

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON AN ENGLISH POET
THE POETRY OF THE EARLY WAVERLEY
NOVELS

By CLAIRE LAMONT

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MY subject this evening is the lyrics, songs, and ballad snatches in the early novels of Sir Walter Scott. I shall say a little about the songs in his longer poems, but talk primarily about the poetry of the novels, up to *The Bride of Lammermoor* of 1819. It has often been pointed out that Scott's novels contain some of his finest poetry. John Buchan, for instance, claimed that it is there that Scott attained 'his real poetic stature', and added 'in his greater lyrics Scott penetrated to the final mystery of the poet.'¹ The short poems in the novels are quite different from Scott's narrative verse, 'that poetry of careless glance, and reckless rhyme'.² In the poetry of the novels there is seldom any carelessness, seldom any failure of eye or ear. The songs and ballad snatches in the novels are usually impersonal, and are in one way or another overheard. We are not now dealing with the minstrel tradition which welcomes the listener into the tale. The short songs are simply sung, and there is not usually a listener although there may be a hearer. Scott knew himself to be a story-teller; and in many places in his work he shows himself preoccupied with the task of the minstrel or bard; did he in a more private part of his mind know that he had that more elusive gift, as a lyric poet?

In talking about the poetry of the novels I have used various terms, songs, lyrics, ballad snatches. As regards the ballad, I shall be dealing with only one ballad which occurs in anything like its narrative completeness, Elspeth's ballad of the Red Harlaw in *The Antiquary*. The rest are ballad snatches which, in the way that Scott quotes and alters them, are half-way to existing as separate songs. There is also the question of ownership. Am I going to give Scott credit for composing what he merely quoted? I shall distinguish as carefully as I can, but it is notoriously difficult and sometimes even Scott himself would not

¹ John Buchan, *Sir Walter Scott*, 1932, p. 115.

² John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Part IV, 1856, vol. iii, p. 265.

have known with certainty.¹ The fact that the songs in the novels are sung by fictitious singers renders the problem of 'authorship' more intricate. A fictitious character may be supposed either to compose or quote; and if he quotes he may do so from another fictitious character, or from a fictitious tradition. In practice, however, the origin of a song in Scott's novels is usually less important than the fact that the singer knew it and sang it at the right moment.

The verse romances, most of which were published before he produced his first novel, show Scott creating various settings for his interspersed songs. In *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) there are none until the last canto when a group of songs is sung at the feast to celebrate the marriage of the heroine. Scott confessed in a letter that he had been short of material for the last canto, 'so I was fain to eke it out with the songs of the minstrels'.² It was a happy accident if it enabled him to discover his talent for writing songs in a context. In *Marmion* (1808) there are two songs. The first, Constance's song 'Where shall the lover rest',³ with its statement about the fates of the lover and the traitor, is clearly related to the poem as a whole. Perhaps more interesting is the relation of the other, the very different song in Canto V, the story of young Lochinvar. It is sung by Lady Heron, the wily Englishwoman who was King James's favourite, while the Court was assembling in preparation for battle. James was about to embark on the rash venture that led to the field of Flodden. The song tells of the victory of the bold man who rode off with his bride on the eve of her marriage to another.

So daring in love, and so dauntless in war,
Have ye e'er heard of gallant like young Lochinvar?

The song, with its irrepressible metre, suggests inexorable success for the man who boldly takes, and is not calculated to bring moderation to the counsels of the King.

There are many more songs in *The Lady of the Lake* (1810). One of the most beautiful is the song sung by the madwoman, Blanche, to warn the King of treachery ahead.

The toils are pitched, and the stakes are set,
Ever sing merrily, merrily;
The bows they bend, and the knives they whet,
Hunters live so cheerily.

¹ See, for instance, *Letters 1821-1823*, p. 179. (All references to Scott's letters are to volumes of *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson, 1932 ff.)

² To Anna Seward, 1805. *Letters 1787-1807*, p. 243. ³ Canto III, x-xi.

It was a stag, a stag of ten,
 Bearing his branches sturdily;
 He came stately down the glen,
 Ever sing hardily, hardily.

...

He had an eye, and he could heed,
 Ever sing warily, warily;
 He had a foot, and he could speed—
 Hunters watch so narrowly. (Canto IV, xxv)

The hearer is given information by one to whom he would not normally turn for counsel. The madwoman sees through disguise (she recognizes the 'stag of ten'), and presents herself to give her vital warning. The inspiration for Blanche came from a poor woman whom Scott had seen in the Pass of Glencoe many years earlier,¹ and in the rather hasty filling in of her life story we can see the germ of a character like Madge Wildfire.

Equally interesting from the point of view of the songs in the novels are those sung by Edmund in *Rokeby* (1813). Here for the first time Scott has created a character to sing his songs who has a sustained part in the action of the poem. Edmund is a peasant boy who has joined a robber gang, and he sings hauntingly of the way of life of the outlaw community:

'And when I'm with my comrades met,
 Beneath the greenwood bough,
 What once we were we all forget,
 Nor think what we are now.

CHORUS.

Yet Brignal banks are fresh and fair,
 And Greta woods are green,
 And you may gather garlands there
 Would grace a summer queen.'—
 (Canto III, xviii)

That song, Scott said, was one of his favourites.² There are no such inset songs in *The Lord of the Isles*, though one wonders if Edith would not have sung in her disguise as a page, had he not been 'from earliest childhood mute'.³ But *The Lord of the Isles* appeared in 1815, six months after the first of the novels, *Waverley*.

¹ *Letters 1808-1811*, p. 411.

² *Letters 1811-1814*, pp. 194 and 201.

³ Canto III, xxiii.

As the songs I am talking about were sung, it should be asked whether Scott had in mind any particular music? Sometimes he had; for instance Constance's song in *Marmion* was inspired by the singing of Highland reapers in the Lowlands, and was written to fit a specific tune.¹ Scott was not particularly musical, but could write to a tune if it were hummed over to him often enough.² For the songs in the novels he did not usually have specific tunes in mind, but he often indicates what the reader should be hearing by a phrase or two of verbal description. One of Madge Wildfire's dying songs, for instance, 'rather resembled the music of the Methodist hymns'.³

Before turning to the novels I should say a word about the manuscripts, as most of Scott's novel manuscripts survive. It is surprising to anyone looking at a Scott novel manuscript for the first time how smoothly the songs appear inset in their places. A closer look reveals that some of the songs we know from the printed texts are not present in the manuscript, for instance Glossin's rather uncharacteristic drinking-song in *Guy Manner-ing*.⁴ In some cases the song is clearly needed in the first draft of the manuscript, and was presumably sent on a separate sheet. In others there was apparently no expectation of a song, and its addition, presumably in proof, required some slight alteration of the text to accommodate it. But still the majority of the songs occur in the manuscript, with very little correction. Did Scott compose the songs as he wrote; or had he worked them out in his capacious memory earlier? Many years later in his *Journal* he recalled the speed at which passages in the novels were written: 'the pen passd over the whole as fast as it could move and the eye never again saw them excepting in proof'. He added immediately afterwards, 'Verse I write twice and sometimes three times over'.⁵

¹ See *Letters 1787-1807*, pp. 363, 393, and 403; *Letters 1808-1811*, pp. 67 and 162; and *Letters 1831-1832*, p. 300.

² See *Letters 1815-1817*, p. 179. This is one of an interesting series of letters about the songs in the verse romances addressed to Dr. John Clarke Whitfeld, the Cambridge musician who set many of them to music. Because the novels were published anonymously the correspondence unfortunately does not extend to the songs in the novels.

³ *Tales of My Landlord*, 2nd series (*The Heart of Midlothian*), vol. iv, p. 68; ch. 40. (The first reference is to the first edition, from which the quotation is taken; the second is to the chapter number in any one-volume edition.)

⁴ ii, p. 248; ch. 34. The manuscript is in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, press-mark VIIB, MA 436-8. The passage referred to here is vol. ii, f. 78.

⁵ *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. W. E. K. Anderson, 1972, p. 86.

By 1814 the songs and ballad snatches in Scott's work were so well known that they threatened the anonymity of the new novel, *Waverley*.¹ There is a wide range of poetry in *Waverley*. Besides the narrator's snatches of quotation, all the main characters sing or write verses. I want to concentrate on the most famous singer in the novel, Davie Gellatley. Davie Gellatley is the Baron of Bradwardine's *innocent*, which Scott glosses as 'a natural fool'.² He is the first person whom Edward Waverley met on his arrival at Tully Veolan, and on coming up to Waverley he sang 'a fragment of an old Scotch ditty', starting 'False love, and hast thou play'd me this . . .'.³ The reader hardly notices that the heir to an English Jacobite family, newly signed on in the Hanoverian army, is being addressed as a faithless lover. When there was a pause in Davie's singing and dancing Waverley asked if Mr. Bradwardine were at home. The reply came:

The Knight's to the mountain
His bugle to wind;
The Lady's to greenwood
Her garland to bind.
The bower of Burd Ellen
Has moss on the floor,
That the step of Lord William
Be silent and sure.

This conveyed no information . . .

and Edward had to repeat his inquiry. And he finished up following Davie Gellatley down the garden. ' "A strange guide this," thought Edward, "and not much unlike one of Shakespeare's roynish clowns . . ." ' "The Knight's to the mountain' Scott wrote himself.⁴ While alluding to the absence of the Baron, it alludes also to the fact that the daughter's lover is entering the house. But the situation is rendered general and

¹ See, for instance, the review in the *British Critic*, August 1814, reprinted in *Scott: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John O. Hayden, 1970, p. 73.

² i, p. 124; ch. 9.

³ i, p. 118; ch. 9. The song is slightly altered from one in David Herd's *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs*, 1776, vol. ii, p. 6. See also F. J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 1882-98, no. 218.

⁴ That is according to Scott's note on some typeset pages containing the poems from vol. i of *Waverley*, which were sent to him by Constable as a specimen for his volume *The Poetry contained in the Novels . . . of the Author of Waverley*, 1822. Scott annotated the pages indicating which poems were original. They are in the National Library of Scotland, MS. 743, ff. 27-36, and I am grateful to Dr. David Hewitt for drawing them to my attention.

impersonal by the references to the knight and the greenwood, and to Lord William and Burd Ellen, archetypal lover and beloved of the ballad tradition. It is not surprising that to the young Englishman, who had in any case so much to learn about Scotland, 'This conveyed no information'.

Before his next meeting with Davie Gellatley Waverley learns something of his history from Rose Bradwardine, including that he had

a prodigious memory, stored with miscellaneous snatches and fragments of all tunes and songs, which he sometimes applied, with considerable address, as the vehicles of remonstrance, explanation, or satire.¹

The source of Davie's songs was his elder brother, now dead, who had been folk-singer and composer—it was he who wrote

Hie away, hie away,
Over bank and over brae,
Where the copsewood is the greenest,
Where the fountains glisten sheenest, . . .²

a song of escape from the world that had dashed his hopes. So that behind the character of Davie Gellatley Scott has created a folk-singer and poet. In Davie's songs we feel the inherent pathos of the oral tradition: the reason that we have songs to sing is that the elders who used to sing them have passed away.

The next meeting between Waverley and Davie Gellatley took place early in the morning; Waverley rose early and going out of doors found Davie with his dog.

One quick glance of his [Davie's] eye recognised Waverley, when, instantly turning his back, as if he had not observed him, he began to sing part of an old ballad:

Young men will love thee more fair and more fast;
Heard ye so merry the little bird sing?
Old men's love the longest will last,
And the throstle-cock's head is under his wing.

The young man's wrath is like light straw on fire;
Heard ye so merry the little bird sing?
But like red-hot steel is the old man's ire,
And the throstle-cock's head is under his wing.

The young man will brawl at the evening board;
Heard ye so merry the little bird sing?
But the old man will draw at the dawning the sword,
*And the throstle-cock's head is under his wing.*³

¹ i, pp. 169–70; ch. 12. ² i, p. 171; ch. 12. ³ i, pp. 195–6; ch. 14.

Although this is introduced as 'part of an old ballad', Scott later admitted to having written it himself.¹ Waverley has by now learned that Davie's songs indicate something he should know, and he tries by direct inquiry to get Davie to tell him outright. But Davie will not. He had after all turned his back on Waverley before singing it, pretending not to see him. The song refers apparently to the quarrel with the young Laird of Balma-whapple two days earlier; but that quarrel was of political origin, and the song's deeper allusion is to the Jacobites, at the time—the summer of 1745—coming together to rise against the government that Waverley serves. It is one of the hints that the rising is shortly to come to a head. But it is a dark one, couched in terms of the contrast between the young man and the old, the young man hasty, impetuous, and quickly dashed, the old man true, owning old loyalties, undeflected. The pace at which the contrast emerges is slowed down by the refrain, with its reference to the rhythms of the natural world. The imminent situation is sketched in terms of the psychological traits of its participants—Balmawhapple and the Baron of Bradwardine, but not only them.

The allusiveness of Davie's song contrasts with the explicitness of the Bard's song about the impending rising which Waverley hears at the feast at Glennaquoich, and which is subsequently translated from Gaelic for him by Flora Mac-Ivor.² The Bard's song is historical, exhortatory, and sung in a communal setting. Yet for all the mass response to the performance of Mac-Murrough the Bard, in which Waverley shares, we feel that the poetry is with Davie.

For all the central part of the novel Davie Gellatley is out of our ken while we watch Waverley join the Jacobite army, march with it into England, and during the retreat from Derby become separated from it in a nocturnal skirmish. It is months later, after the battle of Culloden, that Waverley, alone, makes his way to the deserted and devastated Tully Veolan.

While . . . he was looking around for some one who might explain the fate of the inhabitants, he heard a voice from the interior of the building, singing, in well-remembered accents, an old Scottish song:

'They came upon us in the night,
And brake my bower and slew my knight;
My servants a' for life did flee,
And left us in extremitie.

¹ See National Library of Scotland, MS. 743, f. 33^v. ² *ibid.*, chs. 20–2.

They slew my knight, to me sae dear;
 They slew my knight, and drave his gear;
 The moon may set, the sun may rise,
 But a deadly sleep has closed his eyes.¹

Scott later added a note on this song: 'The first three couplets are from an old ballad, called the Border Widow's Lament'.² This ballad, which derives from James Hogg, had been included in Scott's collection, *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*:³ it is about the murder of a Border chieftain by the King of Scotland. In turning two stanzas of it into a song for Davie Gellatley Scott has made the King into an unspecified enemy, and has added two lines at the end which give a feeling of finality, rather than lamentation. It is a statement of emotion rather than of fact, which *Waverley*, fortunately, seems partly to realize. By this late stage in the novel he is much matured, and he understands Davie Gellatley much better than before. As Davie made to flee the intruder,

Waverley, remembering his habits, began to whistle a tune . . . which Davie had expressed great pleasure in listening to, . . . Davie again stole from his lurking place . . .

Davie Gellatley's poetry is both a commentary on the action of the novel, and a measure of the growing maturity of its hero. And it is, I think, an indication of the relative optimism of *Waverley*, despite Culloden in the background, that the poor foolish singer plays a valuable part in saving the family that protects him, and that the dashing young hero learns to listen and communicate with him.

In *Waverley* Scott created for himself an opportunity to be a folk poet; in *The Antiquary* he provided himself with a similar opportunity to become a ballad singer. Although versions of a ballad on the Battle of Harlaw are known, old Elspeth's ballad of the Red Harlaw is unlike them, and is thought to be Scott's own work.⁴ It is interesting to see how it is introduced. The Antiquary, Mr. Oldbuck, wishes to get from the crazed old

¹ iii, pp. 226-7; ch. 63.

² 1829 edition, vol. ii, p. 328.

³ 2nd edition, 1803, iii, p. 80. The stanzas in question had a history of being portable before Scott used them. Similar ones occur in a broadside ballad, 'The Lady turned Serving-Man', printed by Percy in *The Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 1765, iii, p. 87. See also Child, no. 106.

⁴ See the note in *Sir Walter Scott: Selected Poems*, ed. Thomas Crawford, 1972, pp. 277-8.

Elspeth a statement 'in a formal manner'¹ of the events long in the past which she has just revealed to Lord Glenallan. Oldbuck, his nephew Hector, and the old wandering beggar Edie Ochiltree, approach Elspeth's hut for that purpose.

As the Antiquary lifted the latch of the hut, he was surprised to hear the shrill tremulous voice of Elspeth chaunting forth an old ballad in a wild and doleful recitative:—

'The herring loves the merry moon-light,
The mackerel loves the wind,
But the oyster loves the dredging sang,
For they come of a gentle kind.'²

A diligent collector of these legendary scraps of ancient poetry, his foot refused to cross the threshold when his ear was thus arrested, and his hand instinctively took pencil and memorandum-book. From time to time the old woman spoke as if to the children—'O aye, hinnies, whisht, whisht! and I'll begin a bonnier ane than that—

'Now haud your tongue, baith wife and carle,
And listen, great and sma',
And I will sing of Glenallan's Earl
That fought on the red Harlaw.'³

And she continues with a ballad about the battle of Harlaw, fought in 1411, the battle which, in Scott's words, determined 'whether the Gaelic or the Saxon race should be predominant in Scotland'. As she sings she is held up by failure of memory and wandering thoughts, and then, when she gets to a passage of particular interest, by the need to explain it to her supposed auditors, for she imagines her grandchildren to be present.⁴

' "To turn the rein were sin and shame,
To fight were wond'rous peril,
What would ye do now, Rowland Cheyne,
Were ye Glenallan's Earl?" '

¹ iii, p. 150; ch. 36.

² This stanza does not occur in the manuscript, which is in the Pierpont Morgan Library, press-mark VIIB, MA 1073-5. See vol. iii, f. 61. It is apparently Scott's composition, perhaps influenced by two lines in 'The Dreg Song' in David Herd's *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs*, 1776, ii, p. 163:

The oysters are a gentle kin,
They winna tak unless you sing.

See 'The Poetry contained in the Novels . . . of the Author of Waverley', in *The Retrospective Review*, 2nd series, i, 1827, p. 21.

³ iii, pp. 220 ff.; ch. 40.

⁴ The manuscript shows that Scott at first envisaged the children as present, but made a small alteration to indicate that Elspeth only thought them so. See MS. vol. iii, f. 61.

'Ye maun ken, hinnies, that this Roland Cheyne, for as poor and auld as I sit in the chimney-neuk, was my forbear, and an awfu' man he was that day in the fight, but specially after the Earl had fa'en; for he blamed himsel for the counsel he gave . . .'

One can imagine that historical ballads were frequently glossed in that manner when they were fulfilling one of their basic functions, that of preserving a family's history.

But what about her actual auditors? Hector is impatient, Oldbuck is overcome with the lust of the ballad collector, only Edie Ochiltree has any sympathy for her elderly and bereaved condition. Their voices disturb her, she stops singing and bids them enter; and they start the inquiries which they hope will lead to a confession of her complicity in the Glenallan tragedy. But old Elspeth refuses to make any admission, and in a last disjointed assertion of loyalty to her former mistress she falls dead. So the formal statement was not obtained, and in the end any proofs required are got from elsewhere. But has not Oldbuck in his antiquarian zeal missed something? He came for a statement, and got a ballad—a ballad about an earlier Glenallan whose downfall was brought about by the advice of Elspeth's ancestor.

' "Were I Glenallan's Earl this tide,
And ye were Roland Cheyne,
The spur¹ should be in my horse's side,
And the bridle upon his mane.

' "If they hae twenty thousand blades,
And we twice ten times ten,
Yet they hae but their tartan plaids,
And we are mail-clad men." '

The Countess and Elspeth had been just as ruthless, and it was Elspeth who had given her mistress the fatal advice, which destroyed her son's happiness.² And like her ancestor, Roland Cheyne, after the miscarriage of her advice she fought the more loyally. In view of the mental world in which Elspeth is still living is there any hope that she will submit to a magistrate's inquiry? And likewise is there any hope that Oldbuck will attempt to discover the significance of his much-prized historical ballad?

Probably the most famous of Scott's fictitious singers is Madge Wildfire in *The Heart of Midlothian*. Scott says that the initial

¹ MS. 'spur'; the first edition, wrongly, reads 'spear'.

² iii, p. 75; ch. 33.

inspiration for Madge Wildfire came from 'Feckless Fanny', a girl who had lost her senses on the death of her lover.¹ Some details, for instance Madge's ducking near Carlisle, clearly come from the gipsy lore which had called forth the character of Meg Merrilies in *Guy Mannering*.² Other influences on this story of the girl rendered mad by sorrow and singing in her madness are Wordsworth's mysterious madwomen, and the mad singers of German literature. And in the background, of course, there is Ophelia. The suggestion is made only to be qualified: 'Of all the mad-women who have sung and said, since the days of Hamlet the Dane, if Ophelia be the most affecting, Madge Wildfire was the most provoking'.³ Madge Wildfire, like Davie Gellatley, sings snatches of song to warn, predict, and explain, could the hearer only interpret her message. Madge seldom offers information—though sometimes she has vital information; she is usually led into betraying it by just that playing on her feelings and weaknesses which the Baron of Bradwardine forbids to be practised on Davie Gellatley. For Davie is a protected member of the household at Tully Veolan, whereas Madge is an outcast.

Miss Lascelles has drawn our attention to Scott's interest in a character from an 'alternative society', for instance the gipsy society of Meg Merrilies, a clearly defined way of life drawing on different traditions which may impinge on the rest of society for good or ill, but only according to its own laws.⁴ *The Heart of Midlothian* shows his preoccupation with a character slightly different, the person who has left the ordinary society of which he was once a member, either voluntarily, as George Staunton, or because he was driven out of it, like Madge Wildfire and her mother. Edmund in *Rokeby* is one who voluntarily adopts the life of an outlaw, and can sing of it most attractively:

Allen-a-Dale has no faggot for burning,
 Allen-a-Dale has no furrow for turning,
 Allen-a-Dale has no fleece for the spinning,
 Yet Allen-a-Dale has red gold for the winning.
 Come, read me my riddle! come, hearken my tale!
 And tell me the craft of bold Allen-a-Dale.⁵ (Canto III, xxx)

¹ See his note to the 1830 edition, vol. iii, pp. 36-9.

² See the *Quarterly Review*, xvi, 1817, pp. 439-41; and 'Notices concerning the Scottish Gypsies' in *Blackwood's Magazine*, i, 1817, pp. 43-58, 154-61, and 615-20.

³ ii, p. 99; ch. 16.

⁴ See Mary Lascelles, 'Jane Austen and Walter Scott: a Minor Point of Comparison', in *Notions and Facts*, 1972, pp. 230-46.

⁵ The name presumably comes from the ballad of 'Robin Hood and Allen a Dale', see Child, no. 138.

We must enjoy its bravado, but the desperate fate of Bertram in the same poem shows that its freedom is illusory, or at most only a young man's freedom. The flamboyant outlaw becomes mere robber at last. And what about the girl invited to join such a society?

'If, Maiden, thou wouldst wend with me,
To leave both tower and town,
Thou first must guess what life lead we,
That dwell by dale and down.
And if thou canst that riddle read,
As read full well you may,
Then to the green wood shalt thou speed,
As blithe as Queen of May.'—

CHORUS.

Yet sung she, 'Brignal banks are fair,
And Greta woods are green;
I'd rather range with Edmund there,
Than reign our English queen.' (Canto III, xvi)

The next song shows the next stage:

'A weary lot is thine, fair maid,
A weary lot is thine!
To pull the thorn thy brow to braid,
And press the rue for wine!
A lightsome eye, a soldier's mien,
A feather of the blue,
A doublet of the Lincoln green,—
No more of me you knew,
My love!
No more of me you knew.' (Canto III, xxviii)

The two songs represent 'innocence' and 'experience', and the emotional pull of each is equally balanced.

George Staunton, alias Robertson, with all the explanations proper to a novel, has left ordinary society, and has seduced a vain, giddy girl, Madge Murdockson, in a way that ensures that she will have to leave it too. He wrote for her the song which in the novel becomes, as it were, Madge's 'signature tune', cropping up here and there like wildfire.¹ George made it for her at Lockington wake, a festival in Leicestershire:

¹ In the senses described by *OED*, 2, c. 'will-o'-the-wisp, *ignis fatuus*' and d. 'lightning; *esp.* sheet lightning without audible thunder'.

I'm Madge of the country, I'm Madge of the town,
 And I'm Madge of the lad I am blithest to own—
 The Lady of Beever¹ in diamonds may shine,
 But has not a heart half so lightsome as mine.

I am Queen of the Wake, and I'm Lady of May,
 And I lead the blithe ring round the May-pole to-day:
 The wild-fire that flashes so fair and so free
 Was never so bright, or so bonnie as me.²

The rest of the novel shows us the pathos of this 'Queen of the May'.

It is surprising to realize that the first snatch of song to be sung in *The Heart of Midlothian* is not sung by Madge Wildfire.

'The elfin knight sate on the brae,
 The broom grows bonnie, the broom grows fair;
 And by there came liting a lady so gay,
 And we daurna gang down to the broom nae mair.'³

It is sung by Effie Deans, to cover her confusion at meeting her sister shortly after parting from Staunton. This little snatch, which betrays her apprehensiveness, is sung by the daughter of the strict Presbyterian who had no time for 'fule sangs'; Effie Deans, who like Madge Wildfire was to be ruined by bearing a child to George Staunton. In her description of the dancing where she met Staunton Effie comes close to the world of Madge Wildfire, with its singing, dancing, laughter, and vanity. Yet it is the other sister, Jeanie, who has more to do with Madge in the novel. In her efforts to save Effie, Jeanie meets the dark side of Madge's world. And there, in the midst of her alarm, Jeanie finds that Madge's vanity is mingled with something deeper, though she scarcely understands it. As the two of them leave the barn where Jeanie had been unwillingly detained on her journey to London, Madge likens them to characters from *The Pilgrim's Progress* and sings one of Bunyan's songs. Davie Deans's sectarian zeal had prevented his children from reading Bunyan, and Jeanie has to make what little she can of Madge's fancy. Jeanie's compassion ensures that she will always do what she can to help Madge, but her religion, to which she is so faithful, makes it difficult for her to recognize a groping in the same direction when it does not take the same path.

¹ Belvoir, seat of the Duke of Rutland.

² iii, p. 145; ch. 31.

³ i, p. 246; ch. 10. The refrain is found in the traditional ballad, see for instance Child, no. 16, 'Sheath and Knife'. The broom is often a setting for seduction in the ballad world.

Madge's position gives her freedom from the restrictions of the ordinary world, whether confining or shaping and reassuring. It gives her the freedom to say some things which need saying in the novel. Jeanie, having stumbled unwittingly on the fact that Madge had had and lost a child, says "I am very sorry for your misfortune—" Only to be interrupted by Madge, "Sorry? what wad ye be sorry for? The bairn was a blessing—" There is a blessing in the bairn that the rigours of law and theology in the novel fail to recognize, and the spokesman is Madge Wildfire.

We see no more of Madge after she and Jeanie part until, on her return journey from London, Jeanie visits Madge on her deathbed in the workhouse in Carlisle. Madge is singing as she enters, and does not recognize her visitor. Jeanie calls her by name; Madge replies by summoning the nurse, "Nurse—nurse, turn my face to the wa', that I may never answer to that name ony mair, and never see mair of a wicked world."² There follow three songs. The first is religious:

'When the fight of grace is fought,—
When the marriage vest is wrought,—
When Faith hath chased cold Doubt away,
And Hope but sickens at delay,—
When Charity, imprisoned here,
Longs for a more expanded sphere,
Doff thy robes of sin and clay;
Christian, rise, and come away.'

The first two lines are reminiscent of Meg Merrilies's 'Dirge';³ the rest remind one of the last lines of Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, a poem which Scott particularly admired.⁴ As Madge becomes weaker the style of her song changes:

'Cauld is my bed, Lord Archibald,
And sad my sleep of sorrow;
But thine sall be as sad and cauld,
My fause true-love! to-morrow.'

—a ballad snatch, with as usual a prophetic and monitory element. Then comes her final song:

¹ iii, p. 136; ch. 30.

² iv, pp. 67–8; ch. 40.

³ *Guy Mannering*, ii, p. 87; ch. 27.

⁴ See J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, 1837–8, ii, p. 307.

Again she changed the tune to one wilder, less monotonous, and less regular. But of the words only a fragment or two could be collected by those who listened to this singular scene.

'Proud Maisie is in the wood,
Walking so early;
Sweet Robin sits on the bush,
Singing so rarely.

'“Tell me, thou bonny bird,
When shall I marry me?”—

“When six braw gentlemen
Kirkward shall carry ye.”

* * *

“Who makes the bridal bed,
Birdie, say truly?”

“The gray-headed sexton
That delves the grave duly.”

* * *

'The glow-worm o'er grave and stone
Shall light thee steady;
The owl from the steeple sing,
“Welcome, proud lady.”'

Asterisks between the second and third, and third and fourth stanzas in the manuscript and early printed editions¹ indicate that other stanzas are supposedly missing. It is after all 'only a fragment or two'. One is left to imagine a longer question-and-answer ballad, but the fragment which the listeners could hear is just enough, and enough to give it full emotional intensity. The manuscript shows also that Scott first attempted the song in the past tense:

Proud Maisie was in the wood
Walking so early
Sweet Robin sat on the bush
Singing so rarely²

but he changed the verbs to the present, probably as he wrote. If we feel entitled to apply this most impersonal song to its singer we see that it expresses her situation and character.

The lightning that flashes so bright and so free,
Is scarcely so blithe or so bonny as me.

The giddy singer of that song is here labelled with laconic finality, 'Proud Maisie', and as for the wildfire:

¹ They are not always reproduced when the song is printed separately.

² National Library of Scotland, MS. 1548, f. 254.

'The glow-worm o'er grave and stone
Shall light thee steady.'

The last novel that I want to mention is *The Bride of Lammermoor*. Lucy Ashton's song, in the third chapter, has often been claimed one of Scott's finest lyrics. Critics concur in the view that the song expresses the character of the singer, and that more than any other song in Scott's novels it is indicative of the theme and mood of the whole work. But a curious feature of this criticism is that so many agree in finding Lucy a weak and passive character. Perhaps John Buchan may be allowed to speak for those who have expressed that view: 'Lucy Ashton is a passive creature, a green-sick girl unfit to strive with destiny . . .'¹ But is Lucy purely passive? No one would claim that she is strong, but is it not only in the company and under the power of her mother that she is weak?

Perhaps I may look at Lucy Ashton's song in more detail in its context. We have not met Lucy, though we have been told that she is seventeen, when her father, leaving his library where he had been meditating further vengeance on the Ravenswood family whom he has superseded, overhears his daughter sing the following song to her own accompaniment on the lute:

Look not thou on Beautys charming
Sit thou still when Kings are arming
Taste not when the wine-cup glistens
Speak not when the people listens
Stop thine ear against the singer
From the red gold keep thy finger
Vacant heart & hand & eye
Easy live and quiet die.²

As Mr. Maxwell has pointed out, the song has elements of both the ballad and the cavalier lyric,³ and apparently it advocates a rejection of active life. Sir William Ashton's first remark to his daughter indicates the same interpretation: ' "So Lucy, . . . does your musical philosopher teach you to contemn the world before you know it? . . . " '

Look not thou on Beautys charming
Sit thou still when Kings are arming . . .

¹ John Buchan, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

² i, p. 68; ch. 3. Here transcribed from the manuscript, in the Signet Library, Edinburgh, f. 15.

³ J. C. Maxwell, 'Lucy Ashton's Song', *Notes and Queries*, cxcv, 1950, p. 210.

A series of commands, each rendered in one way or another negative. And then the final couplet, the consequence of the withdrawal advocated,

Vacant heart & hand & eye
Easy live and quiet die.

The song is in one sense worldly wisdom couched in terms of advice and command. But if that is the surface meaning there is a strong undertow in the opposite direction. In another sense the whole poem can be cast in the conditional; *if* you withdraw from full participation in living, *then* all you will have is an easy life and a quiet death. You may buy peace, but at what cost.

Well, how does this relate to the character of the singer? The novelist comments, shortly after the conclusion of the song,

The words she had chosen seemed particularly adapted to her character; for Lucy Ashton's exquisitely beautiful, yet girlish features, were formed to express peace of mind, serenity, and indifference to the tinsel of worldly pleasure.

And the passage goes on to describe the gentleness of Lucy's character, and the affection in which she was held by all except her mother, who, believing her to be 'unfit for courts, or crowded halls', can only plan her daughter's withdrawal from life by marriage to 'some country laird'.

But, like many a parent of hot and impatient character, she was mistaken in estimating the feelings of her daughter, who, under a semblance of extreme indifference, nourished the germ of those passions which sometimes spring up in one night, like the gourd of the prophet, and astonish the observer by their unexpected ardour and intensity. In fact, Lucy's sentiments seemed chill, because nothing had occurred to interest or awaken them.

This passage, which occurs between the end of Lucy's song and her father's first remark, indicates that Scott did not want Lucy to appear solely passive. We are introduced to someone of an apparently passive temperament, but with strong hints that she could prove otherwise. With her character as with her song, there is a current pulling against the most obvious interpretation.

'So Lucy,' said her father, entering as her song was ended, 'does your musical philosopher teach you to contemn the world before you know it?—that is surely something premature.—Or did you but speak according to the fashion of fair maidens, who are always to hold the pleasures of life in contempt till they are pressed upon them by the address of some gentle knight?'

Lucy blushed, disclaimed any inference respecting her own choice being inferred from her selection of a song, and readily laid aside her instrument at her father's request that she would attend him in his walk.

Father and daughter take their walk in the park—this is all in the same chapter, chapter three. There they meet a forester, and there follows a conversation in which the forester complains that there has been no sport in the park since the Ashtons took over the estate. Skill in outdoor sports lay with the Ravenswoods; and the forester extols in particular the prowess of Edgar, Master of Ravenswood, who is, of course, to become Lucy's lover. There are only two songs sung in *The Bride of Lammermoor* and they are both in this chapter. As the forester goes off he sings a song:

The monk must arise when the matins ring,
The abbot may sleep to their chime;
But the yeoman must start when the bugles sing,
'Tis time, my hearts, 'tis time.

There's bucks and raes on Bilhope braes,
There's a herd in Shortwood Shaw;
But a lily white doe in the garden goes,¹
She's fairly worth them a'.

Hunting is often in Scott an analogue of the active life, of the life that must be lived although it is not without danger and cruelty.² The second stanza alludes also to the tradition, particularly strong in medieval literature, of the Chase of Love, where the progress of love is described in terms of a stag-hunt.³

But a lily white doe in the garden goes,
She's fairly worth them a'.

The 'lily white doe' is of course Lucy Ashton. Although she can be brought to follow a hunt, Lucy is in the end not the pursuer but the pursued. After her long persecution by her mother and Dame Gourlay, the hurt to Lucy is described thus: 'the arrow was shot, and was rankling barb-deep in the side of the wounded

¹ Transcribed from the first edition, i, p. 81; ch. 3. The manuscript reads 'gaes' which preserves the rhyme, but loses an internal assonance. f. 18.

² The analogy is present in the first song which Scott inset in a novel, 'Waken lords and ladies gay', which appears in his continuation of Joseph Strutt's *Queen-Hoo Hall*, 1808, p. 47.

³ See Marcelle Thiébaux, *The Stag of Love: The Chase in Medieval Literature*, 1974.

deer'.¹ But long before the 'lily white doe' of the song becomes the 'wounded deer' of the end of the novel, there is the hunting scene in chapter nine, Lord Bittlebrain's hunting party. In the course of it the stag turns at bay: 'the hunted animal had now in his turn become an object of intimidation to his pursuers'.² Bucklaw is the hero of the occasion, and after rather awkwardly paying his compliments to Lucy goes on to explain to her the particular danger from a stag at bay, '. . . for a hurt with a buck's horn is a perilous and somewhat venomous matter,'³—a lesson he will learn to his cost on his wedding night.

I think the songs in *The Bride of Lammermoor* are misread if we see Lucy Ashton as innately passive, that is before the strange passivity that comes over her just before her marriage to Bucklaw. We must remember the Lucy Ashton who engaged herself to her father's enemy in a moment of passion. Her tragedy is the result of her attempt to participate in life. As her father had suggested, she was awakened to life by the addresses of a gentle knight. Immediately the engagement causes trouble, because Lucy knows that her mother will oppose it. The reader is shown in what fear Lucy stands of her mother, and with what justification. The strength of the mother should not be mitigated by declaring the daughter impossibly weak. The mother in the source story, a story of the Stair family in the seventeenth century, was supposed to have had supernatural power,⁴ and Lady Ashton is said to have used 'diabolical' means to coerce Lucy to renounce Ravenswood. Lady Ashton is one of Scott's formidably strong women, successor to the Lady in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, and the Countess of Glenallan in *The Antiquary*. Bucklaw curiously enough recognizes Lady Ashton's strength:

'I'll be bound Lady Ashton understands every machine for breaking in the human mind, and there are as many as there are cannon-bits, martingals, and cavessons for young colts.'⁵

Ravenswood never seems to appreciate it, and sees in Lucy's fears a softness of mind, which however attractive, amounted 'almost to feebleness'. Does he ever understand her last faltering words to him, "'It was my mother"'?⁶ I think it is a mistake for the reader to fail there too.

Perhaps I have given enough examples to be allowed to draw one or two conclusions. The lyric voice in Scott is curiously impersonal; it is not the impassioned 'I' that we associate with

¹ iii, pp. 51–2; ch. 31.

² i, p. 230; ch. 9.

³ i, p. 233; ch. 9.

⁴ See Scott's Introduction to the edition of 1830.

⁵ iii, p. 8; ch. 28.

⁶ iii, p. 78; ch. 33.

the lyric in the post-renaissance tradition. That is one reason why it is possible for the lyric and ballad impulses in Scott to be so inextricably linked. Miss Woolf in the introduction to her study of *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* has pointed out two kinds of anonymity in literature: the accidental anonymity whereby history has lost for us the name of an author whose cast of mind we recognize to be individual; and what she calls natural or genuine anonymity, where the unknown poet obtruded no individual peculiarities of style or thought, where personality is not known because it is not relevant.¹ For a popular author in the early nineteenth century there was not much likelihood of either. Scott played with the idea of the first, but, paradoxically, seems on occasions to be searching for the second. Sometimes in his poetry Scott seems to have wanted to step out of his own personality and into a self-effacing tradition. This is when he creates and steps into the world of his fictitious singers. Even in very slight snatches of poetry Scott often hints just enough to deflect the reader from too closely associating it with himself: the short mottoes which he wrote to head chapters in the novels, from *The Antiquary* onwards, frequently have this disclaimer, 'Old Ballad' or 'Old Play'. What is being said is better vouched for by impersonal utterance than by personal affidavit.

A fair number of Scott's fictitious singers are mad, or crazed with age or grief, apparently not in ordinary command of speech or action. This annoyed Jeffrey, reviewing *The Lady of the Lake*:

The Maniacs of poetry have indeed had a prescriptive right to be musical, since the days of Ophelia downwards; but it is rather a rash extension of this privilege to make them sing good sense, and to make sensible people be guided by them.²

Can anything be said to counter Jeffrey's criticism? Is the mad singer of a sane song a mere literary convention, apt to become tiresome with over-use? Or is it, like any good convention, an indication of something more? Can the mad singer and his hearer tell us anything about the nature of poetry and its place in the rest of life? The mad singer raises the problem of consciousness in the writing of poetry: the poetic gift enables one to express something that one may not be consciously aware of; the linking of words and sound, the convention seems to indicate,

¹ Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*, 1968, p. 5.

² *The Edinburgh Review*, xvi, 1810, p. 279.

may be beyond the conscious decision of the writer. In the individual this gift suggests a many-layered consciousness: one part of the singer's mind can produce a penetrating insight about life, while another is unable to cope with life's most mundane demands. It is an impulse 'rather part of us than ours'.¹ I think this may indicate why Scott always jibbed at the idea of being a professional poet. In his longer poems he often adopts the figure of the conscious mover of men; in the short lyrics and songs he displays another gift, less amenable to times and seasons. The figure of the mad singer is there to defeat our inquiry about the source of the lyric impulse, deliberately to baffle rational inquiry.

The mad singers in the novels have hearers, and this is where the figure of the mad singer illustrates aspects of poetry in its relation to the rest of life. Throughout the novels I have been discussing the hearers are offered information by those to whom they would not normally go for it. Matured by tribulation they learn to listen; wrapped in their own certainties and mental categories they hear but fail to understand; like old Elspeth's grandchildren they creep out of the room to play. The mature character in these novels has to learn that society is many-layered, that one layer can see what another cannot, and that if he can recognize what separates and what links them he may discover that, almost in another language, there is some sort of common utterance. The relation of the hearers to the singers in Scott's novels is an elaboration of the ironic injunction, 'Stop thine ear against the singer'. One may have to hear and act on information whose accuracy is only certain after one has done so—requiring a leap of faith again not readily amenable to the rational mind.

If the mad singer and his hearer is one image of poetry in society, the fact of verse printed in a novel is another. The rest of the novel, in all its variety, is the 'life' in which the poetry occurs. The songs usurp the role of dialogue (often in Scott another sort of poetry)—you are told something and you cannot answer; you cannot even be sure that you have heard properly.

Cumulatively these songs suggest that truth is reached by sudden insights. What you are offered is this statement beside which you must put that. You relish the bravado of the outlaw's song, and then you must put beside it the sad little refrain of the next song, 'Adieu for evermore'. And there are the contrasting songs on the death of Madge Wildfire: the religious

¹ Introduction to the third canto of *Marmion*, l. 122.

lyric seeing death as a new life, and the laconic ballad of Proud Maisie stating the finality of our death in nature. The tragic emotion is allowed to exist in Scott without relief. There may be hope, but somehow that is another song. We are given two emotions, and one is not allowed to contain the other; only the order in which we hear the songs may indicate the dominance of one note over another. They express the apparently conflicting emotions which exist concurrently and with equal strength in the mind.

It follows that one is defeated in any attempt to build a system from these songs. Nevertheless there is what I may call a bias in favour of action and living life to the full whatever the cost. Scott's ideal is the man of action; he himself would have wished to be a soldier had he not been prevented by lameness.¹ As it is he is expert in the psychology of the active life, fighting, hunting, loving, and their almost inevitable consequences, death, loss, jealousy, remorse. It is interesting that when he writes of death in a way other than tragic it is in terms of action,

Doff thy robes of sin and clay,
Christian, rise, and come away.

Scott's poems and novels offer a wide range of effects. The lyric voice is only one of them, but it is one in which his fitful genius is particularly sustained. Perhaps I may end by quoting a passage from the Introduction to the third canto of *Marmion*, a favourite analogy between Scott's poetry and the Border landscape of his youth:

It was a barren scene, and wild,
Where naked cliffs were rudely piled;
But ever and anon between
Lay velvet tufts of loveliest green.

¹ See *Letters 1808-1811*, p. 478.

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