THE ETERNAL RETURN OF THE GOTHIC:

ANNE BANNERMAN'S "PROPHETESS OF THE ORACLE OF SEÄM"

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ABSTRACT

THE ETERNAL RETURN OF THE GOTHIC:
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Anne Bannerman's "The Prophetess of the Oracle of Seäm" has not been studied as thoroughly as her most well-known poem, "The Dark Ladie." Indeed, none of the critical work on Bannerman to this point has focused exclusively on "Prophetess," the second poem in Bannerman's critically-maligned *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry*. This paper offers a standalone study of Bannerman's "Prophetess," analyzing the poem as an exemplar of Deleuzian eternal return. More specifically, it focuses on the manner in which "Prophetess" enacts two key Deleuzian ideas, repetition and fundamental encounter, thereby opening up the possibility of a uniquely Gothic epistemology that problematizes the Enlightenment insistence on clarity and revelation.

A mysterious veiled prophetess with a taste for shipwrecked priests, a wicked subterranean bloodrite, a revenant soul dispatched to fetch a new victim – that, in summary, is Anne Bannerman's "Prophetess of the Oracle of Seäm" (hereafter "Prophetess"). With a nested narrative structure that has been variously described as "a complex and deliberately disorienting series of narrative frames, or more precisely cycles, to undermine the possibility of narrativity itself" (Craciun *Femmes* 172) and a "descent into a narrative maelstrom" (Ruppert 790), Bannerman's "Prophetess" relates the tale of three priests who will all, presumably, experience identical sinister fates. The bulk of "Prophetess" recounts the ordeal of Father Paul. A monk of Einsidlin, Father Paul embarks on a doomed sea voyage, survives (or does not) a shipwreck but finds himself captive to a veiled prophetess, and is forced to participate in a mysterious oracular bloodrite. He then returns inexplicably to Einsidlin forty years later to frighten (and potentially conscript) a fellow priest on the eve of the feast of Pentecost. Within the narrative of Father Paul is enfolded the narrative of another monk, "a brother of St. Thomas' tower," who completed a journey presumably identical to that of Father Paul some thirty years prior to the point at which the poem opens. "Prophetess" enacts repetition in a narrative structure that features a potentially infinite series of priests and sailors continually replaying a potentially endless cycle of prophetic encounter, death, and return. There are specific moments of encounter within the poem, however, that enable the disruption of this cycle. In these moments the priests and sailors must choose between clinging to the world as they have known it or becoming open to new ways of knowing the world. In Bannerman's "Prophetess" the incomprehensible experience of repetition thus opens up the possibility of new epistemologies for its human characters.

Writing at the intersections of Romanticism, the Gothic, and the eighteenth-century ballad revival, Bannerman has only recently become a subject of academic interest as a handful

of scholars have begun to examine her work in terms of the destabilizing potential of her Gothic ballads, the visionary character of her poetry, and her marginalized status as both a woman and a Scottish national. Since her work was rediscovered in the 1990s, Bannerman's poetry has been methodologically situated in terms of feminism or proto-feminism, post-structuralism, and British visionary poetics. The work of Adriana Craciun, Ashley Miller, Katie Garner, Karen McConnell, and Matthew Heilman casts Bannerman as a proto-feminist whose poetry presents a challenge to Romantic-era gender constraints and expectations, while Kate Lister dispenses with the "proto" altogether and argues that Bannerman wrote to further "her own feminist agenda" (1). Diane Long Hoeveler considers the poet's "specifically gendered" brand of nationalism (97), while McConnell and Craciun attribute Bannerman's commercial failure to both her gender and her working-class status. Following Terry Castle's "apparitional lesbianism," Andrew Elfenbein reads Bannerman as a lesbian writer, thus attempting to situate her work within a queer studies framework. Aishah Sulaimann Alshatti takes a disability studies approach to Bannerman's work, arguing that the poet utilizes a Gothic poetics centering on deformed bodies to communicate her own experience of ill health. Daniel P. Watkins and Timothy Ruppert align Bannerman with a long tradition of British visionary poetics, while Garner and McConnell consider her work in terms of Romantic antiquarianism and medievalism. Both Craciun, who reads in Bannerman a "critique of Western metaphysics, specifically Romanticism," (*Femmes* 173), and Miller, who addresses issues of affect and readability in Bannerman's "The Dark Ladie," exemplify a post-structuralist approach to Bannerman's poetry. The relative lack of consensus on Bannerman's work indicates that her poetry, which is richly suited to a variety of methodological possibilities, offers the potential for expanding the canon of the ballad revival.

Since it is Ashley Miller's project that is most similar in focus to my own, I will briefly discuss the ways in which her work on affect in Bannerman's "The Dark Ladie" is relevant to my analysis of Bannerman's "The Prophetess of the Oracle of Seäm." In "Obscurity and Affect in Anne Bannerman's 'The Dark Ladie'" Miller considers Bannerman's "The Dark Ladie" as both a depiction of the "unreadable" and an examination of the body's response to the unknowable (1). In her post-structuralist reading, Miller argues that what many contemporary critics most objected to in Bannerman's poem, namely its obscurity, was in fact a deliberate poetic strategy calculated to convey the impossibility of ever fully attaining meaning. Miller's essay examines the role of the veiled female revenant of Bannerman's poem, suggesting that she is wholly other and thus only readable through affect – more specifically, it is only the other characters' visceral reactions to the dark ladie within the poem that give the reader any indication of her being. "The Dark Ladie" thus offers a study in somatic affectivity that is indicative of what Miller identifies as Bannerman's broader epistemological project: "Bannerman's obscure poetics asks epistemological questions about sense perception, about bodily affect, and about readability itself" (Miller 1). In this essay, I am likewise interested in examining the epistemological significance of Bannerman's poetry, particularly the manner in which "Prophetess" calls into question an Enlightenment epistemology that is grounded in clarity. Like "The Dark Ladie," Bannerman's "Prophetess" has been criticized for its narrative obscurity. Rather than viewing this as a fault in the poem, however, I suggest that this obscurity plays a crucial role in the poem's presentation of alternative epistemological possibilities. More specifically, Bannerman's "Prophetess" depicts the possibility of a uniquely Gothic epistemology that is grounded in immanence and immediate bodily experience. This is apparent within the poem in the immediate sensory and visceral language that Bannerman utilizes in the

encounters between the titular prophetess and the series of priests and shipwrecked sailors that populate the narrative. Beyond this, however, "Prophetess" depicts a form of Gothic repetition that functions as a type of non-human agency, thereby opening up the possibility of processive transformation for the poem's constituent sailors and priests. I will examine Bannerman's "Prophetess" as an enactment of Deleuzian eternal return, giving specific emphasis to what Deleuze designates as a "fundamental *encounter*" (Deleuze *DR* 139). Such an encounter is characterized by affect, immediacy, and the utter non-representability of "the object of encounter" (Deleuze *DR* 139). A figure that is at once a fixture of Gothic horror and conduit for the emergence of the unprecedented through repetition, Bannerman's prophetess functions within the poem as just such an object, encountering the poem's human characters in a manner that is visceral in its immediacy and impossible to convey from within the confines of an existing representational schema, instead enabling processive transformation and the emergence of the unprecedented.

Biography and Contemporary Critical Reception

Born during the latter half of the eighteenth-century, likely in Edinburgh, the details of Bannerman's life are as obscure as her poetry. The January 1830 issue of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* records the poet's death at Portobello on September 29, 1829,[1] but the date of her of birth is uncertain.[2] A marginal member of the Edinburgh literary circle that included Sir

[1] In what is possibly a reference to William Erskine, a Scottish orientalist and member of the Edinburgh literary circle to which Bannerman belonged (Heilman xvi, n. 5, xxiii, n. 14), Lister observes that Bannerman "was interred at St. Johns in a friend, Erskine's, family tomb" (3).

[2] Citing a "parish registry entry for Anne Bannerman, 31 October 1765, Edinburgh" (*Femmes* 272 n. 2), Craciun creates a sketch of the poet's early life. Daughter to Isobel Dick and William Bannerman, a running stationer "authorized to sell and sing broadside ballads" (Craciun *Femmes* 157), this Anne Bannerman would likely have received early and frequent exposure to the popular ballad tradition that provides the source material for much of Bannerman's poetry. However, Heilman argues that Craciun's parish registry find is for a different Anne Bannerman, since placing Bannerman's birth in 1765 does not account for descriptions that present her as a precocious young poet when her Poems was published in 1800. Following Effenbein and Miller, he places the poet's birthdate closer to 1780 (Heilman xvii-xviii). Lister, too, argues for the later date, suggesting that the William

Walter Scott, John Leyden, and Thomas Campbell, Bannerman published just three volumes of poetry during her career, *Poems* (1800), *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* (1802), and *Poems, A New Edition* (1807). While *Poems* garnered minor critical praise, *Tales* was met with outright hostility, and it seems that *Poems: A New Edition* came too late to salvage Bannerman's thwarted poetic career. Following the deaths of both her mother and brother in 1803 Bannerman, now entirely without financial support, agreed to take work as a governess for Lady Beresford of Exeter.[3] This same Lady Beresford urged a mutual friend to burn Bannerman's letters following the poet's death in 1829 (Craciun *Femmes* 158-59); thus what few biographical details remain are in the form of references scattered throughout letters written by Bannerman's friends and acquaintances. The letters of *Edinburgh Magazine* editor Robert Anderson are particularly valuable, as he seems to have taken an interest in both Bannerman's work and her personal well-being. Anderson worries over the poet's livelihood as well as her "at all times uncertain" health (140). Scottish writer Anne MacVicar Grant remarks that "with all this external decay, her shattered frame is illuminated by a mind bright with genius" (43). In a less flattering reference the Reverend Syndey Smith refers to Bannerman as "'that crooked poetess'" and notes her "'ugliness and deformity'" (quoted in Heilman xxv). Leyden laments the poet's "'extreme irritability'" on the occasion of his departure for India (quoted in Craciun *Femmes* 279 n. 71), while Anderson complains that her "lofty and unaccommodating" mind makes it "exceedingly difficult, at all times, to do her any reasonable service" (170). In a letter following the poet's death, Grant fondly recalls Bannerman's "unbending, often unwelcome sincerity" (148). These

Bannerman and Isobel Dick of Craciun's parish registry could not be parents to "the highly literate Anne Bannerman," as both signed their marriage entry with a cross thus suggesting illiteracy (2-3).

[3] According to Bannerman's friend and mentor Robert Anderson, Bannerman now found herself in "total want of relations" (140). The poet's mother had been her principal means of financial support, and her death meant that Bannerman must now find an alternate source of income.

infrequent but telling epistolary references present Bannerman as a woman who was highly intelligent and (perhaps tactlessly) forthright, possibly not always easy to get along with, and whose life was plagued by illness as well as poverty.

Anderson worried that Bannerman's poetry was more likely "to acquire fame than profit" (140), but in the end it gained neither. This is at least partly due to her development of a Gothic aesthetic that was not fully appreciated by many of her contemporaries. While the reviews for *Poems* (1800) were positive,[4] critical reception of her second published volume, *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* (1802), was unfavorable. Bannerman's *Tales* was criticized for its "obscurity" (*The Poetical Register* 432) and perceived imitations. *The Critical Review* suggested that Bannerman's *Tales* did little more than imitate "Mr. Scott's and Dr. Leyden's ballads, and the poems of Mr. Wordsworth" (110). *The New Annual Register* considered the volume to be "more smoke than fire, more imitation than original genius" (318), while *The Annual Review* found the "imagery...essentially monstrous" and the author "capable...of higher productions" (720-21). The volume did receive some praise, though even this was condescending. *The British Critic* suggested that its audience would be limited to "those who love to shudder o'er the midnight fire" (79), and *The Monthly Mirror* predicted that it would "prove interesting, and afford no mean portion of amusement," to readers "who take delight" in tales of horror and wonder (102). Even Scott, an early admirer of Bannerman, remarked that the *Tales* "were perhaps too mystical and too abrupt; yet if it be the purpose of this kind of ballad poetry powerfully to excite the imagination, without pretending to satisfy it, few persons have succeeded better than this gifted lady, whose volume is peculiarly fit to be read in a lonely house

[4] *The New London Review* found in Bannerman's Poems "the breathings of ardent Genius, and...the approaches of the real muse" (408), while *The Critical Review* received the volume "with almost unmixed appropriation" (435). *The Monthly Magazine* praised Bannerman's "vigour, harmony, and taste" (610), and *The British Critic* gave the volume its "highest commendations for vigour, elegance, and harmony" (139).

by a decaying lamp" (559). Bannerman's *Tales* was thus viewed as a Gothic mood piece, good for a late-night "shudder" but unworthy of serious consideration as literature.[5] Yet Bannerman's very originality lies in the innovative configurations she makes of the stock Gothic devices contemporary critics faulted her for using.

A Note on Methodology: Gothic Repetition as Eternal Return

Eternal return is a useful concept for considering the repetition evident in the Gothic, and Bannerman's Gothic poetry provides a particularly well-adapted territory from which to survey this concept. Contemporary reviewers dismissed the Gothic ballads of Bannerman's *Tales* as "imitation," specifically an imitation of male poets working from within the same generic tradition at the time.[6] Yet the Gothic ballad is by its very nature an imitation: it imitates the imagined literature of an imagined past, and it imitates itself through the repetition of its own motifs and conventions. In this sense, then, Bannerman's Gothic ballads do constitute a form of repetition, a repetition of the generic conventions that make Gothic balladry a recognizable literary form. Repetition is at play in Bannerman's work in another sense as well, in the narrative cycles that seemingly entrap many of the characters within her Gothic poetry. "Prophetess," for example, utilizes a narrative structure in which a potentially endlessly-repeating series of priests and sailors find themselves stuck in a potentially endlessly-repeating cycle, as if the very same story is being told again and again *ad infinitum* and there is no escape, and yet the narrative also suggests the possibility of transformation from within the cycle. The repetition enacted within these series functions as the catalyst that enables the processive transformation of the human characters within Bannerman's *Tales*. Of course, this cyclic format is itself a repetition of Gothic

[5] A similar sentiment appears to be at work with some critics even today. Watkins, for example, observes that "Bannerman is well aware of the prophetic possibilities of poetry, *even gothic poetry*" (21, emphasis mine).
[6] For an excellent discussion of the class and gender politics at work in such claims, see Adriana Craciun's "Romantic Spinstrelsy: Anne Bannerman and the Sexual Politics of the Ballad."

convention, the "Gothic loop" (Juaranovsky 2). Thus, Bannerman's "Prophetess" can be read as a study in repetition that is itself situated within a genre that propagates itself through repetition. If there were no more to it than that, however, the Gothic would have played itself out a long time ago. Instead, it has continued to grow and develop as a genre. This is due to the generative potential inherent in Gothic repetition, the potential that something new will emerge from the series.[7] In other words, the creative reassembly of generic motifs and conventions gives rise to new productions. Repetition produces what Deleuze calls difference-in-itself – the unprecedented – and therein lies the generative potential of the series.

The Deleuzian notion of difference in repetition provides a useful conceptual starting point from which to approach Bannerman's "Prophetess," not only the ways in which difference is carried through series within the poem, but also the manner in which the poem itself disrupts literary convention with its differential repetition of stock Gothic devices. Considering "Prophetess" in terms of Deleuze's highly-nuanced treatment of Nietzschean eternal return thus allows for an interpretation of the poem that makes manifest its generative potential, rather than the seemingly circular narrative trap in which the poem's characters appear to be mired, and points to its status as original work rather than imitation. James Williams defines Deleuzian eternal return as "the work of difference through simulacra in systems of series" (130). In one sense, Bannerman's "Prophetess" functions as a simulacrum, "not…a simple imitation but rather the act by which the very idea of a model or privileged position is challenged and overturned" (Deleuze *DR* 69). The poem disrupts the conventions of the series to which it belongs (the tradition of Gothic balladry), thereby enabling the production of the new within the series.[8]

[7]In "Convention, Repetition and Abjection: The Way of the Gothic," Agnieszka Łowczanin characterizes the novelty in repetition of Gothic conventions and motifs in terms of Deleuze's discussion of theft and gift.
[8] For a concise introduction to the Gothic ballad tradition see Douglass H. Thomson's "The Gothic Ballad." *A New Companion to the Gothic*. Edited by David Punter. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, pp. 77-90. For an excellent introduction

Bannerman's "Prophetess" enacts Deleuzian eternal return, not in its seemingly cyclic repetition, but instead by demonstrating the ways in which the cycle can be broken and the unprecedented permitted to emerge. Deleuze's eternal return is "a constantly decentered, continually tortuous circle which revolves only around the unequal" *(DR* 55). The repetition specific to eternal return is thus not a smoothly circular type of repetition in which identical elements recur ad infinitum in a harmoniously predictable pattern, but rather an irruptive motion toward the new. What returns in repetition is difference, not a difference between series or between elements within a series but rather "difference in itself" (Delueze *DR* 94), that is, a differential repetition that carries within itself the generative force of creative evolution. Koan-like, Deleuze teases this difference as "*the return of that which returns*" (*DR* 300). In Bannerman's "Prophetess," it is the fundamental encounter with the veiled prophetess of the oracle that specifically enables this return, which is not a return of the known or a repetition of the cycle but instead a point of departure in which the "hero" is effaced, the cycle broken, and the new permitted to emerge. In the following analysis I explore the ways in which Bannerman's distinctly Gothic engagement with the supernatural enacts a series of fundamental encounters within the poem, each carrying the potential to generate new and unexpected ways of knowing the world.

"'And he told them of the Prophetess / And the Oracle below!'"

Emphasizing the cyclic form of the poem, Craciun attempts to erase all difference from the narrative, collapsing the three priests – or rather, "All priests (and faithful readers)" – into a single epistemological unit engaged in an identical and endlessly futile pursuit of poetico-spiritual truth (*Femmes* 175). Timothy Ruppert, by contrast, seeks to funnel Bannerman's

to the 18th-century British ballad revival see Tim Fulford's "Fallen Ladies and Cruel Mothers: Ballad Singers and Ballad Heroines in the Eighteenth-Century." *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 47, no. 2/3, 2006, 309-329.

multilayered narrative into a single "linear storyline" which he locates in the final encounter between Father Paul and the third priest of Einsidlin, identifying this moment – without further elaboration – as the poem's "single verifiable scene" (790). The poem can be read either way, of course, as a narrative cycle in which countless, and for all intents and purposes identical, priests and sailors are cursed to repeat an infinitely-recurring pattern, or as a linear account of the adventures of the plucky Father Paul. I offer a reading of "Prophetess" that acknowledges Bannerman's use of a destabilizing narrative structure that is seemingly cyclic while also considering the fundamental importance of each specific encounter to the events of the poem.

Bannerman's "Prophetess" presents multiple sites of encounter in which the seemingly interchangeable series of sailors and priests are confronted with a non-representable supernatural force that they are unable to process according to an existing epistemological framework. Each of these encounters within the poem provides the means by which customary ways of knowing are disturbed, resulting in an epistemological dislocation that precipitates a crisis of knowing. Bannerman's poem enacts these epistemological crises. I will consider three crucial sites of fundamental encounter within the poem in which characters' existing epistemological frames are shattered, thus resulting in an effacement of self and a dissolution of the world as they have heretofore experienced it. In the first encounter the sailors, faced with a supernatural threat that they are unable to conceptualize, can no longer orient themselves in a world that has grown unfamiliar. In the second, Father Paul's meeting with the prophetess of the oracle presents a visceral enactment of fundamental encounter that strips the priest of the epistemological advantage that has preserved him to this point in the poem. In the third, Father Paul's meeting with the unnamed priest of Einsidlin fractures the latter's ordered ecclesiastical outlook,

suggesting that he will be the next in line for the sort of epistemological transformation that Father Paul has undergone in his fundamental encounter with the prophetess.

"Prophetess" traffics in a number of stock gothic devices: gloomy settings, supernatural beings, corrupted priests, all brought together within a "labyrinthine" (Craciun *Femmes* 157) narrative structure that seems deliberately designed to frustrate meaning. In one sense the piece reads like an extended exercise in Burkean obscurity, seeming to "work its effect without any clear idea; often without any idea at all of the thing which has originally given rise to it" (Burke 176).[9] Eschewing poetic revelation, Bannerman's "Prophetess" operates instead by affect. Like the veiled female revenant of Bannerman's "The Dark Ladie," the titular prophetess of the oracle at Seäm is never clearly described but instead presented almost entirely in terms of her effects on the doomed priests and sailors who inhabit the poem. She enters the poem as an assault on the senses, "a sound is heard, that stoppeth not, / Like the shrieks of a soul in woe!" (7-8). She is perceived only as a series of auditory expressions – a "sound" (19), a "sob" (20), a "shriek" (24) – yet her effect is such that the normal markers by which the sailors might orient themselves no longer hold. The sailors do not know what to make of the keening voice that has silenced the waves and consequently they are spatially and temporally dislocated. Though they never see her or interact with her directly, the prophetess' effects are such that two of the integral categories by which the sailors typically order their lives – space and time – are no longer valid. At this moment, they no longer *know* the world they inhabit.

In the poem's opening stanza Bannerman coopts a typically Gothic description of dark, stormy seas ceaselessly tossing against a rocky island to introduce the prophetess as a force that

[9] Anna Seward, one of Bannerman's harshest critics, was unwilling to read Bannerman's obscurity as Burkean: "Surely that obscurity, which Burke pronounces a source of the sublime, is totally different in its nature to the strained and abortive conceptions of Miss Bannerman's pen!" (2).

is beyond both nature and understanding. It is the prophetess who opens up the possibility of the unknown even as she fixes the poem's series of priests and sailors within a narrative cycle of Gothic doom and shipwrecked despair. She is thus the catalyst for repetition within the poem. The natural tumult of the stanza is presented, on the one hand, as something that ought to be simply because it has been from time immemorial: "And none can tell the date or time / Since they were tossed so!" (3-4). Yet the uncertain origin and indeterminate time here present the first suggestion of the temporal confusion and disorientation that the prophetess triggers throughout the poem. The presence of the still-unseen prophetess upends the natural order, causing stormy seas to subside as the winds go "dumb" (9) and "the tossing waters still" (10) when she approaches. She is not the storm, but its antithesis, transgressing the natural order. The sailors' encounter with the prophetess effectively disrupts their accustomed relationship to the world they inhabit. In the presence of the unearthly sound "that stoppeth not" the wind and waves no longer behave as the sailors expect: "the waters sleep below" (6), "the winds were dumb, / And the tossing waters still" (9-10). A tossing sea is potential danger that the sailors can accept because it fits within their notion of the sea's inherent dangers. However, the unearthly calm that now prevails signals a danger that the men are not epistemologically equipped to handle. They do not rise to the potentiality inherent in an unknown future but instead accept in mute despair the fate that the cycle has seemingly allotted them. In their encounter with the prophetess, the sailors have entered a "theatre where nothing is fixed, a labyrinth without a thread" (Deleuze *DR* 56). The prophetess has fundamentally altered the "theater" of the sea as they know it, and they no longer have access to the guiding threads of space, time, or a natural world that behaves as they expect it to. Rather than fashion a new epistemological orientation from the wreckage of the old, however, the sailors simply sink. "The eternal return eliminates precisely all those instances

which strangle difference and prevent its transport by subjecting it to the quadruple yoke of representation" (Deleuze DR 300). The sailors, with their seeming need to fix the non-representable within a familiar epistemological model, remain bound in Deleuze's "quadruple yoke of representation" and they are soon eliminated from the text.

Just as the poem's first stanza introduces temporal confusion by reference to an uncertain date/time, by the fourth stanza place has become an equally indeterminate marker. This spatial dislocation is evident as the sailors attempt to orient themselves in terms of a guiding light that is now buried in darkness:

> They had mounted fast the high topmast,
> To watch for the beacon's light
> On the right, on the left, they can trace it not
> Thro' the darkness of the night! (13-16)

The danger presented in this stanza is the darkness that overcomes "the beacon's light," a light that is overwhelmed in the surrounding stanzas by the repetition of words suggestive of night and darkness: "Twas on that night" (9), "a ship was 'nighted" (11), "Thro' the darkness of the night" (16). The image of "the beacon's light" is thus buried within the poem by surrounding words indicative of darkness and night. The sailors vainly attempt to orient themselves in terms of this guiding but now absent beacon: "On the right, on the left, they can trace it not." The light that might serve to shed some meaning on the situation is thus obscured, just as the words indicating darkness gather in around "the beacon's light" on the page thereby foreclosing any possibility of enlightenment for the sailors (or the reader, as the motion of sailors searching vainly to the right and the left for a glimmer of now-absent light can perhaps be likened to that of a reader scanning the page, unable to make sense of the narrative). The narrative is thus enacted upon the page

itself, the poem performing the extinguishment of the light, and of understanding, even as it describes this event. The sailors' spatial unmooring is evidenced by their inability to locate the guiding beacon light, and this in turn indicates a shift away from an Enlightenment epistemology that traffics in clarity and privileges seeing as knowing.

The moment of the sailors' dis-englightenment thus marks a turning point within the poem. When the specific spatial and temporal determinations by which the sailors would normally position themselves within the world as autonomous subjects within an Enlightenment epistemological framework are no longer valid, they look to Father Paul, who is both their priest and metaphysician, to render the situation intelligible. As a priest, he is an agent of both ecclesiastical authority and metaphysical knowledge and the poem suggests that he occupies a privileged epistemological position vis-à-vis the terrified sailors:

> Was never a soul within that ship
> Could tell where they were driven at all
> But a Monk of the choir of Einsidlin
> The holy Father Paul!
>
> Full well he knew the death that hung
> O'er every soul that breathed there (25-30)

Bannerman thus contrasts Father Paul's superior knowledge with the sailors' ignorance. "Full well he knew" (29) what the sailors "never...Could tell" (25-26) The priest's position of epistemological advantage is reinforced in the next role that he assumes within the poem, that of narrator. He relates what is probably not the most comforting story to share with the terrified sailors at this moment, a tale of the mysterious prophetess who is somehow responsible for their

present dire predicament. His role as keeper of the tale not only reinforces his position as the poem's authoritative voice, but also serves to align him with the prophetess. Father Paul does not simply tell the sailors a story. By the logic of Gothic repetition, he forecasts their seemingly inevitable doom. It is the prophetess who drives repetition within the poem, but it is Father Paul who acts as transmitter, giving substance to the prophetess through his tale and conjuring a doomed fate that the sailors prove unable to escape. To this point in the poem the sailors have experienced the prophetess only as a disembodied voice. Father Paul's story, however, provides a narrative framework in which to situate this voice. In a sense, the sailors' encounter with the prophetess is not completed until they hear Father Paul's story, which not only relates the fate of their shipwrecked predecessors but in speaking it makes it their own. The unquestioning sailors accept this fate, receiving the priest's second-hand tale "in dumb despair" (83). Through Father Paul's story the sailors have gained a new way of positioning themselves within the world, but this new outlook is fatalistic: "And they look'd for nothing now to come, / But that they all must die!..." (87-88). While the encounter with the disembodied voice of the prophetess serves to disorient and frighten the sailors, it is not until they accept Father Paul's narrative authority that their fate is sealed. In this sense, then, the sailors enact a failed repetition, one that replicates but does not innovate. Within the poem the sailors enact a "cyclic repetition in which it is supposed that…at the end of a process of dissolution, everything recommences" (Deleuze *DR* 93). They are not permitted to creatively reassemble the elements of the story, as Father Paul will do, and return in a different guise.

As he relates the tale of the prophetess of the oracle, Father Paul buttresses his narrative with the story of his predecessor, "A father of St. Thomas tower" (46) who undertook a similar journey more than thirty years prior. This story within a story functions, in one sense, to forecast

Father Paul's future, again according to the logic of Gothic repetition. However, this moment also introduces the notion of doubt into the poem. Father Paul's predecessor is named for St. Thomas, in Catholicism the apostle most famous for refusing to believe others' accounts of a resurrected Christ until he had empirically investigated the latter's crucifixion wounds. The inclusion of St. Thomas thus suggests doubt in the absence of empirical evidence and serves to align this priest with an Enlightenment epistemology in which seeing precedes belief. Just as the doomed sailors' erstwhile epistemological orientation relied on the natural world to provide signs to guide their behavior, this priest whose very name is imbued with doubt, and who the poem tells us "never had bow'd before the cross / Till he touch'd his dying hour" (47-48), seems to have subscribed to a similar evidence-based epistemology. Father Paul, however, comes to embody an alternative epistemology. As an earthly agent of transcendent authority who looks beyond the intelligible world for meaning, his epistemological outlook is ostensibly grounded in faith and the spiritual authority of the church. In once sense, the act of relating a fellow priest's story as a true narrative and an indicator of future behavior suggests faith in the authorial tradition of the church. In another sense, however, Father Paul's position in the poem as both participant within and transmitter of the tale suggests an emergent epistemological orientation that acknowledges the potential for opening up the narrative and making something new from its constituent parts.

In his seeming complicity with the prophetess of the oracle, Father Paul can also be read as an exemplar of the fallen or wicked priest motif. Thus, Bannerman's "Prophetess" does not resist the Gothic tendency to demonize Catholicism. The poem establishes multiple associations between priest and prophetess throughout, and this Gothic doubling raises questions of the priest's spiritual legitimacy. The moment in which Father Paul "beckon'd" (31) the sailors to

kneel and “rais’d his hands in prayer” (32) is repeated in his experience with the prophetess at the oracle: “One hand she stretch’d” (149), “And she beckon’d him” (151). The prophetess watches over a flame oracle, and Father Paul seems to have a mysterious effect on the flames in the church when he returns from his time at the oracle: “That aged Monk had left the aisle / And the dying tapers sink and fall” (205-206). These lines also suggest that Father Paul’s departure from the isle of Seäm has affected the oracle, or perhaps he has departed in order to recruit his replacement. Aisle is homonymous with isle, thus suggesting a connection between the church and the location of the oracle and further reinforcing Father Paul’s association with the prophetess. Father Paul “bless’d the blood that ran” (141) in a line that is triply suggestive of Father Paul’s survival, the Catholic ritual of the Eucharist, and the blood sacrifice of the oracle. This reinforces the sense in which Father Paul’s unique position within the narrative allows for the emergence of the new. Here, the separate elements of a human’s lifeblood, a forbidden pagan ritual, and a sanctioned religious rite are entwined in a manner that gives fresh life to each constituent part.

In the fundamental encounter between priest and prophetess, Bannerman’s poem utilizes the visceral immediacy of the Gothic to erode Father Paul’s position of transcendent epistemological privilege. This opens up the possibility of a Gothic epistemology that is grounded in immanence and immediate bodily experience. The language in this section of the poem, which opens with one of the poem’s few uses of the present tense, describes embodied experience: “His hoary hair is wet with dew, / He sits” (89-90). The section includes multiple bodily descriptions: “He bow’d him down” (93); “He heard the loud winds blow” (101); “he smote his breast” (114); “he could feel it throb and swell” (110); “He rais’d himself upon his arm” (123). The frequent references to “heart” and “blood” throughout this section also reinforce

the suggestion of bodily experience while also problematizing the notion of embodiment within the poem. The poem's description of Father Paul's time in the oracle's cave is presented in immediate language that is indicative of lived experience, but the prophetess, herself the driving force of this experience, is indicated only in terms of the effects she has upon the priest's body. Her own bodily experience is not directly addressed, though the poem makes clear that she possesses both a voice with the power to render men mute and a beckoning hand that the priest must obey.

To this point in the poem Father Paul has had the advantage of a knowledge that enables him to tell a tale with the authority of one who is here acting as a receptacle for the known. Father Paul's epistemological advantage is thwarted in his encounter with the priestess, and his position of authority dissolves in the face of the unknown. He is confronted with the unprecedented, which he is unable to describe using the concepts available to him, and he is silenced in the encounter, just as the sailors and the waves and wind were rendered "dumb" in the earlier stanzas. This is indicated in Bannerman's frequent use of ellipses in this section. These ellipses also suggest the indescribability of the experience. The prophetess is unrepresentable. "When a voice came near, that roused him,... / 'Twas the Oracle that spoke!" (127-128). He is wakened by a voice, and his excited state is evident in the punctuation at the end of line 128, but whatever it is that occurs in the interim is indescribable. The poem suggests that Father Paul will see the prophetess unveiled, but the description is thwarted at the moment of revelation:

> He knew not yet the sight to come,
> Before his heart could rest on this,
> When he thought his eyes, unmov'd, could look

Upon the Prophetess! (161-164)

Where the reader might expect to be given a description of the prophetess, the poem instead returns to Father Paul's recollection of the doubting priest's story:

Like a dream it flitted o'er his brain,
That miserable hour!
When the father died, in agony,
In the cell of St. Thomas' tower;

For he had said the veil was drawn
That hid the sacrifice within;
That his eyes had seen the Prophetess
At that uncover'd shrine (165-172)

An early reviewer of the poem expressed frustration at Bannerman's lack of revelation at this point in the narrative: "Father Paul remembers the man whom he had seen die in such agony; and he felt that recollection more terrible than the terrors of the cave. What, then, did father Paul do? – here the author skips and goes on" (*The Critical Review* 111). However, this moment depicts Father Paul's fundamental encounter with the unrepresentable force of the prophetess and thus it cannot be rendered in words.

"Prophetess" returns to a description of Father Paul in a less-immediate third-person narration following his encounter with the prophetess, thus signifying denouement and perhaps indicating that Father Paul, having passed the ordeal of the fundamental encounter, now occupies a different role within the poem. In the third section of the poem he is no longer the privileged keeper of the tale, or the focus of the narrative, but has instead become a conduit through which

the tale is repeated. Heilman suggests that Father Paul "has been infected by a persistent and contagious supernatural influence" (cxxxvii) which is then transmitted to the next priest he encounters. Following this line of reasoning I suggest that Father Paul's role in the wake of his encounter with the prophetess can be characterized in terms of a uniquely Deleuzian variety of contagion. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari include contagion in a list that also contains "modes of expansion, propagation, occupation" (*ATP* 239) and it is in this capacity that what was once Father Paul returns, thus ensuring that the refashioned tale is transmitted. When, following Father Paul's return from the isle, the third priest of Einsidlin remarks "'Twas the holy Father Paul!" (192) he is mistaken. Father Paul himself is riven in the encounter with the prophetess, swept up and aside in a process of becoming. He does not return as heir to the previous priest whose tale he has told and creatively reenacted, nor does he return to bequeath the tale to the third, unnamed priest of Einsidlin. In fact, *he* does not return at all. The discrete subject entity that embarked on a journey with the now-shipwrecked sailors is not the same creature who returns to the church on the eve of Pentecost. At this point within the poem the former priest seems somewhat vampiric, appearing at night and shying away from the candlelight. This is in keeping with the notion of contagion that I wish to establish as the means by which the poem ensures repetition: "The vampire does not filiate, it infects" (ATP 241-42). Vampire or not, what was once Father Paul is now a transformed entity who is but one part of the narrative assemblage that enables the poem to evolve according to difference in repetition. A second part of this assemblage is the third priest of Einsidlin, the one to whom Father Paul's tale is presumably transmitted and who will perhaps (but possibly not) embark on a journey much like Father Paul's. While it is Father Paul's fundamental encounter with the figure of the prophetess that most explicitly opens up the possibility of the new within the poem, the

encounters between the priests themselves provide the means by which the story-as-contagion is transmitted.

Bannerman's "Prophetess" presents multiple sites of fundamental encounter that allow the emergent potential of difference-in-itself to manifest or be thwarted within a narrative cycle that itself enacts the potentiality of Gothic repetition. In her capacity as "object of encounter" Bannerman's titular prophetess is the catalyst for difference-in-repetition within the poem. She affects in a manner that is grounded in the visceral immediacy of bodily experience, and yet her own being or embodiment is impossible to gauge according to the existing representational schema available to the sailors and priests who encounter her, thus suggesting the potential for an epistemology based in immanence and embodied experience. Moreover, the poem exemplifies the potential for difference-in-repetition to manifest within a genre that is often denied literary merit for its perennial recourse to ostensibly hackneyed narrative devices. Dismissed by contemporary critics for its obscurity and perceived imitations, the poem's novel use of the generic conventions of the Gothic makes it an important site of fundamental encounter for present-day readers and literary scholars interested in Gothic repetition as well as the potential of the Gothic mode to problematize Enlightenment epistemologies that insist on clarity and revelation.

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