



# Resisting Radical Energies: Walter Scott's Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border and the Re-Fashioning of the Border Ballads

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# EPI-REVEL

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Resisting Radical Energies:  
Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish  
Border*  
and the Re-Fashioning of the Border Ballads  
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Walter Scott conceived of and began his first major publication, the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, in the early 1790s. Throughout that decade and into the first three years of the nineteenth century, he worked consistently at accumulating the substantial range of ballad versions and archival material that he would use to produce what was intended to be an authoritative and definitive print version of oral and traditional Borders ballad culture. For the remainder of his life Scott continued to write and speak with affection of his “Liddesdale Raids,” the ballad collecting and research trips that he made into the Borders country around Liddesdale mainly during the years 1792–99. J. G. Lockhart, his son-in-law and biographer, describes the period spent compiling the *Minstrelsy* as “a labour of love truly, if ever there was,” noting that the degree of devotion was such that the project formed “the editor’s chief occupation” during the years 1800 and 1801.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Lockhart takes particular care to state that the ballad project did not prevent Scott from attending the Bar in Edinburgh or from fulfilling his responsibilities as Sheriff Depute of Selkirkshire, a post he was appointed to on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1799.<sup>2</sup> The initial two volumes of the *Minstrelsy*, respectively sub-titled “Historical Ballads” and “Romantic Ballads,” were published in January 1802.<sup>3</sup> A third volume, supplementary to the first two, was published in May 1803. In the third edition, published in 1806, there was a re-arrangement of the order of the ballads and a number of additions. From that point, although there would be some changes in future editions, most of the ballads and their accompanying notes were in place. It is these early editions of the *Minstrelsy* that I am chiefly concerned with in this paper, as I want to read Scott’s collection and printing of the ballads in terms of their initial political and social environment.

In terms of its European context then, the *Minstrelsy* was compiled during the period immediately leading up to, throughout and in the aftermath of the events of the Terror and the days of Thermidor, during years of the rise to power of Napoleon and at a time when Britain was sporadically at war with France, or existing in a state of uneasy peace. Indeed, publication of the first edition of the *Minstrelsy* finally occurred at a time when Britain was set ready to declare war yet again on France. In terms of home context it was written by a man who had

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<sup>1</sup> J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, 10 vols (Edinburgh: R. Cadell / London: J. Murray and Whittaker, 1839, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), vol. 1, pp. 57–58.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> All quotations in this paper are taken from T. F. Henderson (ed.), *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, with notes and introduction by Sir Walter Scott*, 4 vols (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1932).

chosen law as his profession, and was set against a background of contrasting radicalism on the one hand and virulent anti-sedition activity on the other. From the early 1790's there were a number of notorious high-profile court cases of radicals in England and Scotland and many more trials that were less well known. Whilst treason was the most serious charge, a wide range of other charges was utilised in order to control public and covert political activism. Outside of the courts, unofficial anti-jacobin intimidation became increasingly commonplace and was often very violent. Scott's letters express his unequivocal support for Edinburgh Judge Braxfield's hard-line sentencing of radical activists in the mid 1790's, and show no sympathy for the convicted men. For example, in letters to his spinster aunt Christian Rutherford during his attendance of the treason trials of Robert Watt and David Downie, he spoke of arriving at court as early as 7 a.m. with "some cold meat and a bottle of wine" so that he would not miss the proceedings and of staying on in Edinburgh "to witness the exit of the ci-devant Jacobin Mr. Watt."<sup>4</sup> Watt and Downie were charged with "organizing a plot for a general rising in Edinburgh, to seize the Castle, the Bank, the persons of the Judges, and proclaim a Provisional Republican Government," and thus were seen as plotting against the economic, judicial and administrative structures at the very heart of the nation. Watt, a wine merchant, former government agent and illegitimate son who had taken his mother's name, was hanged and then publicly decapitated. Downie, much to Scott's disappointment, was reprieved.<sup>5</sup> Scott's keen involvement in the formation in 1797 and subsequent training of the Edinburgh Volunteer Light Dragoons militia, to which I shall return in due course, testifies to his support for the forcible suppression of radical activity not only inside, but also outside of and away from the courtroom.

Having sketched an overview of the political and legal framework within which the *Minstrelsy* was compiled, I would now like to look very briefly at certain dominant themes from the pedagogical and intellectual environment of Scotland that particularly informed Scott's method. It then becomes possible to see how intricately these various contexts relate to one other and how as a consequence Scott was able to use scholarly antiquarianism, the vogue for medievalist romance and gothic tales, and his detailed knowledge and love of the Scottish Borders region to deal with thoroughly modern concerns.

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<sup>4</sup> H. J. C. Grierson *et al.* (eds), *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, 12 vol. (London: Constable, 1932–1937), vol. 1, pp. 34–37.

<sup>5</sup> Parallels can be, and frequently are, drawn with the treason trials of Hardy, Holcroft and Thelwall, leading figures in the London Corresponding Society, in England. Each of these was eventually acquitted by the jury, though Thelwall's trial was protracted and very controversial. The penalty of hanging, drawing and quartering in England is frequently thought to have been the reason why a jury was reluctant to convict. The Scottish trials are generally believed to have been used to make deliberate public examples of known radical leaders. Other Scottish radicals, such as Gerrald, Muir, Margerot and Skirving were transported after being found guilty of non-capital offences of sedition. The prominent working-class society in Edinburgh during this period was the Friends of the People. See T. C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish 1560-1830* (London: Fontana, 1998), pp. 412–420 for a concise overview.

The intellectual schools that flourished during the course of the eighteenth century in the Scottish Universities, and which we now know collectively as the Scottish Enlightenment, are probably best known for their debate and advancement of a range of empirical studies of social, civic and economic development. Methodologies central to the study of the social sciences and political economy were laid down. Amongst the most important premises was the consensus that human society develops through a series of general, recognisable and well-defined stages to an ultimate state of commercial civil society.<sup>6</sup> Periods of stability followed by crisis, defined in terms of socio-economic systems, were formally identified as marking a linear progression through each stage to the next. The transition from feudalism, where local customs and laws based on regional custom prevailed, to a centrally administered civil and commercial society maintained through a national judicial system was seen as the last dynamic stage in a natural evolutionary process. By the time of Scott's own formal education at High School in Edinburgh and Kelso, and later at University in Edinburgh under Professor Dugald Stewart, these theories of the progression of human societies had come to comprise the backbone of social and historical studies. Scott also personally knew Adam Ferguson, whose work and publications on history and society were seminal.<sup>7</sup> It is hardly surprising, then, that a readily identifiable period in Scottish history immediately antecedent to the present and seen as representing the movement from the barbarian past to the civilised present should provide the superstructure of the *Minstrelsy*. Scott's writing is all about continuities, and the value of lineages of progression rather than severance. He does not argue for a return to a golden age of chivalry, but he constantly seeks to assert throughout the *Minstrelsy* that old quasi-feudal — and notably masculine — values of valour need to be re-consecrated and retained in the interest of continued civic stability

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<sup>6</sup> Theories concerning the stadial development of human society were proposed by many of those who were active within the Scottish Enlightenment schools. There was a high level of interaction, with ideas continually being built upon and expanded. In *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) Adam Smith proposed that society passes through four stages, from an initial hunter-gatherer phase to civil and commercial society. Adam Ferguson explored similar theories in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767). Dugald Stewart, Scott's professor at Edinburgh University, used the phrase "conjectural history," which is explained in detail in his *Dissertation: Exhibiting the Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical and Political Philosophy, since the Revival of Letters in Europe* (1815 and 1821). The *Dissertation* was originally written for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (to which Scott later contributed essays on Chivalry and Romance). Though published as a single book some years after Scott's *Minstrelsy*, Stewart had debated these concepts at his University and amongst the *literati* during the period in which Scott was working on the Border ballads. He assented to the view that societies at differing stages of development could be found existing at the same point in history, and that the stage to which they had developed was determined by a range of environmental and economic factors. Stewart was particularly concerned with the civic role of virtue. Possibly the most favoured term in use now — stadial theory — was coined by John Millar in *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771).

<sup>7</sup> See above. Ferguson and Stewart were of considerable influential on Scott, and not least as a result of their personal friendships with him.

and growth. Militarism is presented as a paradigmatic social force, supporting hierarchies with strict bonds of loyalty that offer security from the domestic level of the family upwards. The corruption of primary militaristic chivalric models through a process of effeminisation, based on the lack of control of individual desires and passions, plays an overwhelmingly important part in the taxonomic method and narrative structure of the *Minstrelsy*, linking the ballad texts and their accompanying miscellanea with Scott's immediate context. It is easy to see how this kind of historical reflection is inseparable from the ideological concerns that surrounded its production. Contemporary anxieties within late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Scotland — and to a degree within Britain more generally during the same period — over the sustainability of economic growth and civic stability were fanned by concerns over the rise of possessive individualism amongst the growing *nouveaux riches* middling classes, together with the increased visibility of dispossession and poverty resulting from the migration of the displaced and unemployed rural poor towards the cities. The discontent of the poor in urban Scotland, accompanied by the rise of the Corresponding Societies and radical activity, became all the more frightening to those of the middling and aristocratic sectors of society in the wake of the mobilisation of the *sansculottes* in France. These fears are confronted by Scott and neutralised within the *Minstrelsy* from the safety and displacement of a historicised literary domain.

Scotland witnessed the formation a number of volunteer militias during the last years of the eighteenth and first years of the nineteenth centuries. Even Robert Burns, known for his earlier radical disposition, joined the Dumfries Volunteers in 1795, shortly before his death in 1796. The common aims of these forces were to resist invasion from abroad, should it occur, and to suppress radical activity and street protest at home. I have mentioned Scott's instrumental involvement in the formation of the Edinburgh Volunteer Light Dragoons in 1797, and subsequently in its training. A war-song that he wrote for its use was included in the "Imitations of the ancient ballad" final section of the *Minstrelsy* for the third edition of 1806. The inclusion of that song, with its banner-waving imagery and rallying martial themes mirroring those of the historical ballads of the first section, demonstrates the tightness of the closure that the *Minstrelsy* effects when seen as an overall narrative. The looser morals and feminised passions of the romantic and popular ballads are securely contained between these two outer groups.

In terms of literary production, context is similarly important. Scott was inspired in his early adult life by German Romantic Gothic (Schiller and Herder, in particular) and by British and continental collections of ballads and *volkslieder*. In the late 1790's, with the *Minstrelsy* already underway, he published translations of German gothic texts before contributing a handful of ballad adaptations and imitations, all with Germanic supernatural themes, to Matthew Lewis's notorious *Tales of Wonder*. Scott's keen interest in the gothic persisted in spite of the high-profile controversy over Lewis and his work, and over gothic as a genre seen through its appeal to sentiment and passion as sympathetic to

radicalism and dissent. He became instrumental in the movement that sought to redeem gothic and supernatural writing from accusations of excessive sensationalism and fringe libertarian association. The re-affirmation of Scott's belief in the ballads that he composed for Lewis is borne out by their re-appearance in the final section of the *Minstrelsy*.

Scott's three-part ballad "Thomas the Rhymer" is also in the final, imitation section of the *Minstrelsy*. If we look at the three parts on a comparative basis, paying particular attention to the interplay of notes and the ballad text, it becomes clear that we are looking at a quite remarkable example of the way in which Scott's whole program of refashioning the Border ballads works within an ideological framework. Structurally and thematically "Thomas the Rhymer" echoes the tripartite classifications of the entire *Minstrelsy*. The first part, with Scott's note providing details of his manuscript and archival sources, is based on ballad sources originating from near Erceldoune on the Borders (Erceldoune was Thomas's home). Scott begins by establishing the importance of Thomas both as poet and as the subject of legend, describing him variously throughout the prefatory note as renowned, regarded with veneration, remarkable, celebrated, important and as a poet and man whose "memory is still held in profound respect."<sup>8</sup> He makes explicit reference to the gothic beauty of the "wild and fanciful tale" that forms the basis for this part of the poem. His insistence that "This tale exists in MS [...]" accompanied by details of that document, conforms with the formalities of standard antiquarian practice but also, and more importantly, emphasises the importance to Scott of a readily identifiable and recoverable lineage from the poetry of the thirteenth century through to that of himself. Thomas of Erceldoune had become the subject of centuries-old Borders legends that held him to be an inspired bardic poet of elevated position and influence extending far beyond the Scottish Borders to Europe. At a more fantastic level, myths tell of his abduction by the fairies, his return to the mortal world and his final call back to the land of magic. Partly through Thomas the Rhymer's literary legacy, and partly through the myths associated with him, Scott sought to draw attention back towards a Romance literary heritage that incorporated elements of Homeric significance for the Borders region and for Scotland. Thomas's *Sir Tristrem*, extant as a fourteenth century transcription of the poet's original oral version, was translated and edited by Scott and John Leyden concurrently with the production of the *Minstrelsy* and finally published on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1804. Scott continued to maintain — mistakenly, as it turned out — that the Borders poet was the originator of continental literary forms of the Tristan romance tale. Now whether or not Thomas had been the original "Tristrem" poet is not really of prime importance to the issues I wish to deal with in this paper. It matters more that he was regarded by Scott as a model of ancient purity, representing elevated bardic status and the ancestral patriotic Scottish morality and virtue of the early medieval Scottish Borders country. By constituting Thomas as the fundamental historical point of departure for his own

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<sup>8</sup> *Minstrelsy*, vol. 4, pp. 79–84.

work on Borders oral tradition, Scott was reinforcing the authority of his own recovery and re-inscription of oral Borders ballad form. The retrieval of poetic fragments from a time when loyalty to king and crown was apparently honourable and unquestionable, coupled with the regionally-specific siting of such loyalties in the villages of the Borders forms the sub-text of Scott's description of Erceldoune in *Sir Tristrem*. The intimate and intricate relationship between landscape, the poet and patriotism is emphasised and cast in picturesque terms:

THOMAS OF ERCELDOUNE derived his territorial appellation from the village of Erceldoune, in the Merse, or county of Berwick, situated on the river Leader, about two miles above its junction with the Tweed [...]. This small village was once a place of some importance, and, at least occasionally, honoured with the royal residence [...].

In a tower at the western extremity... the ruins of which are still shewn after the lapse of seven centuries, dwelt Thomas of Erceldoune, the earliest Scottish poet.<sup>9</sup>

Scott undoubtedly saw himself as the retriever and re-builder of the neglected "ruins" of Thomas's poetry, and regularly referred to himself throughout his life as the "Rhymer."

The second part of "Thomas the Rhymer" in the *Minstrelsy* deals with what Scott describes as "printed prophecies vulgarly ascribed to the Rhymer."<sup>10</sup> It contrasts with the first part of the poem in that Scott presents it as being compiled from an altogether more disparate range of sources. Much more arbitrary in terms of authenticity, Scott describes in his notes the difficulties of ascertaining the accuracy and sequence of these sources. The inference is that they are less reliable because they have been affected by degrees of popular dissemination. This is important, as it parallels the moral dilution and degradation of ballad form that Scott attributed to the lack of control brought about by excessive popular dissemination in the late medieval period. It also serves as a pretext for an authoritative reclamation, which Scott and his politically conservative male collaborators could then attempt to bring about.

The third part of "Thomas" is openly acknowledged by Scott as his own composition. It effectively retrieves the poem for a single, elevated bardic voice with Scott subtitled it "Modern — By the editor."<sup>11</sup> The repeated statement in his note prefacing this part of the ballad that it is "entirely modern" further emphasises the nature of Scott's historicist perspective: literary lineages from ancient times lead ever towards modernity. Scott's insistence on his fidelity to the manner of the original, and to the cultural importance of legend — an approach that he steadfastly maintained throughout his life — again observes the formalities of antiquarian protocol. At the same time he assents to a Burkean

<sup>9</sup> W. Scott (ed.), *Sir Tristrem*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1811), pp. iv and

v.

<sup>10</sup> *Minstrelsy*, vol., 4, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

notion of continuity that denies modernity the revolutionary iconoclasm of severance:

The following attempt to commemorate the Rhymer's poetical fame, and the traditional account of his marvellous return to Fairy Land, being entirely modern, would have been placed with greater propriety among the class of Modern Ballads had it not been for its immediate connexion with the first and second parts of the same story.<sup>12</sup>

Far from being some kind of apology, the reference to “immediate connexion with the first and second part of the same story,” underpins the importance of history in providing cultural and social continuity.

I have spoken about “Thomas the Rhymer” first, and thus out of sequence, because it provides such a convenient and clearly readable summary of the way in which the *Minstrelsy* constitutes a coherent, overall narrative within a readable ideological program. Now, I would like to look at the Historical and Romantic Ballad sections that constitute the first and second parts of the *Minstrelsy*, with a view to how they function.

The historical ballads are all masculine in their bias, and are based on chivalric principles — women tend to feature only as stereotypical Ladyes in Castelles or, where they are more realistically depicted, as war-widows. The Aberdeenshire ballad of “Sir Patrick Spens,” placed first in the 1806 third edition, is arguably the most straightforwardly patriotic. The emphasis on monarchism in that ballad is amplified by Scott's addition of the Maid of Norway theme. There was no existing ballad precedent for the Norway or “Norroway” verses, which Scott claimed were recited to him, but they give the ballad and its eponymous hero a sense of purpose in bringing back the Scottish king's daughter from Norway. The further insertion of the storm verses towards the end of the ballad heightens the drama, adding a gothic, sublime dimension that also endorses loyalty to the crown to the point of heroic death. It is possible, in these lines, to glimpse Burke's late modification of his concept of the sublime as the supreme authority to which one must submit. However, I would like to suggest that Scott positioned the ballad in the form that it was published in, in order to establish strong and more simply readable foundations of patriotism and valour prior to the Border-raid, Rieving or Riding ballads with their outlaw themes.

I now want to focus more closely on the Riding ballads, for these are more directly concerned with the Borders and its significance within the *Minstrelsy*. The first ballads in the original edition of the *Minstrelsy* were drawn from this group. Intensely regionalist, and set within what Scott describes in his note prefacing “The Sang of the Outlaw Murray” as “a wild and frontier country,”<sup>13</sup> the heroes of these ballads are not stylized Lords or the bards of literary romance but, rather, the legendary frontiersmen and freebooters from a particularly troublesome region immediately bordering on England. Before the Union of the Crowns, this stretch of land had been termed the Debateable Land on account of

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<sup>12</sup> *Minstrelsy*, vol., 4, p. 127.

<sup>13</sup> *Minstrelsy*, vol. 1, p. 302.



its controversial status. Utterly peripheral, the geographical remoteness and treacherous topographical nature of the region was matched by the extent of the clansmen's distanced disregard for laws made at the heart of the nation. Scott describes Tarras Moss, a wetlands area at the heart of Liddesdale that was notoriously difficult to negotiate without detailed local knowledge, as "desolate and horrible" in his note prefacing the ballad "Johnie Armstrang." Yet he does so with a degree of relish that romanticises and glamourises this haunt and sanctuary of "the most lawless of the Border depredators."<sup>14</sup> Given his outlaw heroes' total disregard for official laws and property rights, one might wonder how Scott managed to talk of their rapacity on the one hand yet constitute them as heroes of a Borders that can be read as a site of resistance to contemporary radicalism and revolution on the other. The ideological dimension of his ballad versions, and of his textual insertions and extensive miscellanea, provide the answer. A comparison of "Johnie Armstrang's Goodnight," as published by Scott, with Joseph Ritson's version of the ballad, published in 1783, demonstrates the editorial methods that Scott used to ensure that the Scottish Border country was readable in such a way.<sup>15</sup> The use of dialect by Scott (compare, for instance, the versions of the title) is representative of that used throughout the *Minstrelsy*. Though dialect was incorporated as standard practice in anthologies of this kind, it nevertheless contributes in Scott's case to the regionalism of his collection.

Politically, Scott and Ritson were poles apart. Ritson was a known radical who, on account of his pacifism and vegetarianism, was regarded more as an outspoken but relatively harmless eccentric than a danger to society. Scott knew him, and invited him to stay for a short time at Lassawade in the Borders in 1801.<sup>16</sup> He expressed genuine admiration for the quality of Ritson's scholarship and for his work in collecting and restoring ballads, but wrote of his radical politics with a mixture of acid disapprobation and ironic mirth (he took a similar view of Burns' radicalism). Scott knew Ritson's ballads very well. The version of "Johnie Armstrang" that he chose to publish in the *Minstrelsy* deserves to be considered as providing at least some kind of response to Ritson's version, as indeed does the "Twa Corbies" (which had also accrued controversial radical associations).

The Armstrong ballad was publicly well known. It had been included in collections published by a number of other collectors, including Alan Ramsay and David Herd.<sup>17</sup> Scott's version is heavily based on that used by Herd.<sup>18</sup> The

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 352–358 and Joseph Ritson, *A Select Collection of English Songs* (London: J. Johnson, 1783), pp. 322–326, ballad XXIII. Scott owned a copy of this collection and others by Ritson as part of his extensive collection of ballad literature. See J. G. Cochrane (ed.), *Catalogue of the Library at Abbotsford* (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1838).

<sup>16</sup> H. J. C. Grierson *et al.* (eds.), *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. 12, pp. 194–198. Scott's letter to George Ellis dated 24<sup>th</sup> September 1801 gives an account of Ritson's stay at Lassawade.

<sup>17</sup> See Alan Ramsay, *The Evergreen* (1724) and David Herd, *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs, Heroic Ballads, & c.*, (1776). Again, Scott owned copies of both.

plot is straightforward: Johnny Armstrong, a notorious bandit Baron who has established semi-autonomous rule within his locality, is summoned to meet the Scots King. In both Ritson's and Scott's versions, Armstrong willingly goes with a group of his men to pay homage to his monarch. The summons is a trap, and the men are murdered along with Armstrong as a condition of a pact made in advance between the Scots and English kings. The ballad has its roots in historical fact.

Ritson's version of "Johny Armstrong's Last Good-Night" differs from Scott's in that it tells of the outlaws' desperate fight to escape the Scottish king. The point about Ritson's Armstrong is that he fights tooth and nail for the liberty of himself and his men, albeit in vain. He dies run through from behind by a royalist from a street mob. Scott's "Johnie Armstrang" is more idealistically magnanimous in his loyalty, to the extent that he will not take up arms against his sovereign even in the cause of his and his men's lives. Like Ritson's hero he repeatedly tries to negotiate freedom but fails in the face of a deceptive and unworthy monarch. In both versions the king is shown as cruel and merciless against a loyal, if lawless, subject. Both versions include in their early stanzas brief, but quite detailed representations of the domestic sphere of the outlaws, drawing the sympathies of the reader to Armstrong as a family man before he goes to the king. Thus, the "bad" king is also shown as contravening his duty to protect the families that are his subjects. Scott's note prefacing the ballad comments that the same monarch had also "guilefully entrapped Bothwell, Maxwell, Home, and other Border lords, and kept them in durance, so that he might be free to deal as he wished with their dependents."<sup>19</sup> It has to be said that as a known pacifist, as well as a republican, Ritson would not in practice have supported armed insurrection. But even if the version of Johny Armstrong that he uses is a matter of fidelity to scholarly principle, it nevertheless constitutes a powerful indictment of the tyranny and arbitrary application of justice that he regarded as consistent with absolute monarchical power. It is difficult not to read the ballad as offering some comment on the show trials of the 1790's, however oblique.

Ritson's Johny Armstrong ultimately constitutes the Scottish Borders as a marginal, violent area where nature — human or otherwise — always holds the potential to spark into rebellion if pushed to the limits. Armstrong and his men are freebooters, but they steal to feed their families. Ritson's ballad ends with a return to the domestic sphere. In the last two lines the voice becomes that of the next generation, with the dead man's infant son representing the sheer irrepressibility of fomenting revolution:

O then bespake his little son  
As he sat on his nurses knee  
If ever I live to be man

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<sup>18</sup> David Herd, *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs, Heroic Ballads, & c.*, 2 vol. (Glasgow: Kerr and Richardson, 1869), vol. 1, pp. 13–17.

<sup>19</sup> *Minstrelsy*, vol. 1, p. 350.

My father's death reveng'd shall be.<sup>20</sup>

Closure is denied and the prospect of future rebellion becomes almost a certainty, nestling at the very heart of the family.

The Johnie Armstrang of Scott's *Minstrelsy*, by contrast, does not take arms because he has to be seen as a loyal subject to the end. He cannot be readable as a revolutionary in a time of radical unrest, even at a historical distance. Nor can his descendants be represented as potential traitors, or the domestic environment in any way be construed as nurturing revolution. Scott's ballad is a straightforward glorification of the flawed but virtuous subject, as much as Ritson's is a republican anthem. He ends with verses that commemorate the rough nobility of the martyred hero and his patriotic men. The voice of Armstrang dies away, leaving only the commemorative voice of the poet. The son in this ballad version is left with memories of heroism rather than a mission of revenge:

'And God be with thee, Kirsty, my son,  
Where thou sits on thy nurse's knee!  
But and thou live this hundred yeir,  
Thy father's better thou'lt nevir be.  
'Farewell! My bonny Gilnock Hall,  
Where on Esk side thou standest stout!  
Gif I had lived but seven yeirs mair,  
I wad hae gilt thee round about.'  
John was murdered at Carlinrigg,  
And all his gallant cumpanie;  
But Scotland's heart was ne'er sae wae,  
To see sae mony brave men die –  
Because they saved their countrey deir,  
Frae Englishmen! Nane were sae bauld  
While Jonnie lived on the border syde,  
Nane of them durst cum neir his hauld.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly simplistic patriotic devotion on the part of border clan leaders, and the ultimate privileging of themes of bravery and loyalty on the part of men whose families maintain the home front is borne out over and again throughout the historical ballads. The romanticising of a hardy, but essentially honourable banditry is thus kept within a masculine frame. The contrast between these characters' bravado in the face of death and the manner in which Scott represented Watt as a coward on his way to execution in 1794 is marked. Scott had written to his aunt that "the pusillanimity of the unfortunate victim [Watt] was astonishing considering the boldness of his nefarious plans."<sup>22</sup>

The move to the Romantic ballads in the second section of the *Minstrelsy* takes the reader into a quite different cultural context. Masculine, martial modes,

<sup>20</sup> Ritson, *op. cit.*, p. 326. Ritson comments in his note prefacing this ballad that "the best account of Armstrong, his conduct, capture, and execution [...] for, alas! Instead of ending his life so gallantly as he is made to do in the song, he was ignobly hanged upon a gallows [...] is given by Lindsay of Pitscottie, in his *History of Scotland*. (Edin, 1727. Folio). He is likewise noticed by Buchanan," p. 314.

<sup>21</sup> *Minstrelsy*, vol. 1, p. 358.

<sup>22</sup> H. J. C. Grierson *et al.* (eds), *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. 1, p. 37.

patriotism and regionalism cede to more widely cast tales of the supernatural, and to those with romantic and sentimental themes. John Leyden's haunting lament "Scottish Music, an Ode," written shortly before Leyden left Britain for India in 1803, precedes these ballads. Scott's close friend and active associate in the production of the *Minstrelsy*, Leyden posits oriental imagery of "Hindu legends" and "Syria's date-crowned shore" alongside ossianic motifs, but the poem also directly refers to three of the ballads included in the Romantic ballad section — "The Lass of Lochroyan," "Brown Adam" and the "Gay Goss Hawk." The effect is that an air of heightened exoticism is swiftly brought into the collection at this point. Scott's lengthy essay on the supernatural follows Leyden's ode and introduces the first actual ballad of this section, the "Tale of Tamerlane." Once more, Scott's desire to assert a position of erudition and authority is evident. The detailed account of a wide range of beliefs and fairy superstitions attempts to be objective and rational. Some of the superstitions treated involve benign phenomena, whilst others are popularly held to be malevolent. Throughout the essay Scott assumes the standpoint of the proto-anthropological or ethnographic travel writer of the period, beginning with beliefs traditional in Iceland, Finland and other countries with Germanic Gothic associations, then extending it ever further east to Persia and India. Thus, both Leyden's poem and Scott's essay arouse in the reader a sense of the orient, of magic and of the unfamiliar. With the romantic ballads that follow constituting a feminised genre, and one in which sentiment and lax morals replace the binding loyalties and rugged virtues of the historical ballads, these male (and in Scott's case overtly patrician) approaches to the fantastical are very significant. Evidence of the extent to which the Romantic ballads of the *Minstrelsy* formed part of an ideological agenda at an early stage in Scott's project, representative of the need to control potentially subversive tendencies, can be seen clearly in a letter from Scott to Burns' editor and biographer Dr. Curry in 1800:

I do not mean to limit my collection to the Riding ballads, as they are called in our country, those namely which relate to Border feuds and forays; but, on the contrary to admit Scottish Ballads of merit upon romantic and popular subjects [...].<sup>23</sup>

The Riding ballads, with their masculine themes of Border incident clearly always provided the benchmark for the *Minstrelsy*. The romantic and popular ballads were then allowed in — "admitted," to quote Scott — "but" and "on the contrary." Definitively, the status of these ballads is one of contrast and of otherness. (The "poisonous" effect of the women — the niece and the maid — on the dusty order of the antiquary's study and his more haphazard collection of historical artefacts in Scott's novel *The Antiquary* (1816) is a humorous sketch that provides an interesting comparative case study.)<sup>24</sup> The express mention of the application of a criterion of merit suggests a need for control, with Scott positing himself as a moral guardian or censor in respect of a ballad form that had begun to attract radical associations. Scott also makes a clear distinction

<sup>23</sup> H. J. C. Grierson *et al.* (eds), *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. 2, p. 104.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Scott, *The Antiquary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 20–21.

between “our country,” meaning the Borders, and a more general Scotland that is readable as potentially weaker and in need of guardianship.

The point about the Romantic ballads is that when they are placed by Scott in a historical continuum they represent moral erosion on two closely related fronts: domestic virtue is corrupted on the one hand, and militaristic and chivalric feudal ideals on the other. In the “Twa Corbies” (another ballad with a version by Ritson), a dead knight who represents the passing of chivalry lies in a bleak and windswept wilderness, his horse, hound, hawk and ladye all having deserted and forgotten him. In other ballads, abandoned and/or unmarried mothers abound. *The Edinburgh Review* commented on the extent to which feminine issues dominate the section: the “circumstances of pregnancy and parturition are brought forward to heighten the interest of every love story.”<sup>25</sup> Even where morality remains uncorrupted, loss is the theme. The “Flowers of the Forest,” a Roxburghshire ballad towards the end of the section, comprises two parts, with the first being a particularly beautiful lament on the sorrow of the young women and children left when their men died at Flodden: “Sighing and moaning, on ilka green loaning / The flowers of the forest are a’ wede awae.”<sup>26</sup> By this point in his collection, Scott has moved a long way from the defiant “O wha dare meddle wi’ me?” of Kinmont Willie (footnoted by Scott as a “Border tune”). The section ends with another contemporary poem by Leyden, also on the subject of Flodden and entitled “Ode on Visiting Flodden,” providing a sense of enclosure yet again. In the context of resistance to radical energies, I want to suggest that this central section of the *Minstrelsy*, contained as it is between the Historical and Modern Imitation sections that I have already mentioned, draws upon a “popular” balladry that is in places feminine, and in others effeminate, specifically to treat the threats posed by passion, moral laxity, superstition and a range of other stimuli regarded as subsersive.

In conclusion, Scott’s re-fashioning of the Border ballads results in a *Minstrelsy* that was as relevant to modern issues as it was historical. Indeed, behind the nostalgia for the heroes of the past it is always possible to read a post-sentimental endorsement of modern commercial society supportive of a cohesive British union and empire building itself on class and rank hierarchies with the monarch firmly at the top. The gothic and old romance motifs, vernacular and archaic language of the ballads, and Scott’s persistent appeals to the sentiments attached to tradition form a meticulously constructed matrix of cultural history. Within that matrix any threatened slippage into anarchy and revolution could be controlled and held at bay. The *Minstrelsy* is a collection of rural ballad poetry, and it both invokes and commemorates the cultural history of the rural Scottish Borders region. That region was layered — and known to be layered — with sites of battles, atrocities and outlaw incident. At a more mundane level the depopulation of the border regions throughout the latter half of the eighteenth

<sup>25</sup> *Edinburgh Review*, II (January, 1803), p. 405.

<sup>26</sup> *Minstrelsy*, vol. 3, pp. 402–405. The first part of the ballad is described by Scott in his prefatory note as “having been composed, many years ago, by a lady of family in Roxburghshire.” The second part is by Scott.

century, largely as a result of improved farming methods, provided an environment replete with myth-history and ripe for literary re-inscription. Yet the volumes of the *Minstrelsy* were mainly aimed at an urban commercial market, and more specifically towards a readership coming from the commercial and professional middling-classes. Scott offered these readers a literary site of resistance where the seductive tendencies and threat of urban libertarianism could be treated safely but dramatically from a distance. His ballads and editorial notes provided a picturesquely romantic perspective that drew attention to a glamorous and wild culture. But his romanticism is of the anti-revolutionary kind. Everywhere in the *Minstrelsy* Scott exerts control. He writes of a Borders where hardy men engage in acts of daring and feats of honour whilst women serve as nurturers in the domestic environment. The outlaw culture of a feudalism cut across with familial loyalties had become, over the course of two centuries, law abiding and honest but above all overwhelmingly Tory. The Scottish Borders, seen through these ballads is a ruggedly vigorous and purgative zone, and paradigmatically resistant to radical or revolutionary energies either at home or from further away.