

APPENDIX: ESSAY ON IMITATIONS OF THE ANCIENT BALLAD (1830)

[Note: The “Essay” originally appeared as prefatory material to the fourth volume of *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. It comprises the second of an overall kind of *biographia literaria* written by Scott, preceded by the “Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry,” prefacing the first volume of the *Minstrelsy*, and followed by the “Introduction” to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (both also appearing in 1830). The “Essay” provides material of special interest to *An Apology for Tales of Terror* because it records Scott’s early fascination with the German ballad and his relationship with Lewis, including an [“Appendix”](#) with letters from Lewis recording his criticism and call for revisions of Scott’s earliest ballads. Although written long after his disavowal of his “German-mad” phase, Scott’s account presents a well-balanced rendering of his interest in German literature, which he believed could furnish “a formidable auxiliary to renewing the spirit of our own.” Although written long after the decline of Lewis’s reputation and while acknowledging the controversies attending *The Monk* and *Tales of Wonder*, Scott’s “Essay” also provides a largely sympathetic portrait of the poet he calls his “Mentor,” claiming that “few persons have exhibited more mastery of rhyme, or greater command over the melody of verse.” The “Essay” also supplies valuable information on the rising interest in “imitations of the ancient ballad” and the various modalities of imitating and adapting such poetry.

The text is taken from T. F. Henderson's 1902 edition of the *Minstrelsy*. Scott's notes to the text are prefaced by an (S); those supplied by J.G. Lockhart (Scott's biographer), by an (L); those supplied by Henderson, by an (H). All other notes are provided by the present editor. When it proved necessary to clarify or provide additional information to Scott's, Lockhart's or Henderson's notes, such commentary follows their writing in brackets. The text and its original notes follow the 1902 text, including British punctuation and spelling; the present editor's notes conform to American and MLA style.]

ESSAY ON IMITATIONS OF THE ANCIENT BALLAD^[1]

The invention of printing necessarily occasioned the downfall of the Order of Minstrels, already reduced to contempt by their own bad habits, by the disrepute attached to their profession, and by the laws calculated to repress their licence. When the Metrical Romances were very many of them in the hands of every one, the occupation of those who made their living by reciting them was in some degree abolished, and the minstrels either disappeared altogether, or sunk into mere musicians, whose utmost acquaintance with poetry was being able to sing a ballad. Perhaps old Anthony, who acquired, from the song which he accounted his masterpiece, the name of *Anthony Now Now*, was one of the last of this class in the capital; nor does the tenor of his poetry evince whether it was his own composition, or that of some other.^[2]

But the taste for popular poetry did not decay with the

class of men by whom it had been for some generations practised and preserved. Not only did the simple old ballads retain their ground, though circulated by the new art of printing, instead of being preserved by recitation; but in the *Garlands*,^[3] and similar collections for general sale, the authors aimed at a more ornamental and regular style of poetry than had been attempted by the old minstrels, whose composition, if not extemporaneous, was seldom committed to writing, and was not, therefore, susceptible of accurate revision. This was the more necessary, as even the popular poetry was now feeling the effects arising from the advance of knowledge, and the revival of the study of the learned languages, with all the elegance and refinement which it induced.

In short, the general progress of the country led to an improvement in the department of popular poetry, tending both to soften and melodise the language employed, and to ornament the diction beyond that of the rude minstrels, to whom such topics of composition had been originally abandoned. The monotony of the ancient recitals was, for the same causes, altered and improved upon. The eternal descriptions of battles, and of love dilemmas, which, to satiety, filled the old romances with trivial repetition, were retrenched. If any one wishes to compare the two eras of lyrical poetry, a few verses taken from one of the latest minstrel ballads, and one of the earliest that were written for the press, will afford him, in some degree, the power of doing so. The rude lines from *Anthony Now Now*, which we have just quoted, may, for

example, be compared, as Ritson^[4] requests, with the ornamented commencement of the ballad of 'Fair Rosamond':

**'When as King Henry ruled this land
The second of the name,
Besides his queen he dearly loved
A fair and stately dame.**

**Most peerless was her beauty found,
Her favour, and her face,
A sweeter creature in the world
Did never king embrace.**

**Her crispèd locks, like threads of gold,
Appeared to each man's sight;
Her sparkling eyes, like orient pearls,
Did cast a heavenly light.**

**The blood within her crystal cheeks
Did such a color drive,
As if the lily and the rose
For mastery did strive.'**

It may be rash to affirm, that those who lived by singing this more refined poetry, were a class of men different from the ancient minstrels; but it appears that both the name of the professors, and the character of the minstrel poetry, had sunk in reputation.^[5]

The facility of versification, and of poetical diction, is decidedly in favour of the moderns, as might reasonably be expected from the improved taste, and enlarged knowledge, of an age which abounded to such a degree in poetry, and of a character so imaginative as was the Elizabethan era. The poetry addressed to the populace, and enjoyed by them alone, was animated by the spirit that was breathed around. We may cite Shakespeare's unquestionable and decisive evidence in this respect. In *Twelfth Night* he describes a popular ballad, with a

My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,
O, prepare it!
My part of death, no one so true
Did share it.

Not a flower, not a flower sweet,
On my black coffin let there be strown;
Not a friend, not a friend greet
My poor corpse, where my bones shall be
thrown:

A thousand, thousand sighs to save,
Lay me, O where
Sad true lover never find my grave
To weep there!

On comparing this love-elegy, or whatever it may be entitled, with the ordinary, and especially the earlier popular poetry, I cannot help thinking that a great difference will be observed in the structure of the verse, the character of the sentiments, the ornaments and refinement of the language. Neither, indeed, as might be expected, from the progress of human affairs, was the change in the popular style of poetry achieved without some disadvantages, which counterbalanced, in a certain degree, the superior art and exercise of fancy which had been introduced of late times.

The expressions of Sir Philip Sidney, an unquestionable judge of poetry, flourishing in Elizabeth's golden reign, and drawing around him, like a magnet, the most distinguished poets of the age, amongst whom we need only name Shakespeare and Spenser, still show something to regret when he compared the highly wrought and richly ornamented poetry of his own time with the ruder but more energetic diction of 'Chevy Chase.'⁶ His words, often quoted, cannot yet be dispensed with on the present occasion. They are a chapter in the history of ancient poetry. 'Certainly,' says the brave

knight, 'I must confess my own barbarousness; I never heard the old song of Percy and Douglas, that I found not my heart more moved than with a trumpet. And yet it is sung by some blind crowder, with no rougher voice than rude style, which being so evil apparelled in the dust and cobwebs of that uncivil age, what would it work, trimmed in the gorgeous eloquence of Pindar ?'^[7]

If we inquire more particularly what were the peculiar charms by which the old minstrel ballad produced an effect like a trumpet-sound upon the bosom of a real son of chivalry, we may not be wrong in ascribing it to the extreme simplicity with which the narrative moves forward, neglecting all the more minute ornaments of speech and diction, to the grand object of enforcing on the hearer a striking and affecting catastrophe. The author seems too serious in his wish to affect the audience, to allow himself to be drawn aside by anything which can, either by its tenor, or the manner in which it is spoken, have the perverse effect of distracting attention from the catastrophe.

Such grand and serious beauties, however, occurred but rarely to the old minstrels; and, in order to find them, it became necessary to struggle through long passages of monotony, languor, and inanity. Unfortunately it also happened, that those who, like Sidney, could ascertain, feel, and do full justice to the beauties of the heroic ballad, were few, compared to the numbers who could be sensible of the trite *verbiage* of a bald passage, or the ludicrous effect of an absurd rhyme. In England, accordingly, the popular ballad fell into

contempt during the seventeenth century; and although in remote counties^[8] its inspiration was occasionally the source of a few verses, it seems to have become almost entirely obsolete in the capital. Even the Civil Wars, which gave so much occasion for poetry, produced rather song and satire, than the ballad or popular epic. The curious reader may satisfy himself on this point, should he wish to ascertain the truth of the allegation, by looking through D'Urfey's large and curious collection,^[9] when he will be aware that the few ballads which it contains are the most ancient productions in the book, and very seldom take their date after the commencement of the seventeenth century.

In Scotland, on the contrary, the old minstrel ballad long continued to preserve its popularity. Even the last contests of Jacobitism were recited with great vigour in ballads of the time, the authors of some of which are known and remembered; nor is there a more spirited ballad preserved than that of Mr. Skirving^[10] (father of Skirving the artist), upon the battle of Prestonpans, so late as 1745.^[11] But this was owing to circumstances connected with the habits of the people in a remote and rude country, which could not exist in the richer and wealthier provinces of England.

On the whole, however, the ancient Heroic ballad, as it was called, seemed to be fast declining among the more enlightened and literary part of both countries; and if retained by the lower classes in Scotland, it had in England ceased to exist, or degenerated into doggerel of the last degree of vileness.

Subjects the most interesting were abandoned to the

poorest rhymers, and one would have thought that, as in an ass-race, the prize had been destined to the slowest of those who competed for the prize. The melancholy fate of Miss Ray, [\[12\]](#) who fell by the hands of a frantic lover, could only inspire the Grub Street muse with such verses as these—that is, if I remember them correctly:

‘A Sandwich favourite was this fair,
And her he dearly loved;
By whom six children had, we hear;
This story fatal proved.

A clergyman, O wicked one,
In Covent Garden shot her;
No time to cry upon her God,
It’s hoped He’s not forgot her.’

If it be true, as in other cases, that when things are at the worst, they must mend, it was certainly time to expect an amelioration in the department in which such doggerel passed current.

Accordingly, previous to this time, a new species of poetry seems to have arisen, which in some cases endeavoured to pass itself as the production of genuine antiquity and in others, honestly avowed an attempt to emulate the merits and avoid the errors with which the old ballad was encumbered; and in the effort to accomplish this, a species of composition was discovered, which is capable of being subjected to peculiar rules of criticism, and of exhibiting excellences of its own.

In writing for the use of the general reader, rather than the poetical antiquary, I shall be readily excused from entering into any inquiry respecting the authors who first showed the way in this peculiar department of modern poetry, which I may

term the imitation of the old ballad, especially that of the latter or Elizabethan era. One of the oldest, according to my recollection, which pretends to engraft modern refinement upon ancient simplicity, is extremely beautiful, both from the words and the simple and affecting melody to which they are usually sung. The title is 'Lord Henry and Fair Catherine.' It begins thus:

**'In ancient days, in Britain's isle,
Lord Henry well was known ;
No knight in all the land more famed,
Or more deserved renown.**

**His thoughts were all on honour bent,
He ne'er would stoop to love:
No lady in the land had power
His frozen heart to move.'**[\[13\]](#)

Early in the eighteenth century, this peculiar species of composition became popular. We find Tickell, the friend of Addison, who produced the beautiful ballad 'Of Leinster famed for Maidens fair.'[\[14\]](#) Mallet, Goldsmith, Shenstone, Percy, and many others, followed an example which had much to recommend it, especially as it presented considerable facilities to those who wished, at as little exertion of trouble as possible, to attain for themselves a certain degree of literary reputation.

Before, however, treating of the professed imitators of Ancient Ballad Poetry, I ought to say a word upon those who have written their imitations with the preconceived purpose of passing them for ancient.

There is no small degree of cant in the violent invectives with which imposters of this nature have been assailed. In fact,

the case of each is special, and ought to be separately considered, according to its own circumstances. If a young, perhaps a female,^[15] author chooses to circulate a beautiful poem—we will suppose that of Hardyknute—under the disguise of antiquity, the public is surely more enriched by the contribution than injured by the deception.^[16] It is hardly possible, indeed, without the power of political genius, and acquaintance with ancient language and manners possessed by very few, to succeed in deceiving those who have made this branch of literature their study. The very desire to unite modern refinement with the *verve* of the ancient minstrels, will itself betray the masquerade. A minute acquaintance with ancient customs, and with ancient history, is also demanded, to sustain a part which, as it must rest on deception, cannot be altogether an honourable one.

Two of the most distinguished authors of this class have, in this manner, been detected; being deficient in the knowledge requisite to support their genius in the disguise they meditated. Hardyknute, for instance, already mentioned, is irreconcilable with all chronology, and a chief with a Norwegian name is strangely introduced as the first of the nobles brought to resist a Norse invasion, at the battle of Largs: the ‘needlework so rare,’ introduced by the fair authoress, must have been certainly long posterior to the reign of Alexander III. In Chatterton’s ballad of ‘Sir Charles Baudwin,’ we find an anxious attempt to represent the composition as ancient, and some entries in the public accounts of Bristol were appealed to in corroboration. But neither was this ingenious, but most

unhappy young man, with all his powers of poetry, and with the antiquarian knowledge which he had collected with indiscriminating but astonishing research, able to impose on that part of the public qualified to judge of the compositions, which it had occurred to him to pass off as those of a monk of the fourteenth century. It was in vain that he in each word doubled the consonants, like the sentinels of an endangered army. The art used to disguise and misspell the words only overdid what was intended, and afforded sure evidence that the poems published as antiques had been, in fact, tampered with by a modern artist, as the newly forged medals of modern days stand convicted of imposture from the very touches of the file, by which there is an attempt to imitate the cracks and fissures produced by the hammer upon the original.^[17]

I have only met, in my researches into those matters, with one poem, which, if it had been produced as ancient, could not have been detected on internal evidence. It is the 'War song upon the Victory at Brunnanburg, translated from the Anglo-Saxon into Anglo-Norman,' by the Right Honourable John Hookham Frere. See Ellis's *Specimens of Ancient English Poetry*, vol. i. p. 32.^[18] The accomplished editor tells us, that this very singular poem was intended as an imitation of the style and language of the fourteenth century, and was written during the controversy occasioned by the poems attributed to Rowley.^[19] Mr. Ellis adds, 'the reader will probably hear with some surprise, that this singular instance of critical ingenuity was the composition of an Eton schoolboy.'

The author may be permitted to speak as an artist on

this occasion (disowning, at the same time, all purpose of imposition), as having written, at the request of the late Mr. Ritson, one or two things of this kind—among others, a continuation of the Romance of Thomas of Ercildoune, the only one which chances to be preserved, and which the reader will find in a subsequent volume.^[20] And he thinks himself entitled to state, that a modern poet engaged in such a task, is much in the situation of an architect of the present day, who, if acquainted with his profession, finds no difficulty in copying the external forms of a Gothic castle or abbey; but when it is completed, can hardly, by any artificial tints or cement, supply the spots, weather-stains, and hues of different kinds, with which time alone had invested the venerable fabric which he desires to imitate.

Leaving this branch of the subject, in which the difficulty of passing off what is modern for what is ancient cannot be a matter of regret, we may bestow with advantage some brief consideration on the fair trade of manufacturing modern antiques; not for the purpose of passing them as contraband goods on the skilful antiquary, but in order to obtain the credit due to authors as successful imitators of the ancient simplicity, while their system admits of a considerable infusion of modern refinement. Two classes of imitation may be referred to as belonging to this species of composition. When they approach each other, there may be some difficulty in assigning to individual poems their peculiar character, but in general, the difference is distinctly marked. The distinction lies betwixt the authors of ballads or legendary poems, who have

attempted to imitate the language, the manners, and the sentiments of the ancient poems which were their prototypes; and those, on the contrary, who, without endeavouring to do so, have struck out a particular path for themselves, which cannot with strict propriety be termed either ancient or modern.

In the actual imitation of the ancient ballad, Dr. Percy, whose researches made him well acquainted with that department of poetry, was peculiarly successful. The ‘Hermit of Warkworth,’ the ‘Child of Elle,’ and other minstrel tales of his composition, must always be remembered with fondness by those who have perused them in that period of life when the feelings are strong, and the taste for poetry, especially of this simple nature, is keen and poignant. This learned and amiable prelate was also remarkable for his power of restoring the ancient ballad, by throwing in touches of poetry, so adapted to its tone and tenor, as to assimilate with its original structure, and impress every one who considered the subject as being coeval with the rest of the piece. It must be owned that such freedoms, when assumed by a professed antiquary, addressing himself to antiquaries, and for the sake of illustrating literary antiquities, are subject to great and licentious abuse; and herein the severity of Ritson was to a certain extent justified.

[\[21\]](#) But when the licence is avowed, and practised without the intention to deceive, it cannot be objected to but by scrupulous pedantry.

The poet, perhaps, most capable, by verses, lines, even single words, to relieve and heighten the character of ancient poetry, was the Scottish bard Robert Burns. We are not here

speaking of the avowed lyrical poems of his own composition, which he communicated to Mr. George Thomson,^[22] but of the manner in which he recomposed and repaired the old songs and fragments, for the collection of Johnson and others,^[23] when, if his memory supplied the theme, or general subject of the song, such as it existed in Scottish lore, his genius contributed that part which was to give life and immortality to the whole. If this praise should be thought extravagant, the reader may compare his splendid lyric, ‘My Heart’s in the Highlands,’ with the tame and scarcely half-intelligible remains of that song as preserved by Peter Buchan.^[24] Or, what is perhaps a still more magnificent example of what we mean: ‘Macpherson’s Farewell,’ with all its spirit and grandeur, as repaired by Burns, may be collated with the original poem called ‘Macpherson’s Lament,’ or sometimes the ‘Ruffian’s Rant.’ In Burns’s brilliant rifacimento, the same strain of wild ideas is expressed as we find in the original; but with an infusion of the savage and impassioned spirit of Highland chivalry, which gives a splendor to the composition, of which we find not a trace in the rudeness of the ancient ditty. I can bear witness to the older verses having been current while I was a child, but I never knew a line of the inspired edition of the Ayrshire bard until the appearance of Johnson’s *Museum*.

Besides Percy, Burns, and others, we must not omit to mention Mr. Finlay, whose beautiful song,

‘There came a knight from the field of the
slain,’^[25]

is so happily descriptive of antique manners; or Mickle,^[26]

whose accurate and interesting imitations of the ancient ballad we have already mentioned with approbation in the former *Essay on Ballad Composition*. These, with others of modern date, at the head of whom we must place Thomas Moore,^[27] have aimed at striking the ancient harp with the same bold and rough note to which it was awakened by the ancient minstrels. Southey, Wordsworth, and other distinguished names of the present century, have, in repeated instances, dignified this branch of literature; but no one more than Coleridge, in the wild and imaginative tale of the ‘Ancient Mariner,’ which displays so much beauty with such eccentricity. We should act most unjustly in this department of Scottish ballad poetry, not to mention the names of Leyden, Hogg, and Allan Cunningham.^[28] They have all three honoured their country, by arriving at distinction from a humble origin, and there is none of them under whose hand the ancient Scottish harp has not sounded a bold and distinguished tone. Miss Anne Bannerman likewise should not be forgotten, whose *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* appeared about 1802.^[29] They 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 by a decaying lamp.

As we have already hinted, a numerous class of the authors (some of them of the very first class) who condescended to imitate the simplicity of ancient poetry, gave themselves no trouble to observe the costume, style, or manner, either of the

old minstrel or ballad-singer, but assumed a structure of a separate and peculiar kind, which could not be properly termed either ancient or modern, although made the vehicle of beauties which were common to both. The discrepancy between the mark which they avowed their purpose of shooting at, and that at which they really took aim, is best illustrated by a production of one of the most distinguished of their number. Goldsmith describes the young family of his Vicar of Wakefield, as amusing themselves with conversing about poetry. Mr. Burchell observes that the British poets, who imitated the classics, have especially contributed to introduce a false taste, by loading their lines with epithets, so as to present a combination of luxuriant images, without plot or connection—a string of epithets that improve the sound, without carrying on the sense. But when an example of popular poetry is produced as free from the fault which the critic has just censured, it is the well-known and beautiful poem of ‘Edwin and Agelina!’ which, in felicitous attention to the language, and in fanciful ornament of imagery, is as unlike to a minstrel ballad, as a lady assuming the dress of a Shepherdess for a masquerade is different from the actual Sisly of Salisbury Plain. Tickell’s beautiful ballad^[30] is equally formed upon a pastoral, sentimental, and ideal model, not, however, less beautifully executed; and the attention of Addison’s friend has been probably directed to the ballad stanza (for the stanza is all which is imitated), by the praise bestowed on ‘Chevy Chase’ in the *Spectator*.^[31]

Upon a later occasion, the subject of Mallet’s fine poem,

‘Edwin and Emma,’ being absolutely rural in itself, and occurring at the hamlet of Bowes, in Yorkshire, might have seduced the poet from the *beau-idéal* which he had pictured to himself, into something more immediately allied to common life. But Mallet was not a man to neglect what was esteemed fashionable, and poor Hannah Railton and her lover Wrightson were enveloped in the elegant frippery appertaining to ‘Edwin and Emma’; for the similes, reflections, and suggestions of the poet are, in fact, too intrusive and too well said to suffer the reader to feel the full taste of the tragic tale. The verses are doubtless beautiful, but, I must own, the simple prose of the Curate’s letter, who gives the narrative of the tale as it really happened, has to me a tone of serious veracity more affecting than the ornaments of Mallet’s fiction.^[32] The same author’s ballad, ‘William and Margaret,’ has, in some degree, the same fault. A disembodied spirit is not a person before whom the living spectator takes leisure to make remarks of a moral kind; as

‘So will the fairest face appear,
When youth and years are flown,
And such the robe that Kings must wear,
When death has reft their crown.’

Upon the whole, the ballad, though the best of Mallet’s writing, is certainly inferior to its original, which I presume to be the very fine and even terrific old Scottish tale, beginning—

‘There came a ghost to Margaret’s door.’^[33]

It may be found in Allan Ramsay’s *Tea-Table Miscellany*.^[34]

We need only stop to mention another very beautiful

piece of this fanciful kind, by Dr. Cartwright, called ‘Armin and Elvira,’^[35] containing some excellent poetry, expressed with unusual felicity. I have a vision of having met this accomplished gentleman in my very early youth, and am the less likely to be mistaken, as he was the first living poet I recollect to have seen.^[36] His poem had the distinguished honour to be much admired by our celebrated philosopher, Dugald Stewart, who was wont to quote, with much pathos, the picture of resignation in the following stanza:

‘And while his eye to heaven he raised,
Its silent waters stole away.’^[37]

After enumerating so many persons of undoubted genius, who have cultivated the Arcadian style of poetry (for to such it may be compared), it would be endless to enumerate the various Sir Eldreds of the hills and downs whose stories were woven into *legendary tales*—which came at length to be the name assigned to this half-ancient, half-modern style of composition.

In general, I may observe, that the supposed facility of this species of composition, the alluring simplicity of which was held sufficient to support it, afforded great attractions for those whose ambition led them to exercise their untried talents in verse, but who were desirous to do so with the least possible expense of thought. The task seems to present, at least to the inexperienced acolyte of the Muses, the same advantages which an instrument of sweet sound and small compass offers to those who begin their studies in music. In either case, however, it frequently happens that the scholar, getting tired of the palling

and monotonous character of the poetry or music which he produces, becomes desirous to strike a more independent note, even at the risk of its being a more difficult one.

The same simplicity involves an inconvenience fatal to the continued popularity of any species of poetry, by exposing it in a peculiar degree to ridicule and to parody. Dr. Johnson, whose style of poetry was of a very different and more stately description, could ridicule the ballads of Percy, in such stanzas as these:

‘The tender infant, meek and mild,
Fell down upon a stone;
The nurse took up the squalling child,
But still the child squall’d on’;

with various slipshod imitations of the same quality.^[38] It did not require his talents to pursue this vein of raillery, for it was such as most men could imitate, and all could enjoy. It is, therefore, little wonderful that this sort of composition should be repeatedly laid aside for considerable periods of time, and certainly as little so, that it should have been repeatedly revived, like some forgotten melody, and have again obtained some degree of popularity, until it sunk once more under satire, as well as parody, but, above all, the effects of satiety.

During the thirty years that I have paid some attention to literary matters, the taste for the ancient ballad melody, and for the closer or more distant imitation of the that strain of poetry, has more than once arisen, and more than once subsided, in consequence, perhaps, of too unlimited indulgence. That this has been the case in other countries, we know; for the Spanish poet, when he found that the beautiful Morisco

romances were excluding all other topics, confers upon them a hearty malediction.^[39]

A period when this particular taste for the popular ballad was in the most extravagant degree of fashion, became the occasion, unexpectedly, indeed, of my deserting the profession to which I was educated, and in which I had sufficiently advantageous prospects for a person of limited ambition. I have, in a former publication,^[40] undertaken to mention this circumstance; and I will endeavor to do so with becoming brevity, and without more egotism than is positively exacted by the nature of the story.

I may, in the first place, remark that although the assertion has been made, and that by persons who seemed satisfied with their authority, it is a mistake to suppose that my situation in life or place in society were materially altered by such success as I attained in literary attempts. My birth, without giving the least pretension to distinction, was that of a gentleman, and connected me with several respectable families and accomplished persons. My education had been a good one, although I was deprived of its full benefit by indifferent health, just at the period when I ought to have been most sedulous in improving it. The young men with whom I was brought up, and lived most familiarly, were those, who, from opportunities, birth, and talents, might be expected to make the greatest advances in the career for which we were all destined; and I have the pleasure still to preserve my youthful intimacy with no inconsiderable number of them, whom their merit has carried forward to the highest honours of their profession. Neither was

I in a situation to be embarrassed by the *res angusta domi*,^[41] which might have otherwise brought painful additional obstructions to a path in which progress is proverbially slow. I enjoyed a moderate degree of business for my standing, and the friendship of more than one person of consideration and influence efficiently disposed to aid my views in life. The private fortune, also, which I might expect, and finally inherited, from my family, did not, indeed, amount to affluence, but placed me considerably beyond all apprehension of want. I mention these particulars merely because they are true. Many better men than myself have owed their rise from indigence and obscurity to their own talents, which were, doubtless, much more adequate to the task of raising them than any which I possess. But although it would be absurd and ungracious in me to deny that I owe to literature many marks of distinction to which I could not otherwise have aspired, and particularly that of securing the acquaintance, and even the friendship, of many remarkable persons of the age, to whom I could not otherwise have made my way; it would, on the other hand, be ridiculous to affect gratitude to the public favour, either for my general position in society, or the means of supporting it with decency, matters which had been otherwise secured under the usual chances of human affairs. Thus much I have thought it necessary to say upon a subject, which is, after all, of very little consequence to any one but myself. I proceed to detail the circumstances which engaged me in literary pursuits.

During the last ten years of the eighteenth century, the

art of poetry was at a remarkably low ebb in Britain. Hayley, to whom fashion had some years before ascribed a higher degree of reputation than posterity has confirmed, had now lost his reputation for talent, though he still lived beloved and respected as an amiable and accomplished man.^[42] The Bard of Memory slumbered on his laurels, and He of Hope had scarce begun to attract his share of public attention.^[43] Cowper, a poet of deep feeling and bright genius, was still alive, indeed;^[44] but the hypochondria, which was his mental malady, impeded his popularity. Burns, whose genius our southern neighbors could hardly yet comprehend, had long confined himself to song-writing. Names which are now known and distinguished wherever the English language is spoken, were then only beginning to be mentioned; and, unless among the small number of persons who habitually devote a part of their leisure to literature, even those of Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, were still but little known. The realms of Parnassus, like many a kingdom at the period, seemed to lie open to the first bold invader, whether he should be a daring usurper, or could show a legitimate title of sovereignty.

As far back as 1788, a new species of literature began to be introduced into this country. Germany, long known as a powerful branch of the European confederacy, was then, for the first time, heard of as the cradle of a style of poetry and literature, of a kind much more analogous to that of Britain than either the French, Spanish, or Italian schools, though all three had been at various times cultivated and imitated among us. The names of Lessing, Klopstock, Schiller, and other

German poets of eminence, were only known in Britain very imperfectly. *The Sorrows of Werter* was the only composition that had attained any degree of popularity, and the success of that remarkable novel, notwithstanding the distinguished genius of the author, was retarded by the nature of its incidents. To the other compositions of [Goethe](#), whose talents were destined to illuminate the age in which he flourished, the English remained strangers, and much more so to Schiller, [Bürger](#), and a whole cycle of foreigners of distinguished merit. The obscurity to which German literature seemed to be condemned, did not arise from want of brilliancy in the lights by which it was illuminated, but from the palpable thickness of the darkness by which they were surrounded. Frederick II of Prussia had given partial and ungracious testimony against his native language and native literature, and impolitically and unwisely, as well as unjustly, had yielded to the French that superiority in letters, which, after his death, paved the way for their obtaining, for a time, an equal superiority in arms. That great Prince, by setting the example of undervaluing his country in one respect, raised a belief in its general inferiority, and destroyed the manly pride with which a nation is naturally disposed to regard its own peculiar manners and peculiar literature.

Unmoved by the scornful neglect of its sovereigns and nobles, and encouraged by the tide of native genius which flowed in upon the nation, German literature began to assume a new, interesting, and highly impressive character, to which it became impossible for strangers to shut their eyes. That it exhibited the faults of exaggeration and false taste, almost

inseparable from the first attempts at the heroic and at the pathetic, cannot be denied. It was, in a word, the first crop of a rich soil, which throws out weeds as well as flowers with a prolific abundance.

It was so late as the 21st day of April 1788 that the literary persons of Edinburgh, of whom, at that period, I am better qualified to speak than of those of Britain generally, or especially those of London, were first made aware of the existence of works of genius in a language cognate with the English, and possessed of the same manly force of expression. They learned, at the same time, that the taste which dictated the German compositions was of a kind as nearly allied to the English as their language. Those who were accustomed from their youth to admire Milton and Shakespeare, became acquainted, I may say for the first time, with the existence of a race of poets who had the same lofty ambition to spurn the flaming boundaries of the universe,^[45] and investigate the realms of chaos and old night; and of dramatists, who, disclaiming the pedantry of the unities, sought, at the expense of occasional improbabilities and extravagances, to present life in its scenes of wildest contrast, and in all its boundless variety of character, mingling, without hesitation, livelier with more serious incidents, and exchanging scenes of tragic distress, as they occur in common life, with those of a comic tendency. This emancipation from the rules so servilely adhered to by the French school, and particularly by their dramatic poets, although it was attended with some disadvantages, especially the risk of extravagance and bombast, was the means of giving

free scope to the genius of Goethe, Schiller, and others, which, thus relieved from shackles, was not long in soaring to the highest pitch of poetic sublimity. The late venerable Henry Mackenzie, author of *The Man of Feeling*, in an Essay upon the German Theatre,^[46] introduced his countrymen to this new species of national literature, the peculiarities of which he traced with equal truth and spirit, although they were at that time known to him only through the imperfect and uncongenial medium of a French translation. Upon the day already mentioned (21st April 1788), he read to the Royal Society an Essay on German Literature, which made much noise, and produced a powerful effect. ‘Germany,’ he observed, ‘in her literary aspect, presents herself to observation in a singular point of view; that of a country arrived at maturity, along with the neighbouring nations, in the arts and sciences, in the pleasures and refinements of manners, and yet only in its infancy with regard to writings of taste and imagination. This last path, however, from these very circumstances, she pursues with an enthusiasm which no other situation could perhaps have produced, the enthusiasm which novelty inspires, and which the servility incident to a more cultivated and critical state of literature does not restrain.’ At the same time, the accomplished critic showed himself equally familiar with the classical rules of the French stage, and failed not to touch upon the acknowledged advantages which these produced, by the encouragement and regulation of taste, though at the risk of repressing genius.

But it was not the dramatic literature alone of the

Germans which was hitherto unknown to their neighbours—their fictitious narratives, their ballad poetry, and other branches of their literature, which are particularly apt to bear the stamp of the extravagant and the supernatural, began to occupy the attention of the British literati.

In Edinburgh, where the remarkable coincidence between the German language and that of the Lowland Scottish encouraged young men to approach this newly discovered spring of literature, a class was formed, of six or seven intimate friends, who proposed to make themselves acquainted with the German language. They were in the habit of living much together, and the time they spent in this new study was felt as a period of great amusement. One source of this diversion was the laziness of one of their number, the present author, who, averse to the necessary toil of grammar and its rules, was in the practice of fighting his way to the knowledge of the German by his acquaintance with the Scottish and Anglo-Saxon dialects, and, of course, frequently committed blunders which were not lost on his more accurate and more studious companions. A more general source of amusement was the despair of the teacher, on finding it impossible to extract from his Scottish students the degree of sensibility necessary, as he thought, to enjoy the beauties of the author to whom he considered it proper first to introduce them. We were desirous to penetrate at once into the recesses of the Teutonic literature, and therefore were ambitious of perusing Goethe and Schiller, and others whose fame had been sounded by Mackenzie. Dr. Willich (a medical gentleman), who was our teacher, was judiciously disposed to commence our studies with

the more simple diction of Gesner, and prescribed to us *The Death of Abel* as the production from which our German tasks were to be drawn. The pietistic style of this author was ill adapted to attract young persons of our age and disposition. We could no more sympathize with the over-strained sentimentality of Adam and his family, than we could have had a fellow-feeling with the jolly Faun of the same author, who broke his beautiful jug, and then made a song on it which might have affected all Staffordshire. To sum up the distresses of Dr. Willich, we, with one consent, voted Abel an insufferable bore, and gave the preeminence, in point of masculine character, to his brother Cain, or even to Lucifer himself. When these jests, which arose out of the sickly monotony and affected ecstasies of the poet, failed to amuse us, we had for our entertainment the unutterable sounds manufactured by a Frenchman, our fellow-student, who, with the economical purpose of learning two languages at once, was endeavoring to acquire German, of which he knew nothing, by means of English, concerning which he was nearly as ignorant. Heaven only knows the notes which he uttered, in attempting, with unpractised organs, to imitate the gutturals of these two intractable languages. At length, in the midst of much laughing and little study, most of us acquired some knowledge, more or less extensive, of the German language, and selected for ourselves, some in the philosophy of Kant, some in the more animated works of the German dramatists, specimens more to our taste than *The Death of Abel*.^[47]

About this period, or a year or two sooner, the

accomplished and excellent Lord Woodhouselee, [\[48\]](#) one of the friends of my youth, made a spirited version of *The Robbers* of Schiller, which, I believe, was the first published, though an English version appeared soon afterwards in London—as the metropolis then took the lead in everything like literary adventure. The enthusiasm with which this work was received, greatly increased the general taste for German compositions.

While universal curiosity was thus distinguishing the advancing taste for the German language and literature, the success of a very young student, in a juvenile publication, seemed to show that the prevailing taste in that country might be easily employed as a formidable auxiliary to renewing the spirit of our own, upon the same system as when medical persons attempt, by the transfusion of blood, to pass into the veins of an aged and exhausted patient, the vivacity of the circulation and liveliness of sensation which distinguish a young subject. The person who first attempted to introduce something like the German taste into English fictitious dramatic and poetical composition – although his works, when first published, engaged general attention – is now comparatively forgotten. I mean [Matthew Gregory Lewis](#), whose character and literary history are so immediately connected with the subject of which I am treating, that a few authentic particulars may be here inserted by one to whom he was well known.

Lewis's rank in society was determined by his birth, which, at the same time, assured his fortune. His father was Under-Secretary at War, at that time a very lucrative

appointment, and the young poet was provided with a seat in Parliament as soon as his age permitted him to fill it. But his mind did not incline him to politics, or, if it did, they were not of the complexion which his father, attached to Mr. Pitt's administration, would have approved. He was, moreover, indolent, and though possessed of abilities sufficient to conquer any difficulty which might stand in the way of classical attainments, he preferred applying his exertions in a path where they were rewarded with more immediate applause. As he completed his education abroad,^[49] he had an opportunity of indulging his inclination for the extraordinary and supernatural, by wandering through the whole enchanted land of German faëry and *diablerie*, not forgetting the paths of her enthusiastic tragedy and romantic poetry.

We are easily induced to imitate what we admire, and Lewis early distinguished himself by a romance in the German taste, called *The Monk*. In this work, written in his twentieth year, and founded on the eastern apologue of the Santon Barsisa,^[50] the author introduced supernatural machinery with a courageous consciousness of his own power to manage its ponderous strength, which commanded the respect of his reader. *The Monk* was published in 1795,^[51] and though liable to the objections common to the school to which it belonged, and to others peculiar to itself, placed its author at once high in the scale of men of letters. Nor can that be regarded as an ordinary exertion of genius, to which Charles Fox paid the unusual compliment of crossing the House of Commons that he might congratulate the young author, whose work obtained

high praise from many other able men of that able time. The party which approved *The Monk* was at first superior in the lists, and it was some time before the anonymous author^[52] of the *Pursuits of Literature* denounced as puerile and absurd the supernatural machinery which Lewis had introduced:

‘I bear an English heart,
Unused at ghosts or rattling bones to start.’^[53]

Yet the acute and learned critic betrays some inconsistency in praising the magic of the Italian poets, and complimenting Mrs. Radcliffe^[54] for her success in supernatural imagery, for which at the same moment he thus sternly censures her brother-novelist.

A more legitimate topic of condemnation was the indelicacy of particular passages. The present author will hardly be deemed a willing, or at least an interested apologist for an offence equally repugnant to decency and good-breeding. But as Lewis at once, and with a good grace, submitted to the voice of censure, and expunged the objectionable passages,^[55] we cannot help considering the manner in which the fault was insisted on, after all the amends had been offered of which the case could admit, as in the last degree ungenerous and uncandid. The pertinacity with which the passages so much found fault with were dwelt upon, seemed to warrant a belief that something more was desired than the correction of the author’s errors; and that, where the apologies of extreme youth, foreign education, and instant submission, were unable to satisfy the critics’ fury, they must have been

determined to act on the severity of the old proverb, 'Confess and be hanged.' Certain it is, that other persons, offenders in the same degree, have been permitted to sue out their pardon without either retraction or palinode.^[56]

Another peccadillo of the author of *The Monk* was his having borrowed from Musæus, and from the popular tales of the Germans, the striking and singular adventure of the *Bleeding Nun*.^[57] But the bold and free hand with which he traced some scenes, as well of natural as of that which arises from supernatural causes, shows distinctly that the plagiarism could not have been occasioned by any deficiency of invention on his part, though it might take place from wantonness or willfulness.

In spite of the objections we have stated, *The Monk* was so highly popular, that it seemed to create an epoch in our literature. But the public were chiefly captivated by the poetry with which Mr. Lewis had interspersed his prose narrative. It has now passed from recollection among the changes of literary taste; but many may remember, as well as I do, the effect produced by the beautiful ballad of 'Durandarte,' which had the good fortune to be adapted to an air of great sweetness and pathos; by the ghost tale of 'Alonzo and Imogine'; and by several other pieces of legendary poetry, which addressed themselves in all the charms of novelty and of simplicity to a public who had for a long time been unused to any regale of the kind. In his poetry as well as his prose, Mr. Lewis had been a successful imitator of the Germans, both in his attachment to the ancient ballad, and in the tone of superstition which they

willingly mingle with it. New arrangements of the stanza, and a varied construction of verses, were also adopted, and welcomed as an addition of a new string to the British harp. In this respect, the stanza in which ‘Alonzo the Brave’ is written, was greatly admired, and received as an improvement worthy of adoption into English poetry. [\[58\]](#)

In short, Lewis’s works were admired, and the author became famous, not merely through his own merit, though that was of no mean quality, but because he had in some measure taken the public by surprise, by using a style of composition, which, like national melodies, is so congenial to the general taste, that, though it palls by being much hackneyed, it has only to be for a short time forgotten in order to recover its original popularity.

It chanced that, while his fame was at the highest, Mr. Lewis became almost a yearly visitor to Scotland, chiefly from attachment to the illustrious family of Argyle. The writer of these remarks had the advantage of being made known to the most distinguished author of the day, by a lady who belongs by birth to that family, and is equally distinguished by her beauty and accomplishments. [\[59\]](#) Out of this accidental acquaintance, which increased into a sort of intimacy, consequences arose which altered almost all the Scottish ballad-maker’s future prospects in life.

In early youth I had been an eager student of Ballad Poetry; and the tree is still in my recollection, beneath which I lay and first entered upon the enchanting perusal of Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, although it has long perished in the

general blight which affected the whole race of Oriental
platanus to which it belonged.^[60] The taste of another person
had strongly encouraged my own researches into this species of
legendary lore.^[61] But I had never dreamed of an attempt to
imitate what gave me so much pleasure.

I had, indeed, tried the metrical translations which were
occasionally recommended to us at the High School. I got credit
for attempting to do what was enjoined, but very little for the
mode in which the task was performed, and I used to feel not a
little mortified when my versions were placed in contrast with
others of admitted merit. At one period of my schoolboy days, I
was so far left to my own desires as to become guilty of Verses
on a Thunder-storm, which were much approved of, until a
malevolent critic sprung up, in the shape of an apothecary's
blue-buskined wife, who affirmed that my most sweet poetry
was stolen from an old magazine. I never forgave the
imputation, and even now I acknowledge some resentment
against the poor woman's memory. She indeed accused me
unjustly, when she said I had stolen my brooms ready made;
but as I had, like most premature poets, copied all the words
and ideas of which my verses consisted, she was so far right. I
made one or two faint attempts at verse, after I had undergone
this sort of daw-plucking at the hands of the apothecary's wife;
but some friend or other always advised me to put my verses in
the fire, and, like Dorax in the play, I submitted, though 'with a
swelling heart.'^[62] In short, excepting the usual tribute to a
mistress's eyebrow, which is the language of passion rather
than poetry, I had not for ten years indulged the wish to couple

so much as *love* and *dove*, when, finding Lewis in possession of so much reputation, and conceiving that, if I fell behind him in poetical powers, I considerably exceeded him in general information, I suddenly took it into my head to attempt the style of poetry by which he had raised himself to fame.

This idea was hurried into execution, in consequence of a temptation which others, as well as the author, found it difficult to resist. The celebrated ballad of ‘Lenoré,’ by Bürger, was about this time introduced into England; and it is remarkable, that, written as far back as 1775, it was upwards of twenty years before it was known in Britain, though calculated to make so strong an impression. The wild character of the tale was such as struck the imagination of all who read it, although the idea of the lady’s ride behind the spectre horseman had been long before hit upon by an English ballad-maker. But this pretended English original, if in reality it be such, is so dull, flat, and prosaic, as to leave the distinguished German author all that is valuable in his story, by clothing it with a fanciful wildness of expression, which serves to set forth the marvellous tale in its native terror. The ballad of ‘Lenoré’ accordingly possessed general attractions for such of the English as understood the language in which it is written; and, as if there had been a charm in the ballad, no one seemed to cast his eyes upon it without a desire to make it known by translation to his own countrymen, and six or seven versions were accordingly presented to the public.^[63] Although the present author was one of those who intruded his translation on the world at this time, he may fairly exculpate himself from

the rashness of entering the lists against so many rivals. The circumstances which threw him into this competition were quite accidental, and of a nature tending to show how much the destiny of human life depends upon unimportant occurrences, to which little consequence is attached at the moment.

About the summer of 1793 or 1794, the celebrated Miss Lætitia Aikin, better known as Mrs. Barbauld, paid a visit to Edinburgh, and was received by such literary society as the place then boasted, with the hospitality to which her talents and her worth entitled her. Among others, she was kindly welcomed by the late excellent and admired Professor Dugald Stewart, his lady, and family. It was in their evening society that Miss Aikin drew from her pocket-book a version of ‘Lenoré,’ executed by William Taylor, Esq., of Norwich,^[64] with as much freedom as was consistent with great spirit and scrupulous fidelity. She read this composition to the company, who were electrified by the tale. It was the more successful, that Mr. Taylor had boldly copied the imitative harmony of the German, and described the spectral journey in language resembling that of the original. Bürger had thus painted the ghostly career:

‘Und hurre, hurre, hop, hop, hop,
Gings fort in sausendem Galopp,
Dass Ross und Reiter schnoben,
Und Kies und Funken stoben.’

The words were rendered by the kindred sounds in
English:

‘Tramp, tramp, across the land they speede,

Splash, splash, across the sea;
Hurrah, the dead can ride apace!
Dost fear to ride with me?’

When Miss Aikin had finished her recitation, she replaced in her pocket-book the paper from which she had read it, and enjoyed the satisfaction of having made a strong impression on the hearers, whose bosoms thrilled yet the deeper, as the ballad was not to be more closely introduced to them.

The author was not present upon this occasion, although he had then the distinguished advantage of being a familiar friend and frequent visitor of Professor Stewart and his family. But he was absent from town while Miss Aikin was in Edinburgh, and it was not until his return that he found all his friends in rapture with the intelligence and good sense of their visitor, but in particular with the wonderful translation from the German, by means of which she had delighted and astonished them. The enthusiastic description given of Bürger’s ballad, and the broken account of the story of which only two lines were recollected, inspired the author, who had some acquaintance, as has been said, with the German language, and a strong taste for popular poetry, with a desire to see the original.

This was not a wish easily gratified; German works were at that time seldom found in London for sale—in Edinburgh never. A lady of noble German descent,^[65] whose friendship I have enjoyed for many years, found means, however, to procure me a copy of Bürger’s works from Hamburg. The perusal of the original rather exceeded than

disappointed the expectations which the report of Mr. Stewart's family had induced me to form. At length, when the book had been a few hours in my possession, I found myself giving an animated account of the poem to a friend, and rashly added a promise to furnish a copy in English ballad verse.

I well recollect that I began my task after supper, and finished it about daybreak the next morning, by which time the ideas which the task had a tendency to summon up were rather of an uncomfortable character. As my object was much more to make a good translation of the poem for those whom I wished to please, than to acquire any poetical fame for myself, I retained in my translation the two lines which Mr. Taylor had rendered with equal boldness and felicity. [\[66\]](#)

My attempt succeeded far beyond my expectations; and it may readily be believed that I was induced to persevere in a pursuit which gratified my own vanity, while it seemed to amuse others. I accomplished a translation of 'Der Wilde Jäger'—a romantic ballad founded on a superstition universally current in Germany, and known also in Scotland and France. In this I took rather more licence than in versifying 'Lenoré'; and I balladised one or two other poems of Bürger with more or less success. In the course of a few weeks, my own vanity, and favourable opinion of friends, interested by the temporary revival of a species of poetry containing a germ of popularity of which perhaps they were not themselves aware, urged me to the decisive step of sending a selection, at least of my translations to the press, to save the numerous applications which were made for copies. When was there an

author to such a recommendations? In 1796, the present author was prevailed on, 'by request of friends,' to indulge his own vanity by publishing the translation of 'Lenoré,' with that of 'The Wild Huntsman,' in a thin quarto.^[67]

The fate of this, my first publication, was by no means flattering. I distributed so many copies among my friends as, according to the booksellers, materially to interfere with the sale; and the number of translations which appeared in England about the same time, including that of Mr. Taylor, to which I had been so much indebted, and which was published in *The Monthly Magazine*, were sufficient to exclude a provincial writer from competition. However different my success might have been, had I been fortunate to have led the way in the general scramble for precedence, my efforts sunk unnoticed when launched at the same time with those of Mr. Taylor (upon whose property I had committed the kind of piracy already noticed, and who generously forgave me the invasion of his rights); of my ingenious and amiable friend of many years, William Robert Spenser; of Mr. Pye, the laureate of the day, and many others besides. In a word, my adventure, where so many pushed off to sea, proved a dead loss, and a great part of the edition was condemned to the service of the trunk-maker. Nay, so complete was the failure of the unfortunate ballads, that the very existence of them was soon forgotten; and, in a newspaper, in which I very lately read, to my no small horror, a most appalling list of my own various publications, I saw this, my first offence, had escaped the industrious collector, for whose indefatigable research I may in

gratitude wish a better object.^[68]

The failure of my first publication did not operate, in any unpleasant degree, either on my feelings or spirits. I was coldly received by strangers, but my reputation began rather to increase among my own friends, and, on the whole, I was more bent to show the world it neglected something worth notice, than to be affronted by its indifference. Or rather, to speak candidly, I found pleasure in the literary labour in which I had, almost by accident, become engaged, and labored, less in the hope of pleasing others, though certainly without despair of doing so, than in the pursuit of a new and agreeable amusement to myself. I pursued the German language keenly, and, though far from being a correct scholar, became a bold and daring reader, nay, even translator, of various dramatic pieces from that tongue.^[69]

The want of books at that time (about 1796) was a great interruption to the rapidity of my movements; for the young do not know, and perhaps my own contemporaries may have forgotten, the difficulty with which publications were then procured from the Continent. The worthy and excellent friend, of whom I gave a sketch many years afterwards in the person of Jonathan Oldbuck,^[70] procured me Adelung's *Dictionary*, through the mediation of Father Pepper, a monk of the Scotch College of Ratisbon. Other wants of the same nature were supplied by Mrs. Scott of Harden, whose kindness in a similar instance I have had already occasion to acknowledge. Through this lady's connections on the Continent, I obtained copies of Bürger, Schiller, Goethe, and other standard German works;

and though the obligation be of a distant date, it still remains impressed on my memory, after a life spent in a constant interchange of friendship and kindness with that family, which is, according to Scottish ideas, the head of my house.

Being thus furnished with the necessary originals, I began to translate on all sides, certainly without anything like an accurate knowledge of the language; and although the dramas of Goethe, Schiller and others, powerfully attracted one whose early attention to the German had been arrested by Mackenzie's Dissertation, and the play of *The Robbers*, yet the ballad poetry, in which I had made a bold essay, was still my favourite. I was yet more delighted on finding that the old English, and especially the Scottish language, were so nearly similar to the German, not in sound merely, but in the turn of phrase, that they were capable of being rendered line for line, with very little variation. [\[71\]](#)

By degrees, I acquired sufficient confidence to attempt the imitation of what I admired. The ballad called 'Glenfinlas' was, I think, the first original poem which I ventured to compose. As it is supposed to be a translation from the Gaelic, I considered myself as liberated from imitating the antiquated language and rude rhythm of the Minstrel ballad. A versification of an Ossianic fragment came nearer to the idea I had formed of my task; for although controversy may have arisen concerning the authenticity of the poems, yet I never heard it disputed, by those whom an accurate knowledge of the Gaelic rendered competent judges, that in their spirit and diction they nearly resemble fragments of poetry extant in that

language, to the genuine antiquity of which no doubt can attach. Indeed, the celebrated dispute on that subject is something like the more bloody though scarce fiercer controversy, about the Popish Plot in Charles the Second's time, concerning which Dryden has said:

‘Succeeding times will equal folly call,
Believing nothing, or believing all.’[\[72\]](#)

The Celtic people of Erin and Albyn had, in short, a style of poetry properly called natural, though MacPherson was rather an excellent poet than a faithful editor and translator. This style and fashion of poetry, existing in a different language, was supposed to give the original of ‘Glenfinlas,’ and the author was to pass for one who had used his best command of English to do the Gaelic model justice. In one point, the incidents of the poems were irreconcilable with the costume of the times in which they were laid. The ancient Highland chieftains, when they had a mind to ‘hunt the dun deer down,’ did not retreat into solitary bothies, or trust the success of the chase to their own unassisted exertions, without a single gillie to help them; they assembled their clan, and all partook of the sport, forming a ring, or enclosure, called the Tinchell, and driving the prey towards the most distinguished persons of the hunt. This course would not have suited me, so Ronald and Moy were cooped up in their solitary wigwam, like two moorfowl-shooters of the present day.[\[73\]](#)

After ‘Glenfinlas,’ I undertook another ballad, called ‘The Eve of St. John.’[\[74\]](#) The incidents, except the hints alluded to in the marginal notes, are entirely imaginary, but the

scene was that of my early childhood. Some idle persons had of late years, during the proprietor's absence, torn the iron-grated door of Smailholm Tower from its hinges, and thrown it down the rock. I was an earnest suitor to my friend and kinsman, Mr. Scott of Harden, already mentioned, that the dilapidation might be put a stop to, and the mischief repaired. This was readily promised, on condition that I should make a ballad, of which the scene should lie at Smailholm Tower, and among the crags where it is situated.^[75] The ballad was approved of, as well as its companion 'Glenfinlas'; and I remember that they procured me many marks of attention and kindness from Duke John of Roxburghe, who gave me the unlimited use of that celebrated collection of volumes from which the Roxburghe Club derives its name.

Thus was I set up for a poet, like a pedlar who has got two ballads to begin the world upon, and I hastened to make the round of all my acquaintances, showing my precious wares, and requesting criticism—a boon which no author asks in vain. For it may be observed, that, in the fine arts, those who are in no respect able to produce any specimens themselves, hold themselves not the less entitled to decide upon the works of others; and, no doubt, with justice to a certain degree: for the merits of composition produced for the express purpose of pleasing the world at large, can only be judged of by the opinion of individuals, and perhaps as in the case of Molière's old woman,^[76] the less sophisticated the person consulted so much the better.^[77] But I was ignorant, at the time I speak of, that though the applause of the many may justly appreciate the

general merits of a piece, it is not so safe to submit such a performance to the more minute criticism of the same individuals when each, in turn, having seated himself in the censor's chair, has placed his mind in a critical attitude, and delivers his opinion sententiously and *ex cathedrâ*. General applause was in almost every case freely tendered, but the abatements in the way of proposed alterations and corrections, were cruelly puzzling. It was in vain the young author, listening with becoming modesty, and with a natural wish to please, cut and carved, tinkered and coopered, upon his unfortunate ballad—it was in vain that he placed, displaced, replaced, and misplaced; every one of his advisers was displeased with the concessions made to his co-assessors, and the author was blamed by some one, in almost every case, for having made two holes in attempting to patch up one.

At last, after thinking seriously on the subject, I wrote out a fair copy (of 'Glenfinlas,' I think), and marked all the various corrections which had been proposed. On the whole, I found that I had been required to alter every verse, almost every line, and the only stanzas of the whole ballad which escaped criticism, were two which could neither be termed good nor bad, speaking of them as poetry, but were of a mere commonplace character, absolutely necessary for conducting the business of the tale. This unexpected result, after about a fortnight's anxiety, led me to adopt a rule from which I have seldom departed during more than thirty years of literary life. When a friend, whose judgment I respect, has decided, and upon good advisement told me, that a manuscript was worth nothing, or at least possessed no redeeming qualities sufficient

to atone for its defects, I have generally cast it aside; but I am little in the custom of paying attention to minute criticisms, or of offering such to any friend who may do me the honour to consult me. I am convinced, that, in general, in removing even errors of a trivial or venial kind, the character of originality is lost, which, upon the whole, may be that which is most valuable in the production.

About the time that I shook hands with criticism and reduced my ballads back to their original form, stripping them without remorse of those ‘lendings’ which I had adopted at the suggestion of others, an opportunity unexpectedly offered of introducing to the world what had hitherto been confined to a circle of friends. Lewis had announced a collection, first intended to bear the title of *Tales of Terror*, and afterwards published under that of *Tales of Wonder*. As this was to be a collection of tales turning on the preternatural, there were risks in the plan of which the ingenious editor was not aware. The supernatural, though appealing to certain powerful emotions very widely and deeply sown amongst the human race, is, nevertheless, a spring which is peculiarly apt to lose its elasticity by being too much pressed on, and collection of ghost-stories is not more likely to be terrible, than a collection of jests to be merry or entertaining. But although the very title of the proposed work carried in it an obstruction to its effect, this was far from being suspected at the time, for the popularity of the editor, and of his compositions, seemed a warrant for his success. The distinguished favour with which the *Castle Spectre* was received upon the stage, [\[78\]](#) seemed an additional pledge

for the safety of his new attempt. I readily agreed to contribute the ballads of 'Glenfinlas' and of 'The Eve of Saint John,' with one or two others of less merit; and my friend Dr. Leyden became also a contributor. Mr. Southey, a tower of strength, added 'The Old Woman of Berkeley,' 'Lord William,' and several other interesting ballads of the same class, to the proposed collection.^[79]

In the meantime, my friend Lewis found it no easy matter to discipline his northern recruits. He was a martinet, if I may so term him, in the accuracy of rhymes and of numbers; I may add, he had a right to be so, for few persons have exhibited more mastery of rhyme, or greater command over the melody of verse. He was, therefore, rigid in exacting similar accuracy from others, and as I was quite unaccustomed to the mechanical part of poetry, and used rhymes which were merely permissible, as readily as those which were legitimate, contests often arose amongst us, which were exasperated by the pertinacity of my Mentor, who, as all who knew him can testify, was no granter of propositions. As an instance of the obstinacy with which I had so lately adopted a tone of defiance to criticism, the reader will find in the [Appendix](#) a few specimens of the lectures which I underwent from my friend Lewis, and which did not at the time produce any effect on my inflexibility, though I did not forget them at a future period.

The proposed publication of the *Tales of Wonder* was, from one reason or another, postponed till the year 1801,^[80] a circumstance by which, of itself, the success of the work was considerably impeded, for protracted expectation always leads

to disappointment. But, besides, there were circumstances of various kinds which contributed to its depreciation, some of which were imputable to the editor, or author, and some to the bookseller.

The former remained insensible of the passion for ballads and ballad-mongers having been for some time on the wane, and that with such alteration in the public taste, the chance of success in that line was diminished. What had been at first received as simple and natural, was now sneered at as puerile and extravagant. Another objection was, that my friend Lewis had a high but mistaken opinion of his own powers of humour.^[81] The truth was, that though he could throw some gaiety into his lighter pieces, after the manner of the French writers, his attempts at what is called pleasantry in English, wholly wanted the quality of humour, and were generally failures. But this he would not allow; and the *Tales of Wonder* were filled, in a sense, with attempts at comedy which might be generally accounted abortive.

Another objection, which might have been more easily foreseen, subjected the editor to a charge of which Mat Lewis was entirely incapable—that of collusion with his publisher in an undue attack on the pockets of the public. The *Tales of Wonder* formed a work in royal octavo, and were, by large printing, *driven out*,^[82] as it is technically termed, to two volumes, which were sold at a high price. Purchasers murmured at finding that this size had been attained by the insertion of some of the best-known pieces of the English language, such as Dryden's 'Theodore and Honoria,' Parnell's

‘Hermit,’ Lisle’s ‘Porsenna, King of Russia,’ and many other popular poems of old date, and generally known, which ought not in conscience to have made part of a set of tales, ‘written and collected’ by a modern author. His bookseller was also accused in the public prints, whether truly or not I am uncertain, of having attempted to secure to himself the entire profits of the large sale which he expected, by refusing to his brethren the allowances usually, if not in all cases, made to the retail trade.[\[83\]](#)

Lewis, one of the most liberal as well as benevolent of mankind, had not the least participation in these proceedings of his bibliopolist; but his work sunk under the obloquy which was heaped on it by the offended parties. The book was termed *Tales of Plunder*, was censured by reviewers, and attacked in newspapers and magazines. A very clever parody was made on the style and the person of the author, and the world laughed as willingly as if it had never applauded.[\[84\]](#)

Thus, owing to the failure of the vehicle I had chosen, my efforts to present myself before the public as an original writer proved as vain as those by which I had previously endeavoured to distinguish myself as a translator. Like Lord Home, however, at the battle of Flodden, I did so far well, that I was able to stand and save myself; and amidst the general depreciation of the *Tales of Wonder*, my small share of the obnoxious publication was dismissed without much censure, and in some cases obtained praise from the critics.[\[85\]](#)

The consequence of my escape made me naturally more daring, and I attempted, in my own name, a collection of

ballads of various kinds, both ancient and modern, to be connected by the common tie of relation to the Border districts, in which I had gathered the materials. The original preface explains my purpose, and the assistance of various kinds which I met with. The edition was curious, as being the first work^[86] printed by my friend and schoolfellow, Mr. James Ballantyne, who, at that period, was editor of a provincial newspaper, called *The Kelso Mail*. When the book came out, in 1802, the imprint, Kelso, was read with wonder by amateurs of typography, who had never heard of such a place, and were astonished at the example of handsome printing which so obscure a town produced.

As for the editorial part of the task, my attempt to imitate the plan and style of Bishop Percy, observing only more strict fidelity concerning my originals, was favourably received by the public, and there was a demand within a short space for a second edition, to which I proposed to add a third volume. Messrs. Cadell and Davies, the first publishers of the work, declined the publication of this second edition, which was undertaken, at a very liberal price, by the well-known firm of Messrs. Longman and Rees of Paternoster Row. My progress in the literary career in which I might now be considered as seriously engaged, the reader will find briefly traced in an Introduction prefixed to the *Lay of the Last Minstrel*.^[87]

In the meantime the Editor has accomplished his proposed task of acquainting the reader with some particulars respecting the modern imitations of the Ancient Ballad, and the circumstances which gradually, and almost insensibly, engaged

himself in that species of literary employment. W. S.

ABBOTSFORD, *April* 1830.

APPENDIX

EXTRACTS FROM THE CORRESPONDENCE OF M. G. LEWIS

My attention was called to this subject, which is now of an old date, by reading the following passage in Medwin's *Account of Some Passages in Lord Byron's later Years*.^[88] Lord Byron is supposed to speak: 'When Walter Scott began to write poetry, which was not at a very early age, Monk Lewis corrected his verse: he understood little then of the mechanical part of the art. The 'Fire King,' in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, was almost all Lewis's. One of the Ballads in that work, and, except some of Leyden's, perhaps one of the best, was made from a story picked up in a stage-coach—I mean that of 'Will Jones.'

'They boil'd Will Jones within the pot,
And not much fat had Will.'

'I hope Walter Scott did not write the review on "Christabel"; for he certainly, in common with many of us, is indebted to Coleridge. But for him, perhaps, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* would never have been thought of. The line,

"Jesu Maria shield thee well!"

is word for word from Coleridge.'

There are some parts of this passage extremely mistaken and exaggerated, as generally attends any attempt to record what passes in casual conversation, which resembles, in difficulty, the experiments of the old chemists for fixing quicksilver.

The following is a specimen of my poor friend Lewis's criticism on my juvenile attempts at ballad poetry; severe enough, perhaps, but for which I was much indebted to him, as forcing upon the notice of a young and careless author hints which the said author's vanity made him unwilling to attend to, but which were absolutely necessary to any hope of his ultimate success.

Supposed 1799

'THANK you for your revised "Glenfinlas." I *grumble*, but say no more on *this* subject, although I hope you will not be so inflexible on that of your other Ballads; for I do not despair of convincing you in time, that a *bad* rhyme is, in fact, no rhyme at all. You desired me to point out my objections, leaving you at liberty to make use of them or not; and so have at "Frederic and Alice." Stanza 1st, "*hies*" and "*joys*" are not rhymes; the 1st stanza ends with "*joys*"; the 2nd begins with "*joying*." In the 4th, there is too sudden a change of tenses, "*flows*" and "*rose*." 6th, 7th, and 8th, I like much. 9th, Does not "*ring his ears*" sound ludicrous in yours? The first idea that presents itself is, that his ears were pulled; but even the *ringing of the ears* does not please. 12th, "*Shower*" and "*roar*," not rhymes.

“*Soil*” and “*aisle*” in the 13th are not much better; but “*head*” and “*descried*” are execrable. In the 14th, “*bar*” and “*stair*” are ditto; and “*groping*” is a nasty word. *Vide Johnson*, “*He gropes his breeches with a monarch’s air.*” In the 15th you change your metre, which has always an unpleasant effect; and “*safe*” and “*receive*” rhyme just about as well as Scott and Lewis would. 16th, “*Within*” and “*strain*” are not rhymes. 17th, “*Hear*” and “*air,*” not rhymes. 18th, Two metres are mixed; the same objection to the third line of the 19th. Observe, that, in the Ballad, I do not always object to a variation of metre; but then it ought to increase the melody, whereas, in my opinion, in these instances, it is diminished.

‘THE CHASE.—12th, The 2nd line reads very harshly; and “*choir*” and “*lore*” are not rhymes. 13th, “*Rides*” and “*side*” are not rhymes. 30th, “*Pour*” and “*obscure,*” not rhymes. 40th, “*Spreads*” and “*invades*” are not rhymes. 46th, “*Rends*” and “*ascend*” are not rhymes.

‘WILLIAM AND HELEN.—In order that I may bring it nearer the original title, pray introduce, in the first stanza, the name of *Ellenora*, instead of *Ellen*. “*Crusade*” and “*sped,*” not rhymes in the 2nd. 3rd, “*Made*” and “*shed*” are not rhymes; and if they were, come too close to the rhymes in the 2nd. In the 4th, “*Joy*” and *victory*” are not rhymes. 7th, The first line wants a verb, otherwise is not intelligible. 13th, “*Grace*” and “*bliss*” are not rhymes. 14th, “*Bale*” and “*hell*” are not rhymes. 16th, “*Vain*” and “*fruit-less*” is tautology; and as a verb is wanted, the line will run better thus, “*And vain is every prayer.*” 19th, Is not “*to her*” absolutely necessary in the 4th line? 20th, “*Grace*” and “*bliss,*” not rhymes. 21st, “*Bale*” and

“*hell*,” not rhymes. 22nd, I do not like the word “*spent*.” 23rd, “*O’er*” and “*star*” are vile rhymes. 26th, A verb is wanted in the 4th line; better thus, “Then whispers thus a voice.” 28th, Is not, “Is’t thou, my love?” better than “My love ! my love !”? 31st, If “*wight*” means, as I conjecture, “*enchanted*,” does not this let the cat out of bag? Ought not the spur to be *sharp* rather than *bright*? In the 4th line, “*Stay*” and “*day*” jingle together; would it not be better, “ I must be gone e’er [*sic*] day ?” 32nd, “*Steed*” and “*bed*” are not rhymes. 34th, “*Bride*” and “*bed*,” not rhymes. 35th, “*Seat*” and “*await*,” not rhymes. 39th, “*Keep hold*” and “*sit fast*” seem to *my* ear vulgar and prosaic. 40th, The 4th line is defective in point of English, and, indeed, I do not quite understand the meaning. 43rd, “*Arose*” and “*pursues*” are not rhymes. 45th, I am not pleased with the epithet “*savage*”; and the latter part of the stanza is, to me, unintelligible. 49th, Is it not closer to the original in line 3rd to say, “Swift ride the dead”? 50th, Does the rain “whistle”? 55th, line 3rd, Does it express, “Is Helen afraid of them ?” 59th, “*Door*” and “*flower*” do not rhyme together. 60th, “*Scared*” and “*heard*” are not rhymes. 63rd, “*Bone*” and “*skeleton*,” not rhymes. 64th, The last line sounds ludicrous; one fancies the heroine coming down with a plump, and sprawling upon her bottom. I have now finished my *severe* examination, and pointed out every objection which I think can be suggested.’

6th January 1799.

‘ DEAR SCOTT,

‘Your last Ballad reached me just as I was stepping into my chaise to go to Bocket Hall (Lord Melbourne’s), so I took it with me, and exhibited both that and “Glenfinlas” with great success. I must not, however, conceal from you, that nobody understood the *Lady Flora* of Glengyle to be disguised demon till the catastrophe arrived; and that the opinion was universal, that some previous stanzas ought to be introduced descriptive of the nature and office of *the wayward Ladies of the Wood*.

William Lambe,^[89] too (who writes good verses himself, and, therefore, may be allowed to judge those of other people), was decidedly for the omission of the last stanza but one. These were the only objections started. I thought it as well that you should know them, whether you attend to them or not. With regard to “St. John’s Eve,” I like it much, and instead of finding fault with its broken metre, I approve of it highly. I think, in this last Ballad, you have hit off the ancient manner better than in your former ones. “Glenfinlas,” for example, is more like a polished tale, than an old Ballad.^[90] But why, in verse 6th, is the Baron’s helmet hacked and hewed, if (as we are given to understand) he had assassinated his enemy? Ought not *tore* to be *torn*? *Tore* seems to me not English. In verse 16th, the last line is word for word from “Gil Morrice.” 21st, “*Floor* and “*bower*” are not rhymes,’ etc., etc., etc.

The gentleman noticed in the following letter, as partaker in the author’s heresies respecting rhyme, had the less occasion to justify such licence, as his own have been singularly accurate. Mr. Smythe is now Professor of Modern History at

Cambridge. [\[91\]](#)

London, January 24, 1799

‘I MUST not omit telling you, for your own comfort and that of all such persons as are *wicked* enough to make bad rhymes, that Mr. Smythe (a very clever man at Cambridge) took great pains the other day to convince me, not merely that a bad rhyme might pass, but that occasionally a bad rhyme was better than a good one!!!!!! I need not tell you that he left me as great an infidel on this subject as he found me.

‘Ever yours,

‘M. G. LEWIS.’

The next letter respects the Ballad called the ‘Fire King,’ stated by Captain Medwin to be almost all Lewis’s. This is an entire misconception. Lewis, who was very fond of his idea of four elementary kings, had prevailed on me to supply a Fire King. After being repeatedly urged to the task, I sat down one day after dinner, and wrote the ‘Fire King,’ as it was published in the *Tales of Wonder*. The next extract gives an account of the manner in which Lewis received it, which was not very favourable; but instead of writing the greater part, he did not write a single word of it. Dr. Leyden, now no more, and another gentlemen who still survives, were sitting at my side while I wrote it; nor did my occupation prevent the circulation of the bottle.

Leyden wrote a ballad for the Cloud King, which is

mentioned in the ensuing extract. But it did not answer Mat's ideas, either in the colour of the wings, or some point of costume equally important; so Lewis, who was otherwise fond of the Ballad, converted it into the Elfin King, and wrote a Cloud King himself, to finish the hierarchy in the way desired.

There is a leading mistake in the passage from Captain Medwin. *The Minstrelsy of the Border* is spoken of, but what is meant is the *Tales of Wonder*. The former work contains none of the Ballads mentioned by Mr. Medwin—the latter has them all. Indeed, the dynasty of Elemental Kings were written entirely for Mr. Lewis's publication.

My intimate friend, William Clerk, Esq., was the person who heard the legend of Bill Jones told in a mail coach by a sea-captain, who imagined himself to have seen the ghost to which it relates. The tale was versified by Lewis himself. I forget where it was published, but certainly in no miscellany or publication of mine.

I have only to add, in allusion to the passage I have quoted, that I never wrote a word parodying either Mr. Coleridge or any one else, which, in that distinguished instance, it would have been most ungracious in me to have done; for which the reader will see reasons in the Introduction to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*.'

LONDON, 3d February, 1800.

' DEAR SCOTT,

' I RETURN you many thanks for your Ballad and the Extract, and I shall be very much obliged to your friend for the "Cloud King." I must, however, make one criticism upon the

stanzas which you sent me. The Spirit, being a wicked one, must not have such delicate wings as pale-blue ones. He has nothing to do with Heaven except to deface it with storms; and, therefore, in *The Monk*, I have fitted him with a pair of sable pinions, to which I must request your friend to adapt his stanza. With the others I am much pleased, as I am with your “Fire King”; but everybody makes the same objection to it, and expresses a wish that you had conformed your spirit to the description given of him in *The Monk*, where his office is to play the Will-o’-the-Wisp, and lead travelers into bogs, etc. It also objected to, his being removed from his native land, Denmark, to Palestine; and that the office assigned to him in your Ballad has nothing peculiar to the “Fire King,” but would have suited Arimanes, Beelzebub, or any other evil spirit as well. However, the Ballad itself I think very pretty. I suppose you have heard from Bell respecting the copies of the Ballads. I was too much distressed at the time to write myself, [\[92\]](#) etc., etc.

‘ M. G. L.’

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[1] (L) This essay was written in April 1830, and forms a continuation of the ‘Remarks on Popular Poetry,’ printed in the first volume of the present series. [*Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders*. The “Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry and on the Various Collections of Ballads of Britain, Particularly those of Scotland” first prefaced volume I of the 1830 edition; the “Essay” appears as a preface to volume IV. Scott supplied for the 1806 edition of the *Minstrelsy* a lengthy “Introduction” containing three sections: a history of the Border region; a discussion of its inhabitants’ “peculiar customs and modes of life” and the “plan of the present publication,” defining the three classes of ballads as “Historical,” “Romantic,” and “Imitations of these compositions by modern authors.” The “Essay” also continues and amplifies the distinctions among various modes of ballad writing discussed by Scott in this third section of the 1806 “Introduction.”]

[2] (S) He might be supposed a contemporary of Henry VIII., if the greeting which he pretends to have given to that monarch is of his own composition, and spoken in his own person.

‘Good morrow to our noble king’ quoth I;
‘Good morrow,’ quoth he to thou:
And then he said to Anthony,
‘O Anthony, now, now, now.’

[Information on this old ballad cited by Scott can be found in Edward F. Rimbault’s “Our King He Went to Dover.” *Notes and Queries* 4th Series IX, March 23, 1872: 244-245.]

[3] A Garland is a collection or miscellany of short literary pieces, such as poems and ballads.

[4] Joseph Ritson (1753-1802), antiquarian, literary scholar, and notorious polemicist. He edited *Ancient Songs, and Ballads: From the Time of King Henry the Second to the Revolution* (London, J. Johnson, 1790—actually printed 1792). Scott had recently assisted with some translations for a revised

edition of this text published in 1829.

[5] (H) ‘Fair Rosamond’ (c. 1592-3), of which there are black-letter copies in the Roxburghe, Pepys, and Wood Collections, was written by Thomas Delone. [?-1600, known as the “Balleting Silke Weaver of Norwich.” The ballad was included in Percy’s *Reliques*.]

[6] The ballad “Chevy Chase” records the story of a large hunting party (or “chase”) in the border region of the Cheviot Hills. The hunting expedition was led by the English Percy, Earl of Northumberland, but the Scottish Earl Douglas, who had forbidden hunting in the area, interpreted it as an invasion of Scotland. A bloody battle ensued, in which only 110 people survived. “Chevy Chase” was perhaps written as early as the 1430’s, but the earliest printed record we have of it is in *The Complaynt of Scotland* (c. 1540), in which it is entitled “The Hunting of Cheviot.” Percy prints two versions of the famed ballad in his *Reliques* (1765).

[7] (S) Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poesy*.

[8] (S) A curious and spirited specimen occurs in Cornwall, as late as the trial of the Bishops before the Revolution. The President of the Royal Society of London [(H) Mr. Davies Gilbert] has not disdained the trouble of preserving it from oblivion. [(H) *Christmas Carols*, 1826.]

[9] (L) *Pills to Purge Melancholy*. (H) It first appeared in 1684; reissue, enlarged, 5 vols., 1699-1714; and a final ed., 6 vols., 1719-1720.

[10] (L) See Hogg’s *Jacobite Relics*, vol. i. (H) This ballad, modelled on older ones on Killiecrankie, etc., appeared as a broadside, and is included in Herd’s *Songs*, 1776, vol. i. 109-12.

[11] The Battle of Prestonpans marked a decisive Scottish victory over the English in the second Jacobite Rising. Adam Skirving wrote “Hey Johnny Cope, Are Ye Waking Yet?” to commemorate the victory (John Cope was the commander of the English forces during the battle).

[12] (L) Miss Ray, the beautiful mistress of the Earl of Sandwich, then First Lord of the Admiralty, was assassinated by Mr. Hackman, ‘in a fit of frantic jealous love,’ as Boswell expresses it, in 1779. See Croker’s *Boswell*, vol. iv. p. 254. (H) Miss Ray was the mother of Basil Montagu, the friend of Carlyle.

[13] This ballad can be found in Allan Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany* (1724-1727). The second stanza reads: "His thoughts on honour always run, / He ne'er could bow to love, / No nymph in all the land had charms / His frozen heart to move."

[14] "Lucy and Colin" by Thomas Tickell (1685-1740).

[15] The ballad commemorating the victory of Hardyknute over Norse invaders is usually attributed to Lady Elizabeth Wardlaw, who presented it in 1719 as an authentic ancient text. "Hardyknute" is included in Percy's *Reliques*.

[16] (L) 'Hardyknute was the first poem that I ever learnt—the last that I shall forget.'—Ms. Note of Sir Walter Scott on a leaf of Allan Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany*.

[17] (S) This failure applies to the repairs and rifacimentos of old ballads, as well as to complete imitations. In the beautiful and simple ballad of 'Gil Morris,' some affected person has struck in one or two factitious verses, which, like vulgar persons in a drawing-room, betray themselves by their over-finery. Thus, after the simple and affecting verse which prepares the readers for the coming tragedy—

'Gil Morrice sat in good green wood,
He whistled and he sang;
O what mean a' yon folk coming,
My mother tarries lang?

some such 'vicious intromitter' as we have described (to use a barbarous phrase for a barbarous proceeding) has inserted the following quintessence of affectation:

'His locks were like the threads of gold,
Drawn from Minerva's loom;
His lips like roses drapping dew,
His breath was a' perfume.

His brow was like the mountain snow,
Gilt by the morning beam ;
His cheeks like living roses blow,
His een like azure stream.

The boy was clad in robes of green,
Sweet as the infant spring ;
And like the mavis on the bush,
He gart the valleys ring.'

["Vicious intromission" is a term from Scottish law: it refers to the act of meddling with the effects of a deceased person,

without the supervision of legal authority to guard against embezzlement. The penalty for the act requires the offender to pay all the debts of the deceased. James Boswell and Dr. Johnson argued in support of this law.]

[18] Frere (1769-1846), English diplomat best known in literary terms as a contributor to the *Antijacobin Review*. Frere's "metrical version" of the battle song from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* appears in volume I of the third edition of Ellis's *Specimens of the Early English Poets* (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1811).

[19] The controversy concerned *Poems Supposed to Have Been Written at Bristol by Thomas Rowley and Others, in the Fifteenth Century* (1777), actually written by Chatterton.

[20] (H) See *post*, 'Thomas the Rhymer,' Parts Second and Third. [First appearing in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802).]

[21] Ritson attacked Percy in the preface to his *Ancient Songs, and Ballads: From the Time of King Henry the Second to the Revolution*.

[22] Thomson's *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice* came out in five volumes from 1799-1815.

[23] James Johnson's *The Scots Musical Museum*. Edinburgh: James Johnson and Co., 1793.

[24] (S) Peter Buchan's version was probably mainly the work of his modern 'wight of Homer's craft,' so that in this case the comparison would be between Burns and the 'wight.' Burns's version was, he states, his own, all except the first half-stanza.

[25] "Dirge" by the Scottish poet John Finlay (1782-1810), from his *Wallace; or, the Vale of Ellerslie. With Other Poems*. Glasgow: R. Chapman, 1802.

[26] Scottish poet William Julius Mickle (1735-88), best known for his translation of Luís de Camões' epic poem *The Lusiad, or the Discovery of India* (1776). *The Poetical Works of William Mickle* appeared in 1799 (London: C. Cooke). In the Introduction to the "Magnum Opus" edition of *Kenilworth* (Edinburgh: Cadell, 1831), Scott credits Mickle's ballad "Cumnor Hall" with giving him the first idea for the novel (p. xi). Scott printed "Cumnor Hall" in full in the *Magnum*

Kenilworth (pp. xii-xv), and did much to keep Mickle's name alive as the ballad was subsequently reprinted in a number of nineteenth-century anthologies. [I am indebted to Paul Barnaby for this information.]

[\[27\]](#) Irish poet (1779-1852), best known for his *Irish Melodies* (1808-34).

[\[28\]](#) John Leyden (1775-1811) was Scott's good friend and joined him in submitting poems to M.G. Lewis's *Tales of Wonder* (1801). Leyden's contribution appears in the volume as "The Elfin-King." See Scott's comments upon his and Leyden's relationship with Lewis in the "[Appendix](#)" to this essay. Leyden also authored *Scottish Descriptive Poems* (Edinburgh: Mundell and Son, 1803) and edited *The Complaynt of Scotland* (Edinburgh: A. Constable, 1801). James Hogg (1770-1835), the "Ettrick Shepherd," assisted Scott with collecting ballads for *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802) and published his own popular *The Mountain Bard* in 1807 (Edinburgh: J. Ballantyne for A. Constable). Cunningham (1784-1842) came to Scott's and Hogg's attention through his contributions to *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song*, ed. Robert Hartley Cromek (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1810); he wrote many songs and imitations of the old Scottish ballad. As Scott notes, all three rose from "humble" circumstances: Leyden and Hogg as shepherds, Cunningham as a stone mason's apprentice.

[\[29\]](#) Scottish poet (1765-1829). The *Tales* were printed for Vernor and Hood, by J. Swan, 1802 and are now available [on line](#). See Adriana Craciun's "[Anne Bannerman: A Critical Introduction](#)" from [Scottish Women Poets from the Romantic Period](#). Also see Craciun's discussion of Bannerman in her *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2003).

[\[30\]](#) "Lucy and Colin."

[\[31\]](#) Addison's praise for "Chevy Chase" appears in issues 70 and 74 of *The Spectator* (21 and 25 May 1711).

[\[32\]](#) "Edwin and Emma" by the Scottish poet and playwright David Mallet (1705-1765) was first published in Birmingham for A. Miller, 1755. The tragic love story was founded on the story of a real life couple, Roger Whitson and Martha [not, as Scott has it, Hannah] Railton, as recounted in an "Extract of a Letter from the Curate of Bowes in Yorkshire" included in most editions of the poem.

[\[33\]](#) Mallet's ballad first appeared in *Aaron Hill's Plain Dealer*

36 (July 1724). Percy in his printing of the poem in the *Reliques* believed its source to be the old ballad “Fair Margaret and Sweet William” (inspired by lines from John Fletcher’s *Knight of the Burning Pestle*). Henderson in his note below refers to this ballad. Scott refers to a less creditable source, the old Scottish ballad “Sweet William’s Ghost” (Child 77A), printed in both Ramsay’s *Tea Table Miscellany* and the *Reliques*.

[34] (H) Mallet’s ballad is now known to be a slight alteration of another vamp, of which there is a copy with music in the British Museum.

[35] Actually *Armine and Elvira* (London: J. Murray, 1771) by Edmund Cartwright (1743-1823), inventor of the power loom.

[36] (S) If I am right in what must be a very early recollection, I saw Mr. Cartwright (then a student of medicine at the Edinburgh University) at the house of my maternal grandfather, John Rutherford, M. D.

[37] (S) Happily altered by an admiring foreigner, who read:
‘*The silent waters stole away.*’

[38] (L) Percy was specially annoyed, according to Boswell, with

‘I put my hat upon my head,
And walked into the Strand,
And there I met another man,
With his hat in his hand.’

[Johnson composed these stanzas ex tempore to mock Percy’s *The Hermit of Warkworth* (1771); the story is recounted in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*.]

[39] (S) See the Introduction to Lockhart’s *Spanish Ballads*, 1823, p. xxii.

[40] Most likely an allusion to the “Introduction” to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, wherein Scott discusses his abandonment of his law career for literary pursuits.

[41] “narrow circumstances at home.”

[42] William Hayley (1745-1820), English writer of various poetic epistles and best known for his biography of Cowper.

[43] Names used to designate Samuel Rogers (1762-1855),

author of “The Pleasures of Memory” (1792) and Thomas Campbell (1777-1844), author of “The Pleasures of Hope” (1799). In 1812 Scott recommended Campbell for the chair of literature at Edinburgh University.

[44] William Cowper (1731-1800), English poet and hymnodist, best known for his long blank verse poem *The Task* (1785).

[45] (L) ‘Flammantia moenia mundi.’ – Lucretius. [*De Rerum Natura*, i. 74. Also see Thomas Gray’s “He [meaning Milton] passed the flaming bounds of place and time” from “The Progress of Poesy: A Pindaric Ode” (1757): 98.]

[46] *Account of the German Theatre*. Edinburgh: T. Cadell and J. Dickson, 1790.

[47] Chapter II of Lockhart’s *Life of Scott* provides an entertaining account of Scott’s German studies.

[48] (L) Alexander Fraser Tytler, a Judge of the Court of Session by the title of Lord Woodhouselee, author of the well-known *Elements of General History*, and long eminent as Professor of History in the University of Edinburgh. He died in 1810.

[49] In 1792 Lewis traveled to Weimar to learn German and met Goethe and Christoph Martin Wieland.

[50] Lewis found “The History of Santon Barisa” recounted by Richard Steele in *The Guardian* 148 (August 31, 1713).

[51] Actually, 1796.

[52] James Mathias blasted Lewis’s novel in the fourth part of *The Pursuits of Literature: A Satirical Poem in Dialogue. With Notes*. 2nd Ed. London: T. Beckett, 1797.

[53] Mathias’s original lines read: “No German nonsense sways my English heart, / Unused at ghosts or rattling bones to start” (4. 73-74).

[54] Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823), mother of the female Gothic novel, whose use of the so-called “explained supernatural”—in which seemingly fantastic events are eventually assigned to natural causes—differs markedly from Lewis’s more sensational Gothicism.

[55] See Appendix E (“Variants”) of Macdonald’s and Scherf’s

edition of *The Monk* for the full record of Lewis's mollifications.

[56] (S) In justice to a departed friend, I have subjoined his own defence against an accusation so remorselessly persisted in. The following is an extract of a letter to his father:

Feb. 23, 1798.

'MY DEAR FATHER,— Though certain that the clamour raised against *The Monk* cannot have given you the smallest doubt of the rectitude of my intentions, or the purity of my principles, yet I am conscious that it must have grieved you to find any doubts on the subject existing in the minds of other people. To express my sorrow for having given you pain is my motive for now addressing you, and also to assure you, that you shall not feel that pain a second time on my account. Having made you feel it at all, would be a sufficient reason, had I no others, to make me regret having published the first edition of *The Monk*; but I have others, weaker, indeed, than the one mentioned, but still sufficiently strong. I perceive that I have put too much confidence in the accuracy of my own judgment; that, convinced of my object being unexceptionable, I did not sufficiently examine whether the means by which I attained that object were equally so; and that, upon many accounts, I have to accuse myself of high imprudence. Let me, however, observe that twenty is not the age at which prudence is most to be expected. Inexperience prevented my distinguishing what would give offence; but as soon as I found that offence was given, I made the only reparation in my power — I carefully revised the work, and expunged every syllable on which could be grounded the slightest construction of immorality. This, indeed, was no difficult task; for the objections rested entirely on expressions too strong, and words carelessly chosen not on the sentiments, *characters*, or general *tendency* of the work; that the latter is *undeserving* censure, Addison will vouch for me. The moral and outline of my story are taken from an allegory inserted by him in the *Guardian*, and which he commends highly for ability of invention and '*propriety of object*.' Unluckily, in working it up, I thought that the stronger my colours, the more effect would my picture produce; and it never struck me, that the exhibition of vice in her *temporary triumph*, might possibly do as much harm, as her final *exposure* and *punishment* could do good. To do *much* good, indeed, was more than I expected of my book; having always believed that our conduct depends on our own hearts and characters, not on the books we read, or the sentiments we hear. But though I did not hope much benefit to arise from the perusal of a trifling romance, written by a *youth of twenty*, I was in my own mind convinced that no harm could be produced by a work whose subject was furnished by one of our best moralists, and in the

composition of which I did not introduce a single incident, or a single character, without meaning to illustrate some maxim universally allowed. It was then with infinite surprise that I heard the outcry raised against the * * * *

[I regret that the letter, though once perfect, now only exists in my possession as a fragment. – W.S.]

[57] Johann August Musäus, “Die Entführung” [“The Enloperment”] from *Die Volksmärchen* (1782).

[58] The poem employs anapestic meter and was widely imitated; for an example, see Robert Southey’s [“Poor Mary, the Maid of the Inn.”](#)

[59] (L) The Lady Charlotte Bury.

[60] (S) This tree grew in a very large garden attached to a cottage at Kelso, the residence of my father’s sister, where I spent many of the happiest days of my youth. (H) See further Lockhart’s *Life of Scott*.

[61] Perhaps Robert Shortreed, Sheriff-substitute of Roxburghshire, who accompanied Scott on what he called his “raids” into Liddesdale and the surrounding country in his search for ancient Scottish ballads.

[62] From *Don Sebastian, a Tragedy* by John Dryden. Scott edited the first collected works of Dryden in 1808.

[63] Other translations of “Lenore” in 1795-96 include those by John Thomas Stanley, poet-laureate Henry J. Pye, William Robert Spencer, and William Taylor of Norwich, whose version published in *Monthly Magazine* (1796) proved to be the most acclaimed one.

[64] Taylor was a student of Barbauld’s at her Palgrave, Suffolk boarding school. Although his “Lenora” was not published until 1796 in *The Monthly Magazine*, it was composed as early as 1790. See note #1 to John Aikin’s [“Arthur and Matilda.”](#)

[65] (S) Born Countess Harriet Bruhl of Martinskirchen, and married to Hugh Scott, Esq, of Harden, the author’s relative and much-valued friend almost from infancy. (H) See further Lockhart’s *Life of Scott*. In 1835 Mr. Scott of Harden’s right of succession, through his mother, to the peerage of Polwarth was allowed by the House of Lords.

[66] See note #2 of [“William and Helen.”](#)

[67] (L) This thin quarto was published by Messrs. Manners and Miller of Edinburgh.

[68] (L) This list here referred to was drawn up and inserted in the *Caledonian Mercury*, by Mr. James Shaw, for thirty years past in the house of Sir Walter Scott’s publishers, Messrs. Constable and Cadell of Edinburgh; and use will be made of it hereafter.

[69] (L) Sir Walter Scott’s second publication was a translation of Goethe’s drama of *Goetz of Berlichingen with the Iron Hand*, which appeared in 1799. He about the same time translated several other German plays, which yet remain in MS.

[70] (L) The late George Constable, Esq. See Introduction to *The Antiquary*.

[71] (S) Among the popular Ballads, or Volkslieder, of the celebrated Herder, is (take one instance out of many) a version of the old Scottish song of ‘Sir Patrick Spence,’ in which, but for difference of orthography, the two languages can be scarcely distinguished from each other. For example:

‘The King sits in Dumfermling town,	‘Der
Koenig sitzt in Dumfermling Schloss,	
Drinking the blood red wine;	Er
trinkt blutrothen Wein;	
“Where will I get a good skipper	“O wo
treff” ich einen Segler gut	
To sail this ship of mine?”	Dies
Schiff zu segeln mein ?”	

In like manner, the opening stanza of ‘Child Waters,’ and many other Scottish ballads, fall as naturally and easily into the German habits and forms of speech, as if they had originally been composed in that language:

‘About Yule, when the wind was cule,	‘In
Christmessfast in Winter kalt,	
And the round tables began,	Als
Tafel rund began;	
O there is come to our king’s court	Da kam
zu König’s Hoff und Hall	
Mony weel favour’d man.’	
Manch wackner Ritter an.’	

It requires only a smattering of both languages to see at what

cheap expense, even of vocables and rhymes, the popular poetry of the one may be transferred to the other. Hardly anything is more flattering to a Scottish student of German; it resembles the unexpected discovery of an old friend in a foreign land.

[72] From *Absolom and Achitophel* 116-17. Scott references and somewhat downplays the controversy occasioned by James Macpherson's *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books, together with Several Other Poems composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal, translated from the Gaelic Language* (1761). Many critics, most formidably Dr. Johnson, rightly challenged the authenticity of these purportedly "found" documents, and although we now know that much of the material was composed by Macpherson, his works played a large role in the revival of interest in Gaelic and "ancient" poetry at the end of the eighteenth-century.

[73] "Glenfinlas" first appeared in Lewis's *Tales of Wonder* but without any claim or pretense of being based on a "Gaelic model." Scott's bemused comment on how the Gothic necessity of isolating his characters contradicts actual Highland custom indicates his distance from the terror literature that had once attracted his interest.

[74] First published as *The Eve of St. John: A Border Ballad*. Kelso: James Ballantyne, 1800. Also appears in *Tales of Wonder*.

[75] (S) This is of little consequence, except in as far as it contradicts a story which I have seen in print, averring that Mr. Scott of Harden was himself about to destroy the ancient building ; than which nothing can be more inaccurate. (H) See further regarding Smailholm Tower in the introduction to the 'Eve of St. John.'

[76] In *The Spectator* Addison relates how "Moliere, as we are told by Monsieur Boileau, used to read all of his comedies to an old woman who was his housekeeper" (No. 70, May 21, 1711).

[77] (L) See the account of a conversation between Sir Walter Scott and Sir Thomas Lawrence, in *CUNNINGHAM'S Lives of British Painters, etc.*, vol. vi. p. 236.

[78] Lewis's Gothic melodrama was performed forty-seven times at Drury Lane in 1797 and earned its author the unheard of sum of over fifteen thousand pounds.

[79] Leyden's contribution was entitled by Lewis "The Elfin-

King.” Southey was at best a lukewarm participant in the collection, demanding withdrawal of his seven poems in the second edition of *Tales of Wonder* (November 1801). See Douglass H. Thomson’s forthcoming Broadview edition for a discussion of the collaborative nature of the undertaking.

[\[80\]](#) This postponement in part led to the printing of [An Apology for Tales of Terror \(1799\)](#).

[\[81\]](#) Lewis included several parodies of Gothic ballads in his collection, including one, “Giles Jollup the Grave, and Brown Sally Green,” that burlesqued his most famous poem, “Alonzo the Brave, and Fair Imogine.” This “French” waggishness perplexed and irritated reviewers of the *Tales of Wonder*.

[\[82\]](#) Geoffrey Asher Glaister’s *Glossary of the Book* offers two definitions of this “technical” term: “1. said of type which occupies much lateral space. 2. an instruction to the compositor that wide spaces are to be inserted between words” (147).

[\[83\]](#) See Thomson’s Broadview edition for information on the book’s reception and the dealings of Lewis’s publisher, Joseph Bell.

[\[84\]](#) Possibly a reference to the anonymous *Tales of Terror* (May 1801), which contains a number of parodies directly aimed at Lewis and his ballads from *Tales of Wonder*. But the more likely candidate is George Watson-Taylor’s “The Old Hag in a Red Cloak,” which contains an attack, as Scott notes, on “the person of the author”:

Mat Lewis was little, Mat Lewis was young,
The words they lisp’d prettily over his tongue;
A spy-glass he us’d, for he could not well see,
A spy-glass he us’d, for near-sighted was he.

Cochrane’s *Catalog of the Library at Abbotsford* notes that Scott owned a manuscript copy of this poem (251).

[\[85\]](#) Scott is correct: despite the generally harsh tenor of the reviews, critics from the *British Critic* (16 [December 1801]: 681) and the *Poetical Register* (1 [1801]: 436-37) reserved praise for Scott’s ballads. The critic from the *Antijacobin Review* (8 [March 1801]: 322-27) remarks that Scott “seems to be the best of the new species of *horror-breeding* Bards” and prints “The Wild Huntsman.”

[\[86\]](#) As first pointed out by George P. Johnston in his “The

First Book Printed by James Ballantyne,” the actual first book was [*An Apology for Tales of Terror*](#) (1799), not *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802).

[87] The “Introduction” was published for an 1830 edition of the poem and intended to “resume the story of my literary labors at which I broke off in the *Essay on the Imitation of Popular Poetry*” [sic], a title that conflates the two prefatory essays in the 1830 *Minstrelsy*. However, as the present “Essay” twice references what appears an already completed “Introduction” to the *Lay*, the order of composition of these three biographical-literary essays is uncertain. Paul Barnaby of the *Walter Scott Digital Archive* reasonably conjectures that “a) Scott essentially wrote the two new introductory essays to the ‘Minstrelsy’ and the introduction to the ‘Lay’ in tandem; b) the pieces did not appear in the order that he’d initially expected; and c) that they were slightly re-edited to fit the new order of appearance but that one or more loose ends were left” (personal correspondence).

[88] *Conversations of Lord Byron: Noted During a Residence with His Lordship at Pisa in the Years 1821 and 1822*. London: H. Colburn, 1824. 249-250.

[89] (L) Now Lord Melbourne. (H) The second Lord Melbourne (1779-1848), afterwards Prime Minister. He was then a contributor of verse to Monk Lewis’s weekly paper *The Bugle*.

[90] Scott claims in his 1806 “Introduction” to *The Minstrelsy* that “The Eve of St. John” was written to furnish an example of a “real” imitation of an “old ballad,” as opposed to the more “modern” legendary poem “Glenfinlas,” with its “equality of versification, and elegance of sentiment” (173). This letter from Lewis may suggest that it was he, not Scott, who first drew this distinction.

[91] (H) He published *English Lyrics*, 1797, of which a fifth edition with memoir appeared in 1850.

[92] Lewis’s recent biographer, D.L. Macdonald, suggests that the death of Lewis’s brother Barrington was the cause of this distress and for delays in the publication of *Tales of Wonder* (151).