'Mony Kings, Mony Queens' and its Possible Link with Seasonal Custom

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Andrew Crawfurd's manuscript collection of *Auld Ballats* includes the following curious piece of verse from Thomas Macqueen who derived it from his mother, Elizabeth Copland, who had it from her mother[1]:

1 Monie kings, monie queins in the land hae bein,
The dochter and the son of Killiehanghain

2 I gade to the wode and I hard a killing
I met a black dog Caus Mas and black maddy

3 He bate aff my finger he left me nae mair
A bannock of Gapgair

4 Yoke the pleuch and draw the win

5 Take hills aw snaw the muntanes ill to draw
But little Cuttie she was the foremest of thame aw

6 And whan she came to Patrick's yett
She laid her lugs down by her bare back

7 Up starts the hird wi his black bitch
Plays hirdie girdie wi the witch

8 He took her hame and shure her smaw
And put her in the pat baith gut and gaw

9 Syne little Maggie she lap out upon the halie thorn
And blest the hour that she was born

10 She gat a wee boy baith hose and shune
To tell the deed that she had dune.

I know of nothing closely comparable and the nearest parallel I am able to point to is a piece from the Isle of Man, each line of which is preceded by *Hop! ta'n oie* (Clague 1911:26–9). I give the core of it here in Manx and in the English translation and have divided the lines into lettered groups for ease of reference.

a	*Kellagh as kiark.*	Cock and hen.
	Shibbyr y gounee.	Supper of the heifer.
	Cre'n gauin gow mayd?	What heifer shall we take?
	Yn gauin beg breck.	The little spotted heifer.
	Kerroo ayns y phot.	Quarter in the pot.
b	*Vlayst mee yn vroit.*	I tasted the broth.
	Scold mee my scoarnagh.	I scalded my throat.
	Roie mee gys y chibbyr.	I ran to the well.
	Diu mee my haie.	I drank my fill.
c	*Eisht cheet ny yeï.*	Then coming back.
	Veeit mee poul kayt.	I met a pole-cat.
	Ren eh scryssey.	He grinned.
	Ren mee roic.	I ran.
d	*Roie mee gys Nalbin.*	I ran to Scotland.
	Cre naight ayns shen?	What news there?
	Yn cheeaght va traaue.	The plough was ploughing.
	Ny cleain va cleiee.	The harrows were harrowing.
e	*Va ben aeg giarey caashey.*	A young woman was cutting cheese.
	Yn skynn va geyre.	The knife was sharp.
	Yiare ee e mair.	She cut her finger.
	Lhap ee 'sy clooid.	She wrapped it in a cloth.
f	*Ghlass ee eh 'sy choir.*	She locked it in a chest.
	Ren eh sthock as stoyr.	It made stock and store.
	Three kirree keeir	Three brown sheep
	Va ec Illiam yn Oe.	Had William the grandson.

The connections in idea can be expressed as: putting an animal in a pot (a, 8), going to a place (well/wood) and then meeting a fierce animal—this expressed in the first person (b–c, 2–3), a reference to the action of ploughing (d, 4), the loss of a finger (e–f, 3) and a statement that birth or increase resulted from an earlier action (f, 10). In relation to the last it may be noted that in the *Mabinogion* it is a male child that develops from 'a small something' dropped by a young woman which is wrapped in silk and placed in a chest (Jones and Jones 1949:63–4).

Both the pieces remain puzzling, but I think at least that the connections are sufficient to justify a theory that 'Mony Kings, Mony Queens' belongs to the same class as 'Cock and Hen'. Fortunately in the latter case we are given context. Lines like these were sung by boys going round the houses in the Isle of Man on Hallowe'en or Old Hallowe'en (31 October or 11 November). The lines as given above are preceded by:

Noght oie Houney.	To-night is Hollantide Night.
Mairagh Laa Houney.	To-morrow is Hollantide Day.

and close with the petition:

My ta shiu cur veg dou,	If you give me anything,
Cur eh dou nish,	Give it to me soon,
Son ta mish laccal goll thie	For I want to go home
Lesh soilshey yn eayst.	With the light of the moon.

which is followed by a final *Hop! ta'n oie*. The song was written down by John Clague, who died in 1908. He has some preliminary remarks from which I quote the following extracts in the English translation:

> The eve of the twelfth day of the first month of winter (November) is the beginning of the year of the Celts. Young boys used to go about on that night singing an old song and rhyme "Hop ta'n Nai." An old man, called William Duke, who was learned in all old Manx stories, told me, about fifty years ago, that he thought the words were "To-night is the night," and that it was joy for the coming in of the new year. For the evening and the morning were the first day, and the evening was the beginning of the day. It is like "Happy New Year" in English. The day is called Hollantide Day. . . . In Scotland the night is called Hallow E'en . . . . "To-night is the night" ["Noght! ta'n Oie"] must be very old, for the tune is in the Dorian Mode. I took it down from the singing (voice) of Thomas Kermode, Bradda. . . . He had a wonderfully good memory, and he was good to sing, and he knew the Manx language very well. . . . He had great intelligence, and I owe him a great deal for the knowledge he has given me of the life of the Manx at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

I would suggest that Clague is right in thinking of this as a New Year song, and that its equivalent is to be found in the Gaelic-speaking regions of Scotland in the verses employed when going round the houses on Hogmanay or Old New Year's Eve (31 December or 11 January). These verses are sometimes far longer than is required to refer to the season, ask for a gift and call down a blessing or a curse. A verse from Barra, for example, which is said to be 'typical of the locally-composed poems, a mixture of local satirical references and pure nonsense, which used to be recited in the Gaelic-speaking areas by men going around the houses at New Year' (*Tocher* 20:144–5) consists of twenty-one lines ending:

> *Bha dùil aig Dòmhnall Ruadh a' Mhuilinn le 'bhalg mineadh*
> *Gu faigheadh e nighean Uilleim, bean mo ghille.*
> *'S ann a chuile latha féilleadh bhiodh i maistreadh,*
> *'S gheobhainn fhìn a' chiad cheap dheth.*
> *Thug i mach na cóig ginidhean òir as a pòca,*
> *Na cóig cearca móra fireann 's an coileach boireann*
> *'S an clàr fuineadh, 's biodh siod aig Uilleam.*
>
> Red-haired Donald from the mill with his bag of meal was hoping
> To get William's daughter, my boy's wife—
> She used to churn every holy day,

And I was the one to get the first lump [of butter] from it.
She took the five gold guineas out of her pocket,
The five great male hens and the female cock
And the baking-board, and William was to have that.

It seems possible that the use of nonsense verses in recent years stems from an earlier use of obscure rhymes that had some bearing on seasonal custom, which perhaps survived most fully in those places where one of the company wore the skin of an animal. Donald MacDonald, who went round with a group of boys including one who wore a calf skin or a sheep skin in North Tolsta, Lewis, about the years 1909 to 1914, recalls a method of delivering the seasonal rhyme which provides a strong link with the Manx piece for each line was preceded by the syllables *Hurra bhith o*! and these syllables also came at the close of the rhyme (MacDonald 1976). This is precisely the same as the placing of the repeated *Hop*! *ta'n oie* in the song from the Isle of Man. A rhyme recorded from Annie MacKenzie, Stornoway, Lewis, has the lines:

Hó ro bhi ó *Chaidh a' Righ a dh'Eirinn*
Hó ro bhi ó *A dh'iarraidh bonnach Eirinn.*

Hó ro bhi ó The king went to Ireland
Hó ro bhi ó To ask for an Irish bannock.

which may be compared with 'I ran to Scotland' (d), a line which is followed in a different version of the Manx song by 'What were they doing there?/Baking bannocks and roasting collops' (Paton 1942:78).
Another rhyme she knew has:

Bhean an taighe éirich suas
Is gearr cùl càise; na gearr d'òrdag.

Woman of the house rise up
And cut a portion of cheese; do not cut your thumb.

which may possibly relate to the incident of the young woman cutting her finger while cutting cheese (e).[2]

These similarities suggest that the Manx 'Cock and Hen' is not merely a local form but springs from a general Gaelic tradition. The likenesses, in turn, between it and 'Mony Kings, Mony Queens' may further suggest that there was a body of ideas given seasonal expression which could be phrased in quite different words. I hope that this note may lead to the production of more evidence which can be brought to bear on the interpretation of these verses.

NOTES

1 For Crawfurd's song manuscripts, see Lyle 1975:xv–xvii. As this piece occurs towards the end of *Auld Ballats* (3. 303–4) it was apparently added at a later date than the group of songs collected by Thomas Macqueen in 1827 and is probably best dated *c.* 1830. The lines in the manuscript are written continuously and without numbering but I have divided them into the couplets indicated by the rhyme and have given a separate number to the only unpaired line.

2 The rhymes from Miss Annie MacKenzie were recorded by Gordon MacLennan and are in the archive of the School of Scottish Studies (SA 1956/154/ 3 and 2). I am grateful to Ian Paterson for transcribing and translating the lines printed and for giving other assistance.

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