that the Ladie, too, does not utter a word: “She spoke not when she enter’d there; / She spoke not when the feast was done” (27-28). When the Ladie addresses the knights, however, it becomes clear that it is not merely the lack of words that is notable here, but the lack of *voice*:

And to the' alarmed guests she turn'd,
No breath was heard, no voice, no sound,
And in a tone, so deadly deep,
She pledg'd them all around,
That in their hearts, and thro' their limbs,
No pulses could be found. (51-56)

The Ladie's unearthly "tone" has a deeply physical effect on the bodies of her listeners: their hearts, limbs, and pulses are "pledg'd" to immobility. Thus, the Ladie imposes an alignment between the state of her communication (deadly) and the state of her audience (seemingly dead).

<6>The knights, when finally roused from their senseless (and pulseless) stupor, find that their minds, as well as their bodies, have been immobilized in response to the Ladie:

For, often as they turn'd to rest,
And sleep prest down each heavy eye,
Before them, in her black veil wrapt,
They saw the Dark Ladie.

And then the voice, the tone, that stopt
Thro' all their limbs, the rushing blood;
The cup which she had fill'd with wine,
The steps on which she stood. (65-72)

Unable to rest, the knights are fixated on their encounter, and this fixation is portrayed as sensory imprinting. One old man's encounter, we are told, has left his sense organs scarred—both his auditory organ ("For still, on his alarmed ear, / That rousing echo rung!" [135-36]) and his visual

organ ("It glar'd for ever on his sight, / That fixed eye, so wildly keen!" [137-38]). It is not merely the *memory* of the Ladie that remains with the knights; similarly, it is not merely the knights' minds that are affected, but their bodies. The Ladie's gaze and the Ladie's tone have printed themselves upon the bodies of the knights, thus enforcing not only a physical correspondence but a virtual replication of her presence. The Ladie's unearthly presence, then, precludes any interactive communication; she thwarts dialogue, rendering her audience mute, and through her forcible self-reproduction she remains, sensorily, with the knights at all times.

<7>In the discourse surrounding sympathy and sensibility contemporary with Bannerman's poem, this, of course, is a tense image. For eighteenth-century associationist philosophers, this kind of forcible replication threatens the nature of communication itself; the function of sympathy goes awry. Addison, in an essay printed in the *Spectator* on July 3, 1712, presents an intriguing (and highly anxious) assessment of the dangers inherent in any ability to communicate—to influence the imagination of another person:

We have already seen the influence that one man has over the fancy of another, and with what ease he conveys into it a variety of imagery: How great a power then may we suppose lodged in him who knows all the ways of affecting the imagination; who can infuse what ideas he pleases, and fill those ideas with terror and delight to what degree he thinks fit? He can excite images in the mind without the help of words, and make scenes rise up before us and seem present to the eye without the assistance of bodies or exterior objects. (289)

Anxious about the obverse of humankind's celebrated universal sympathy—the ability to manipulate, perhaps, that we observed in Coleridge's balladeer—Addison worries that this manipulation might interfere in an established Object→Idea and Idea→Object relationship. And yet the Dark Ladie's imposed affect presents an even more troubling problem for Enlightenment thinkers: although she communicates forcefully and elicits bodily sympathy, she seems to do so without association or context. Her sensory presence is permanently "called up" not only in the mind (as Addison fears) but in the bodily organs of her audience; she expresses, and her expressions affect. And yet these affective expressions carry with them no identifiable emotions, no hints of meaning or causality. What do her expressions mean? Why does she express them? As if in a post-Lockean nightmare, there is no association being called up, no referent—there is merely a bodily response, a freezing, an imprinting. The Dark Ladie's communication is a one-way affective process: veiled and obscure, she replicates herself on her audience, while her audience has no means of identifying with her

<8>Adela Pinch suggests that, contrary to our traditional understanding of selfhood in the Romantic period, emotions can be read as transpersonal, moving between and inhabiting selves rather than being produced solely by them. David Hume, in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, implies this motility of emotion:

The minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations, nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible. As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature. When I see the effects of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the passion, as is presently converted into the passion itself. (576)

This, it seems, is exactly what is thwarted in “The Dark Ladie”—the ability to “pass from effects to causes,” to read and properly respond to (i.e. sympathetically mimic) the emotion. Instead, the knights respond to (and replicate) the *expression* of emotion. The Ladie’s presence “begets corresponding movements” in her listeners, to be sure—it even imprints itself on their bodies—but it does so without the transitional step Hume illustrates: the cause of her emotion itself, along with the cause of her uncanny presence, remains unknown—and, as we shall see, unknowable. All that remains, then, is form and expression. In the Dark Ladie’s singularly affective communication, effect enforces similar effect, while any cause—including the medium of transmission—is absent.

<9>Throughout the poem, Bannerman repeatedly presents the reader with signs and surfaces, symptoms and expressions, rather than emotional or mental states. The poem opens with a lengthy depiction of Sir Guyon’s agitation; Bannerman’s description lingers on each physical symptom of his disturbance without delving into the emotion that causes it. Similarly, when Bannerman finally provides a modicum of insight into the Ladie’s tragic history—she was abducted from her family by the crusading Sir Guyon—we are not allowed any kind of access to her psychology but are instead compelled to witness her agony from the outside, cataloguing not only her actions but her physical symptoms:

“And how her sinking heart recoil'd,
And how her throbbing bosom beat,
And how sensation almost left
Her cold convulsed feet:

“And how she clasp'd her little son,
Before she tore herself away;
And how she turn'd again to bless
The cradle where he lay.” (145-152)

The audience is distanced even further from the Ladie’s emotional state by the fact that (as the quotation marks indicate) this narrative consists of hearsay, thrice-removed—a story recounted to a man who recounts it to a man who recounts it to the knights. As the poem nears its conclusion, Bannerman forces her audience farther and farther away from any sense of intimate knowledge, finally excluding us from knowledge whatsoever: “But where Sir Guyon took her then, / Ah! none could ever hear or know” (153-54).

<10>This brings me, then, to the contemporary critical response to Bannerman’s poetry. The reviews are remarkably (and amusingly) consistent, and worth cataloguing: they repeatedly insist upon one particular flaw—“obscurity”—and fault Bannerman for her inconsiderate treatment of her readers. One of Bannerman’s more vicious critics was Anna Seward, who, in two separate letters to Bannerman’s friend and mentor Thomas Park, roundly abuses him for his support of her. On September 25, 1800, Seward writes:

Surely that obscurity, which Burke pronounces a source of the sublime, it totally different in its nature to the strained and abortive conceptions of Miss Bannerman’s pen! The obscurity he means, is where sentiment is rather hinted than expressed; and, to an intelligent mind, conveys a different meaning to that which the words bear. Certainly an author is not obliged to find his reader brains; but that obscurity

which puzzles a reader, who has poetic sensibility and taste, to guess what an author means, is a great inexpiable fault. (324-25)

For Seward, “good” obscurity hints at sentiment and conveys some kind of meaning beyond words; “bad” obscurity damages the relationship of text to reader. The reader’s intelligence should be counted on, Seward insists, but not deliberately frustrated. What Seward objects to is the seeming meaninglessness—or, at least, the difficulty in securing meaning—that occurs in Bannerman’s poetry, which she lambastes as “blown and empty conceptions” that are “elaborate, yet incomprehensible” (325). In a letter dated January 5, 1801, Seward quotes September’s *Historical Magazine*: “The lines are sounding; —one would almost think, at first sight, that it is *meaning* which meets the ear, but in vain shall you pause and strive to catch it” (336). Bannerman’s “strained and abortive conceptions,” Seward insists, fail to bring forth complete meanings with which the reader can interact. Both the text’s production of and the reader’s response to traditional meaning-making are thwarted.

<11>Seward was not the only critic that found Bannerman’s poetics frustrating; neither was she the only one to complain, as she did in the January 5 letter, that Bannerman’s verses were “confused, *incongruous*, and abortive” (my emphasis, 339). Incongruity, along with obscurity, bothered Bannerman’s critics. Take, for example, the *Critical Review*:

The author has heard that obscurity is one source of the sublime, and has therefore veiled his [sic] sublimity in impenetrable darkness. He has perceived how rapidly good poets connect their narratives, and this also he has imitated, but, with great originality, has contrived to leap over, not the dull parts, but what would in ordinary hands have formed some of the main action. (110-11)

Assuming Bannerman’s anonymous volume to have been authored by a man,⁽²⁾ the reviewer maintains that failure to “connect narratives” results in an “impenetrable” meaninglessness. Similarly, the critic for the *Poetical Register* writes:

The language is frequently in a high degree poetical, and the incidents well imagined. One fault, however, runs through nearly the whole of the volume. It is obscurity. The author solicitous, as it would appear, to produce a striking effect, has often left so much to be imagined by the reader that he is turned aside from the general beauty of the poem to discover the connexion or the meaning of particular parts. (431-32)

For these critics, the imagination of the reader should be invoked, but should not be forced to establish the connection, meaning, or context of images in the poem. When this happens, the reader’s general “poetic sensibility and taste,” as Seward puts it, cannot function; reading becomes a cryptic search for meaning rather than an established association of ideas.

<12>And here we come to the crux of my argument: that what appears, to critics, as faults in Bannerman’s poetics are in fact deliberate and intrinsic to the project of her poetry. This “turning aside” from the beauty of the language in order to search for meaning and connection is what we see depicted in “The Dark Ladie” as well as enacted on her readers. As we have observed, the nature of the Ladie’s expression is such that it renders her audience mute and forces itself on their senses; at the same time, it fails to insist on (or even allow for) meaning and causality. Expression alone is replicated, and even the narrator of the poem—like the knights, unable to gain access to the Ladie’s interiority—is conscripted into this repetition. The first few stanzas of the poem ring with repeated words and phrases that link stanza to stanza: “to his castle, on the sea, / *He welcom’d them again. / He welcom’d them with soldier glee*” (3-5). The second and third stanza repeat the description of Guyon’s expression: “But none, on Guyon’s *clouded face*, / Had ever seen a smile! / And, as the hour of eve drew on, / That *clouded face* more dark became” (7-10). And the fourth stanza contains an internal repetition, rhyming “turn’d” with “return’d” (14, 16). This compulsive repetition, which creates a linguistic continuity throughout the opening of the poem, dissipates with the entrance of the lady, and her mysterious expressions become the enforced repetition that drives the rest of the text. The narrator is not released from this repetitive drive, however; the remainder of the poem can do no more than struggle for meaning by recounting twice-told tales about the Ladie’s past. Like the knights, the narrator is subject to the compulsive desire to find meaning(s) behind the powerful obscurity of the Ladie’s expressions.

<13>This search to locate the Ladie in some kind of context—some recognizable narrative structure—does not, however, allow for satisfactory meaning-making. Sir Huart interrogates an old man long haunted by his encounter with the Ladie, who expresses minor relief at finally receiving some kind of contextualizing narrative: "He told me that, *at last*, he heard / Some story, how this poor Ladie / Had left, alas! her husband's home / With this dread knight to flee" (141-44, my emphasis); yet this story simply becomes interpolated into a system of unresolvable narratives that are scripted into repetition. Similarly, when Huart first learns the history of the Ladie, this, too, becomes imprinted on his ear:

"But O! that Ladie! Huart cries,...
That Ladie, with the long black veil,
This morn I heard!...I hear it still,
The lamentable tale!" (97-100)

Huart, like the narrator, is driven to repeat the tale, despite its inconclusive conclusions. The poem culminates (if one can use that word here) in a series of unanswerable questions—unanswerable both within and without the text:

"But where Sir Guyon took her then,
Ah! none could ever hear or know,
Or, why, beneath that long black veil,
Her wild eyes sparkle so.

"Or whence those deep unearthly tones,
That human bosom never own'd;
Or why, it cannot be remov'd,
That folded veil that sweeps the ground?" (153-160)

What the knights—and the readers—can, ultimately, "never hear nor know" is the series of causes for which we—like the knights—have compulsively searched, ever since encountering the mysterious Ladie: the meaning of, or the context that would impart meaning to, her unsettling presence.

<14>Bannerman's poetry, then, both depicts and enacts a fragmented reading experience—a noncontextualized, unreadable expression *and* the effects of that unreadability. It's important to remember that Bannerman is interested in depicting the physical effects of frustrated reading, as well as the mental—the effects that lead to a fruitless quest for narrative context as a way to resolve the unreadable expression. In her text, bodily expressions stand in for emotions, and bodily expressions are what is affected; the original, the context, is obscured entirely. Unlike the case of Burke's famous Mr. Spon, who recounts the tale of Campanella, a physiognomist capable of making "very accurate observations on human faces" and "very expert in mimicking such," Bannerman's expressions deny purposeful imitation. For Campanella (and even for Burke), expressions are ultimately so readable that they provide access to the original emotion that caused it:

When he had a mind to penetrate into the inclinations of those he had to deal with, he composed his face, his gesture, and his whole body, as nearly as he could into the exact similitude of the person he intended to examine; and then carefully observed what turn of mind he seemed to acquire by this change. So that, says my author, he was able to enter into the dispositions and thoughts of people, as effectually as if he had been changed into the very men. (120)

In Bannerman's poetry, however, expression is a one-way interaction, one that operates on its audience without revealing anything about its source; it remains intact, obscure, impenetrable. Like the experience of reading a printed text, we can observe the index of emotion but not the original emotion that caused it—and, Bannerman seems to insist, this is all we can know. Bannerman's unreadability challenges traditional notions of sympathy, suggesting that in interactions between subjects—speaker and audience, text and reader—expression can affect (and replicate) without providing prescribed meanings. Thus, poetry imprints itself on the minds and bodies of its readers without allowing the reader to inhabit the text.

Endnotes

(1)For information on Bannerman's life, see: Adriana Craciun, "Romantic Spinstrelsy: Anne Bannerman and the Sexual Politics of the Ballad," in *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, ed. by Leith Davis, Ian Duncan, and Janet Sorensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 204-24; Andrew Elfenbein, "Lesbianism and Romantic Genius: The Poetry of Anne Bannerman," in *ELH* 63.4 (1996), 929-57.(△)

(2)See Elfenbein for a discussion of gender in contemporary criticism of Bannerman.(△)

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