

Susanna Blamire

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Susanna Blamire (1747-1794) was a Romantic singer, songwriter, and poet born in Cumberland, England, whose works representing the working class and rural living gained her nickname “The Muse of Cumberland.” In 1767, she accompanied her sister Sarah to Scotland, where Blamire remained for several years writing poetry and songs in both Cumbrian and Scottish dialects. Her writings were not intended for publication, but instead for friends and family. Her family held on to Blamire’s works after her death, and pieces were eventually published in Edinburgh in 1842. “Moonlight” appeared in that first edition of *The Poetical Works of Miss Susanna Blamire*.

“Moonlight” is a poem of English and Scottish duality. The twenty lines are written in the iambic pentameter associated with classic English poetry, but with an ABAB rhyme scheme more closely associated with the ballad stanzas of folk poetry. Readers on both sides of the border would recognize elements drawn from the Gothic and graveyard styles, as dark naturalism plays a large part in the imagery of this poem. Blamire’s folkloric poems incorporate Gaelic language, while her serious political works are in standard English. However, “Moonlight” is written in standard English but topically incorporates Scottish lore, making it one of the outliers of her collection.

Scottish folklore had a longer, darker history with nature spirits than the English did their fairies. Blamire’s poems caution against interacting with nature spirits, while English myth often encouraged it. Writing “Moonlight” in standard English assured it would reach a more extensive audience than a dialect poem. References to Shakespeare allow English readers to connect nature spirits with malevolence, as an educated English audience would understand the reference to the devious nature of Shakespeare’s mainstream fairy characters. The first line pulls from *The Merchant of Venice*, and while it is one of Shakespeare’s plays that does not include fairies, other plays such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest* do.

The myths of England and Scotland differ, and, since Blamire lived in both countries, she had access to a variety of stories. The language she uses in “Moonlight” shows both an appreciation for the Scottish faerie lore and the impact English influence had on their image.

Further Reading

Henderson, Lizanne, and Edward J. Cowan. *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History*.
Tuckwell Press, 2001.

Huber, Alexander. "Susanna Blamire." *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*, Eighteenth
Century Poetry Archive, 2015,
www.eighteenthcenturypoetry.org/authors/pers00280.shtml.

“Moonlight”¹

“HOW sweet the moon now sleeps upon yon bank,”²
 Cried Nature’s first-born,³ and delighted saw
 Her fairy elves⁴ play many a wily prank,
 As she sail’d on majestically slow.
 Her pale beams tremble o’er the sleeping flower, 5
 The tall trees lengthen in the sombre gloom;
 Her brighter gleams now light the leafy tower,
 Now show the Gothic⁵ arches of the dome.
 A wandering cloud will sometimes cross her way,
 Her head oft bowing lets the stranger pass, 10
 While golden stars the canopy enlay,⁶
 And shadowy forms fly o’er the waving grass.
 In solemn groves, where silver⁷ lamps late hung,
 The fear-struck traveller sees huge spectres rise;
 Sees grisly ghosts and stalking phantoms come, 15
 As darkness draws the curtain of the skies.

¹ This edition of “Moonlight” is based on the electronic text from the *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive* in collaboration with the Text Creation Partnership (ECCO_TCP project) of 2005.

² The opening line comes from the character Lorenzo of William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, in Act 5, Scene 1. Lorenzo’s speech also contains lines about immortal bodies and gentle music.

³ Many folkloric creatures are said to be born from Mother Nature. “Nature’s first born” here alludes to a faerie Queen.

⁴ In Scottish folklore, nature spirits would be called by their species name such as boggarts, kelpies, or bansidhes. Elves are not part of Celtic lore, and “fairy” is an English umbrella term that includes all species.

⁵ Popular in the 1790s for focusing on mystery, horror, and both the dark natural and supernatural, Gothic literature has close ties to the Romantic. A Gothic-style arch was typically for churches or cathedrals and would have been both intricately carved and intimidatingly massive.

⁶ An archaic use of “inlay,” or imbedding a piece of different material into another (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2020).

⁷ Silver is most well-known in legends for deterring werewolves, but silver and iron are metals that continuously appear in myths as being protection against magic.

In yonder tower the meditative mind
May suit the subject to the scene around,
Find some memento murmur⁸ in the wind,
Or print⁹ the smallest leaf that strews the ground.

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⁸ “Memento murmur” is similar to “memento mori,” a reminder of death. Translated to “remember you must die,” the phrase originally referred to a skull or death’s head on a Puritan tombstone. In the Victorian era, memento mori grew in popularity as objects that gave the bearer a macabre reminder of death, including skulls, hair jewelry, or photographs of the deceased.

⁹ Shortened version of archaic “imprint”: to press into or leave a mark on a surface (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2020). In this context, Blamire says the speaker associates a memory with the wind or the leaves.



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