

## Notes for “Johnie Armstrang”

There are several levels of information contained within language used in traditional ballads. Much is that of the narrative, but there may be other important points of information which can refer to cultural or historic practices, or may refer to the emotional condition of the characters.

Literal statements may actually indicate a different action, which cannot fully presented due to the constraints of ballad language and the invasive nature a full description would have on the actual narrative of the story within the ballad.

Developed euphemisms may be used to indicate but not state a more visceral event than that which seems to be referred to. In the *Minstrelsy*, Scott seems to have resorted to at least one of these, and may have invented it.

Sometimes, such information may be presented through the use of supranarrative functions, which operate as an effective shorthand code, implying actions, emotions or the likelihood of a certain outcome, which would not be easily described concisely or within the bounds of a ballad’s verses.

Several forms of these language structures, formulas and formulaic language have been developed within the tradition, in order to contain a full emotive response from a listener, who would often share the knowledge with the singer. To help interpret the subtleties which exist within some ballads, we have provided a list of interpretative points to help pinpoint important moments of action or response within these ballads, or to better explain certain phrases within the narrative or the dialogue

And remember, if words ever seem confusing on the page - always try reading them aloud.

### Overview |

The language of this ballad appears quite archaic to a modern reader. This is partly due to Scott’s source, which was a 1724 publication, and also partly due to Scott’s inclusion of archaic forms of grammar - for example, while Ramsay in 1724 uses speiks - the present tense of the verb to speik (ie to speak), Scott opts for the more archaic -is form - speikis.

### Verse 2 |

.       The King he wrytes a luving letter,  
          With his ain hand sae tenderly,

This indicates a familiar, friendly letter, not a love letter. The fact that the King writes it himself implicates the character with the action further on in the ballad. Then, as now, monarchs had secretaries and clerks to manage correspondence.

Verse 4 |

“Make kinnen and capon ready then,  
And venison in great plentie,

There are three meats mentioned here - rabbit, capon - which can indicate a castrated cockerel reared as a food source or a large chicken, and venison. This intimates the wealth of food available to Johnie Armstrang and indicates that he is no peasant.

Verse 5 |

They ran their horse on the Langhome howm,  
And brak their speirs wi' mickle main;

A howm is a flat area, often near a water source which can flood in times high water - effectively a water meadow. Langholm Holm (here howm) is located below the high ground where Langhom Castle stood and is at the confluence of the River Esk and the Ewes Water. In this couplet, the Elliots and the Armstrongs are celebrating their strength and ability by riding their horses and engaging in some friendly jousting bouts.

Verse 6 |

When Johnie came before the King,  
Wi' a' his men sae brave to see,  
The King he movit his bonnet to him,  
He ween'd he was a King as well as he.

This is a pivotal point in the ballad. Etiquette of status requires that when a subordinate meets someone who socially their superior - here when a lord meets a king - the subordinate individual removes their hat or headwear as a sign of deference, respect and subordination. The fact that it is the king who removes or doffs his hat to Johnie Armstrong, he is, as the last line of the verse states, acknowledging the reiver's dominance. It is not a case of equals meeting, as, according the the ballad in verse 27, Johnie Armstrong is wearing his hat: a commoner would keep his hat off before his king.

Something similar happens in another ballad, “The Laird of Drum”. When the laird brings his new bride home, none of his retinue will doff their hats to her, as they are outraged that he has married a woman of a low social status. It does not matter, in their view, that she is now a lady, being married to the laird, and therefore their social superior through marriage.

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## Verses 7 – 18

These verses display the reiver's power and influence. The king declares that he is going to condemn Johnie Armstrong to death. In return, Armstrong offers the king a series of incentives to pardon him and his fellows from the sentence of death.

Armstrong offers twenty-four milk white steeds. The indication is that these are war horses, as the ballad says that the horses will "prance and nicker at a speir" - that is, prance and neigh. He also offers to load four of them with English gold. He then offers the kind the proceeds of twenty four working mills, before then offering "Bauld four and twenty sister's sons, / Shall for thee fight, tho' all should flee!". Here, he can offer the king a guaranteed, loyal bodyguard, who will not abandon him. Finally, he offer the "yeirly rent" of " All between heir and Newcastle town".

These verses are a reminder of the influence Armstrong has along the border. These rents are the blackmail, or protection money, paid to some dominant reivers. In return, they would not rob an individual, and may have given aid, in some cases, if they were attacked by anyone the reiver was hostile to, through feud etc. In short, Armstrong has all the trapping of power: he has men, money, status symbols, such as the war horses, and a fearsome influence.

The king, in return, rejects all of Armstrong's appeals and incentives.

## Verse 20 |

A fat horse is not an overfed horse, it is a well-fed horse. At times on the Border, there was a fall-off in the amount of reiving, usually around the end of Novembber due to the lack of fodder for horses and cattle. The horses did not have the stamina to be ridden hard if necessary and the cattle did not have the energy to be driven hard over miles, often in poor weather.

## Verse 21 |

Armstrong's power is put into a romantic context in this verse. While he refers to reiving, it is emphasised that he did not raid in Scotland, but only in the enemy lands of England - where he could find everything a man needed to eat well: meal (grain), mault (for ale), beef and mutton.

## Verse 28 |

This verse contains a veiled threat from Armstrong. In the previous verse, he casts disdain on the king's bravery, but here Armstrong indicates that if her had been ready for a battle, the contest between the king and Armstrong would have been long remembered: there is also an irony here, for the meeting has been recalled for many more than the hundred years mentioned in the ballad.

## Verse 29 and 30 |

Johnie Armstrong says his farewells to members of his family. These type of verses, often referred to as "last goodnights", are common in ballads, at the critical moment of execution.

Kirsty is a variant of a shortened form of Christopher. In historic documents it is often spelled Creste or Christie. John Armstrong had a number of brothers, one of whom was called Christopher. His older brother, Thomas, was the Laird of Mangerton. If we choose to read this verse as referring to two brothers, then it is historically correct. If we choose to associate Kirsty with the title of laird, it is inaccurate. Mangerton is pronounced with a hard a, as in range. The g is soft.

John Armstrong's son was also called Christopher.