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Chapter title: Private Thoughts and Public Display: Gender, Genre and Lives.

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Studies in genre and gender in literature of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often associate masculinity with public lives while femininity is linked to the domestic world of marriage and families. According to those generalisations, men can, and often do, behave badly. Women are encouraged to exercise propriety or face ruined lives. These are stereotypes, of course, and a more complexly interesting society has always existed. When thoughts are published they cross the boundaries between private and public lives, so what calls for enquiry is how intimacy and display interact and the way they are explored in the literature itself. By comparing two of Scotland's most well-known male writers — Walter Scott and Lord Byron — with three women who, while popular in their own lifetimes, more or less disappeared from public view for a century and a half — Susan Ferrier, Mary Brunton and Elizabeth Grant — this chapter explores what gender and genre can tell us about Scottish life writing in the Romantic period. I extend the term 'life writing' here to include narratives of the lives of communities as well as those of individuals. Some of the works discussed were not published during their authors' lifetimes, which raises further questions about what happens when private materials enter the public domain.

Celebrity authors arrived with a certain amount of drama in the early nineteenth century. Walter Scott's and Lord Byron's latest works would sell out overnight or soon afterwards,

leaving their publishers rushing to produce new print runs and editions¹. Interest in the authors accompanied their literary fame, and in Byron's case was exacerbated by often outrageous behaviour that accompanied the more serious, socially concerned side of the man. By the time his satirical mock-epic *Don Juan* was published between 1819 and 1824, Byron was being read as almost indistinguishable from the kind of darkly seductive, troubled character that appeared in his own poems: the Byronic hero was a literary type, but also a seductive Anglo-Scotsman living as an émigré in Europe. However, during the years in which Scott and Byron were writing their way to becoming literary giants, a more expansive circle of writers of which they formed only part added to a vibrantly diverse Scottish context. Ferrier and Brunton wrote successful novels that ran to multiple print runs, along with memoirs and travelogues (Ferrier's *Self-Control* was translated into French by 1825), while Grant published one of the most informative and imaginative memoirs of early-nineteenth century life in the Scottish Highlands. Comparing works by these authors should help towards a reassessment of the boundaries associated with gender and genre in Scottish Romanticism.

That Scott is known for his poetry and historical novels while Byron essentially for poetry only is a commonplace, but both men also engaged in prolific correspondence and kept multiple journals. Scott recorded in his *Journal* of the years 1825 to 1832 that, 'The Big Bow-wow strain I can do myself like any now going, but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and sentiment is denied to me.'² The comparison is with Jane Austen's style, but he could as easily here be measuring himself against Ferrier, Brunton and Grant (although *Memoirs of a Highland Lady*

¹ For print runs and sales in Romantic publishing, see William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

² Walter Scott, *The Journal of Walter Scott*, ed. and intro. W. E. K. Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 132. Entry dd. 14 March 1826.

was not published until after his death). Indeed a few days later he added that, ‘thoughts and sentiments’ are ‘much better’ done by ‘the women,’ citing the examples of Maria Edgeworth, Ferrier and Austen. These often quoted remarks differentiate between the display-oriented style and subject matter of writing produced by men and the thought-based narratives of women. Yet Scott’s *Journal*, like his extensive correspondence from the years 1787 to 1832 and other life writing, is an archive of more personal thoughts and sentiments, alongside reflections on public life.

The year 1826 was one of the most significant of Scott’s life. January brought the public humiliation that came with insolvency, then in May his wife of thirty years, Charlotte, died after a sudden illness. These catastrophic life events show a publicly visible life from which Scott could find no refuge, and two of his most emotionally vulnerable private moments. Throughout January 1826, the journal records a growing momentum with which the author realised that the nationwide economic crisis of 1825, his business interests with James and John Ballantyne’s publishing company, and personal spending on his Abbotsford home and estate had left him no alternative but to make formal arrangements for insolvency with his creditors. The prose in which he writes about these events implies a detached position of self-control, as if Scott were his own lawyer: ‘If I am hard pressed and measures used against me I must use all measures of legal defence and subscribe myself bankrupt . . . It is the course I would have advised a client to take.’³ Two days later, his concern is that insomnia might cause him the embarrassment of missing public engagements. By contrast, his entries on the death of Lady Scott show a grieving husband and family man, a side of Scott that is usually lost from sight behind his authorial literary success and financial ruin. Charlotte Scott died on 15 May 1826, ‘at nine in the morning after being very ill for two days — easy at last.’ Walter Scott’s first concern is for their daughter Anne, whose exhaustion he notes. The account of his own grief says much about his wish to separate intensely private thoughts and public display:

³ Ibid., pp. 80-1.

I sometimes feel as firm as the Bass Rock[,] sometimes as weak as the wave that breaks on it . . . Lonely—aged—deprived of my family all but poor Anne . . . I am deprived of the sharer of my thoughts and counsels who could always talk down my sense of the calamitous apprehensions which break the heart that must bear them alone . . . But I will not blaze cambric and crape in the publick eye like a disconsolate widower, that most affected of all characters.’⁴

Anne’s letters record Scott’s pain at not being with his wife at her death because he had been ‘obliged to leave her to attend his duties in Edinburgh.’⁵ In June, he notes a personal moment in which his son Charles found him weeping due to mixed embarrassment at facing Edinburgh’s lawmen and grief for the loss of his ‘poor Charlotte,’ whose death he still found hard to accept. Other entries addressing aspects of life in Scotland more generally show the extent to which he remained a respected public figure despite his worsening health. Reflections on reading, word pictures of the growth of Edinburgh as a city, notes on his visit to Paris in 1826 and, finally, the account of the journey that he made with Anne to Italy in 1831 and 1832, shortly before his death, make this a portrait of a man who spent a lifetime thinking and writing about Scotland’s past and present, but who was also intensely interested in Europe (he had been one of the first British visitors to the site of the Battle of Waterloo in August 1815). In a last act of authorial curiosity and tribute, the journey to Italy included a visit to the late Lord Byron’s home on the Grand Canal in Venice, Palazzo Mocenigo.

Unlike Scott, who lived in Edinburgh and the Borders for his entire life, Byron spent his short life moving from one place to another until his death aged 36 in Greece in April 1824. Born in London in January 1788, his Scottishness lies in his maternal family, the Gordons of Gight, his early childhood in Aberdeen, and a lifelong claim that Scotland was his cultural home. Where

⁴ Ibid., pp. 166-7.

⁵ Ibid., p. 166.

life writing is concerned, his correspondence and journals will always be haunted by absence: the poet's final memoir was famously burned in the drawing room at John Murray's 50, Albermarle Street home in London on 17 May 1824. That record of intensely private thoughts would, if made public, almost certainly have caused embarrassment to friends, family and associates of the poet. The secrecy of the many people, including several women, who were entrusted to read its contents is extraordinary.⁶ Nevertheless, the substantial body of correspondence and journals that survives constitutes a collective, epistolary work of literature in its own right. With a style that Richard Lansdowne has aptly described as 'freshness and racy vigour,' Byron dramatised his own life at least as much as the exploits of the heroes in his poetry. Whereas his poems interlace expertise in established metric forms with mischievous variation, his personal writing accelerates Romantic feeling and imagination towards modernism's stream-of-consciousness mode.⁷ Among his several periods of diarising, the Ravenna journal that covers just over a month from early January to late February 1821 is one of the highest points in Byron's writing about himself. Since the present chapter is about Scottish literature, I will focus on a single extract from the Ravenna journal that shows Walter Scott's importance to Byron's thoughts and habits as well as

⁶ For a list of readers of Byron's memoir see Doris Langley Moore, *The Late Lord Byron: Posthumous Dramas*, (London: John Murray, 1961), pp. 46 -7.

⁷ Richard Lansdowne, ed. *Byron's Letters and Journals: a New Selection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. xi.

p. xi. For Byron and poetic form, see particularly Susan Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), pp. 133-63 and Matthew Bevis, 'Byron's Feet', *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of The Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Jason Hall (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2011), pp. 78-104.

demonstrating a seamless private and public style.⁸ The entry for 15 January 1821 brings together a vivacious articulacy, dramatic punctuation that constantly features in the letters and journals, evidence of the poet's business relationship with his publisher John Murray, and his habit of reading, then rereading, his favourite author :

Rose late—dull and drooping—the weather dripping and dense. Snow on the ground, and scirocco above in the sky . . . Roads up to the horse's belly, so that riding (at least for pleasure) is not very feasible . . . Added a postscript to my letter to Murray. Read the conclusion, for the fiftieth time (I have read all W. Scott's novels at least fifty times) of the third series of "Tales of my Landlord"—grand work—Scotch Fielding, as well as great English poet—wonderful man! I long to get drunk with him.⁹

Three days before, Byron had declared Scott's novels to be 'a new literature in themselves.'¹⁰ The ease with which he slips between private thoughts and public display in his epistolary writing suggests an arbitrary quality to those boundaries. That he almost certainly intended his burned final journal to be published (ample evidence suggests that to be the case) is an irony that he might himself have appreciated if the literary self-portrait that he left us is authentic.

For Susan Ferrier, reading Byron's poetry had much the same effect on her as it did on so many women, so that she wrote in her *Memoir* in 1816, 'Did you ever read anything so exquisite

⁸ For explorations of Scott and Byron's interconnectedness see Susan Oliver, *Scott, Byron and the Poetics of Cultural Encounter* and 'Crossing "Dark Barriers": Intertextuality and dialogue between Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott,' *Studies in Romanticism*, 47:1 (2008), 15-34.

⁹ Lord Byron, *Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 11 vols. (London: John Murray, 1973-1981), viii, p. 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 23.

than the new Canto of Childe Harold. It is enough to make a woman fly into the arms of a *tiger*.’¹¹ Ferrier was a friend of Scott’s and a writer whom, he wrote in his journal, he admired for being ‘gifted . . . full of humour, and exceedingly ready at repartee . . . without the least affectation of the blue stocking.’¹² Best known for her novels *Marriage* (1818), *The Inheritance* (1824), and *Destiny: or, the Chief’s Daughter* (1831), her lively narrative style and plots warn women how emotional impetuosity is usually followed by years of regret. Writing firstly to entertain her family and friends, and only later publishing anonymously, she shunned the celebrity associated with being a known authoress, writing in her memoir that she ‘could not bear the *fuss* of authorism.’¹³

Ferrier has been called the Scottish Jane Austen on account of her marriage-based plots. However, her prose style is quite different from Austen’s. Her narrative confidentiality and gossipy humour is earthy and direct, so that it does not fit the description of an ‘exquisite touch’ that Scott ascribed to Austen.¹⁴ Ferrier is also very much a Scottish author. The description of Highland life in *Marriage* is not just the high point of that novel, but a *tour de force* that complements the comedies of manners of Austen and Scott’s brilliance in building communities of colourful characters. Three comically depicted Highland spinsters in *Marriage* are gradually revealed to be less ridiculous and to have altogether more integrity than the spiteful London society wives with whom the main character yearns to associate. The landscape, castles and houses that appear gloomy to the main character, who has come to them from London after

¹¹ Susan Edmonstone Ferrier, *Memoir and Correspondence of Susan Ferrier, 1782-1854*, ed. J. A. Doyle (London: John Murray, 1898), p. 131.

¹² Scott, *Journal*, p. 734.

¹³ Ferrier, *Memoir and Correspondence*, p. 178.

¹⁴ Scott, *Journal*, p. 132.

marrying a Scot, seem so because distanced from the whirl of city life; Ferrier infuses them with conviviality, deconstructing stereotypes that Scottish rural life is remote and limited.

Ferrier's most innovative moments show her to be intensely sensitive to matters that impacted women's lives, including childlessness, poverty, and respect for the nonhuman world. The insensitivity shown by *Marriage*'s main character, the recently married Lady Juliana Douglas, toward her Highland host and sister-in-law is a case in point. Mary Douglas, who lives on the Scottish estate to which Juliana's husband has been financially obliged to take her, is introduced knitting stockings for local children whose mothers can't afford to buy such garments: she explains that she is herself childless. Later, it is revealed that her only child was stillborn. Juliana's monstrous insensitivity peaks when, rejecting her own twin babies, she exclaims 'I am sure you are very happy in not having children . . . I hope to goodness I shall never have any more.'¹⁵ Mary responds with the silence of private thoughts.

Another episode describes Mary Douglas's small garden and collection of houseplants. Heliotrope, moss roses and exotic Cape Jessamine (gardenia) show this Highland woman to be far from out of touch with the wider world and to have a taste based on respect for living things. She rebukes Juliana for picking the flowers, saying they are intended only for 'the gratification of two senses — seeing and smelling.'¹⁶ Mary's botanical interests reflect a fashion that was stimulated by global exploration along with a boom in botanical publications and collecting. Ferrier would have known Edinburgh's Botanical Garden and Scott's ambitious planting at Abbotsford. Another moment in *Marriage* acknowledges Scotland's growing, modernising herring fishing industry, with a remarkable vignette of 'a fleet of herring-boats, the drapery of

¹⁵ Ferrier, *Marriage, a Novel* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1818), p. 242. Ferrier's name as author was first included in Richard Bentley's *Standard Novels* edition, 1841.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.192.

whose black suspended nets contrasted with picturesque effect the white sails of the larger vessels.’¹⁷

Unlike Susan Ferrier, Mary Brunton never visited or met Scott.¹⁸ Raised in Orkney as a committed Presbyterian and married to a Church of Scotland minister with whom she eloped by boat, she is known for what Lisa Wood has described as ‘Evangelical romance’ fiction.¹⁹ She, too, is often compared with Austen despite writing in a very different style. In a chain of references passing through women’s life writing, Mary Loveday recollects Byron’s amusement at what he called the ‘cant’ of Brunton’s more serious moments during a reading aloud of *Self-Control* at a country house near Manchester.²⁰ Meanwhile, Scott mentioned in a letter to Lady Abercorn that Brunton had written *Self-Control*, shortly after that novel was published, adding that she was married to an Edinburgh clergyman and was well known in the city. Her authorship quickly became even less of a secret than his own.²¹ Brunton’s first two fictional works—*Self-Control* (1811), *Discipline* (1814) are supplemented in 1818 by her husband’s memoir of her life

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 189.

¹⁸ See Caroline McCracken-Flesher, ‘Where We Never Were: Woman at Walter Scott’s Abbotsford,’ *Walter Scott at 250: Looking Forward*, ed. Caroline McCracken-Flesher and Matthew Wickman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), pp. 142-60 and ‘Six Degrees from Walter Scott: Separation, Connection and the Abbotsford Visitor Books,’ *The Yearbook of English Studies*, ‘Walter Scott: New interpretations,’ 47 (2017), 19-35 (p. 28).

¹⁹ Lisa Wood, *Modes of Discipline: Women, Conservatism, and the Novel, and the Novel after the French Revolution* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2003), p. 28.

²⁰ Sarah Loveday, cited in Fiona McCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 144.

²¹ Walter Scott, *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson, 12 vols. (London: Constable, 1932-37), iii, p. 3. Letter dd. September 1811.

along with extracts from her correspondence and travel journals, included in his publication of her unfinished *Emmeline*, after her death aged 39 following the stillbirth of their only child.

Brunton's tales feature independent young heroines whose struggle with temptation threatens to ruin their lives. All explore the contradictions that might lead to a Christian young woman's understanding of morality to conflict with her experience of romantic and sexual desires. But depicting these characters sympathetically, her style, as H. D. Jackson has said, is 'spirited and exciting.'²² In *Self-Control*, an early passionate scene develops into an attempted rape, after which 'no words can express' the feelings of the heroine. Laura realises with 'horror, dismay and anguish' that she has been in love with a man who has social standing but cannot exercise the virtue of the novel's title. The violence of Hargrave's assault is as vividly portrayed as Laura's inability to articulate her experience. It is easy to see how a sensualist such as Byron would have thrilled to the more experiential episodes of *Self-Control* while abjuring the inevitable moralising reflection.

Brunton's reputation as Scottish writer was assured by *Discipline*'s lengthy section on Highland manners and customs. Ironically, this was nearly dropped from the manuscript when *Waverley* was published shortly before *Discipline* went to press. Brunton was concerned that Scott's Highland scenes surpassed her own. Her perspective, however, adds a sympathetic woman's view of everyday, domestic Highland life that complements the more masculine style of Scott's adventure plots.

Where non-fiction is concerned, Brunton's travel journals reverse the commonplace of tour narratives by male authors to Scotland, offering instead a Scottish woman's reflection on how the rest of the UK seemed strangely foreign to her in its appearance, manners and social structures. Her vignette of an outing to hear Handel's *Messiah* in Covent Garden describes with

²² H. D. Jackson, *Those Who Write for Immortality: Romantic Reputations and the Dream of Lasting Fame* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 85.

amusement how her party took tickets in the pit to be close to the stage, only to find themselves among drunken sailors and their female companions. The dramas on and off stage constitute very different forms of display that compete for the author's attention. Among the letters that Alexander Brunton included with *Emmeline*, Mary's confession to her friend Mrs Craigie reveals how public her life had become: 'Since Self-Control was fixed upon me, my circle of acquaintances has widened so unmercifully, that my time, in Edinburgh, is very little at my command . . . I have gained associates among persons eminent for talents . . . while I have lost only the power of sitting at times dozing by my own fire-side, or of wandering out unnoticed among the crowd.'²³ Notably, Brunton here thinks of the public world as exerting power over her, while she had lost the empowerment of choosing for herself to remain in the home.

Elizabeth Grant, like Byron, wrote about Scotland while an émigré in Europe. Her *Memoirs of a Highland Lady*, published by her niece in 1898 in the decade after her death, is recognised as one of the best first-hand accounts of life on a remotely located Highland estate. Written decades retrospectively, after her family's financial ruin led to their leaving their home in the Cairngorms, *Memoirs* covers the years 1797-1827.

Grant's childhood was spent between Edinburgh, where her lawyer father bought one of the first three houses to be completed in Charlotte Square, London, Hertfordshire and the Cairngorms. She makes clear that her best memories are of the Highlands, stressing that her family members regarded the Cairngorms as their place of homecoming, returning there after careers around the world: 'All who survived returned to end their days where they began them, for no change of circumstance can change the heart of a Highlander'.²⁴ From start to finish she

²³ Mary Brunton, *Emmeline, with Some Other Pieces*, ed. Caroline Franklin (London: Routledge Thoemmes, 1992), p. lxxii.

²⁴ Elizabeth Grant, *Memoirs of a Highland Lady, 1797-1827*, ED. Angela Davidson (London: John Murray, 1950), p. 2.

refers to the Rothiemurchus estate as her family's 'Duchus', a Gaelic word meaning 'domain' that links the home to everything in the environment around it: '[it was] the spot on Earth dearest to every one of us . . . No other spot ever replaced it, no other scenery ever surpassed it.'²⁵

Grant's narrative is particularly interesting for its traversal of the boundaries between the male-dominated world of land management and women's epistolary observation. She identifies forestry as a developing industry in Scotland, explaining that her family had not recognised the value of the timber that surrounded them: 'black cattle were its staple products; its real wealth, its timber, was unthought of [although] beginning to be marketable; three or four thousand a year could easily have been cut out of that extensive forest for ever, and hardly have been missed.'²⁶ Where cities are concerned, her vivid image depicts Edinburgh's New Town in the process of construction:

The width of the streets, the size of the houses, the brightness and cleanliness . . . It was then very far from being what it became a few years later, how very very far from what we see now! The New Town was but in progress, the untidy appendages of buildings encumbered the half finished streets, and where afterwards the innumerable gardens spread in every quarter to embellish the city of palaces, there were then only unsightly greens abandoned to the washer women.²⁷

Of the writers discussed in this chapter only Elizabeth Grant makes a cultural distinction between the Highlands and Lowlands explicitly based on the inseparability of theology, folklore and geology. Scott achieved this in multiple indirect ways, writing into literature an environmental history that changed the way Scotland was understood. But theology was for him

²⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

a means to an end in storytelling that is more fully alive because of folklore.²⁸ Ferrier and Brunton capture Scottish interests in botany and forestry alongside religious and moral didacticism. Byron made numerous references to Scotland's Highland environment, mostly in the elegiac mode of someone who was always in exile. But Grant's claim about faith, literature and place is boldly unequivocal: 'Our mountains were full of fairy legends, old clan tales, foreboding, prophecies, and other superstitions, quite as much believed in as the bible. The Shorter Catechism and the fairy stories were mixed up to form the innermost faith of the Highlander, a much gayer and less metaphysical character than his Saxon-trained countryman.'²⁹ This passage assigns a masculine gender to culture. That is noteworthy, coming from a woman who challenged so many other attempts to limit the thoughts and behaviour of wives, mothers, daughters and sisters.

The aim of this chapter has been to explore boundaries between gender and genre, along with privacy and public display in Scottish life writing in ways that ask whether such distinctions are more often than not based on arbitrary assumptions. As so many studies have shown, assumptions about gender and forms of writing exist. By extending 'life writing' to include representations of individual lives and cultural Scottishness, including in fiction, I hope to have drawn attention to how diverse and forward thinking, as well as historically aware, Scottish Romantic period literature was. More attention is being given to women authors, and the ways in they were different from their male, English, or other contemporaries. Studies of Scott and Byron are showing how those authors are relevant to the concerns of twenty-first century audiences. Taking that work ahead into a dialogue that explores gender in more than binary ways is a next step to better understanding the contentious thresholds in which private thoughts meet public display.

²⁸ See Oliver, *Walter Scott and the Greening of Scotland: Emergent Ecologies of a Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Studies in Romanticism, 2021).

²⁹ Grant, *Memoirs*, p. 143.