

Interpretative Notes for “Hughie the Graeme”

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.

Sometimes, such information may be presented through the use of supra-narrative 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.

Verse 1 |

“Gude lord Scroope’s to the hunting gane”

The character of Lord Scroope (also Scroop / Scrope) appears in several ballads. Henry Scrope was Warden of the English West March for many years, and was succeeded in the post by his son, Sir Thomas Scrope.

The character of Scrope is not presented favourably in any of the ballads. However, it is only in this one that he appears competent and cunning.

“For stealing of the bishop’s mare”

A great deal has been written and discussed over the erstwhile crime of Hughie the Graeme. Whether he has indeed stolen a horse or has been framed, it should be pointed out that the Grahams were one of the most notorious families on the English side of the Border, and in the Calendar of Border Papers, Thomas Scrope especially repeatedly writes about their crimes and criminal ways.

Verse 3 - 5 |

Scroope and Hughie the Graeme are fighting hand-to-hand, when ten of Scroope's men appear: the inference is that Hughie has fallen into an ambush.

Verse 6 |

Carlisle was and is the principal town of the area. It was also Scroope's headquarters.

Verse 7 - 11 |

In this version of the ballad, there is the presentation of a judicial trial. The inclusion of the Humes is interesting, for while the Humes were a Border family, they were Scottish. Despite their intercessions, however, Hughie is condemned to death.

Verse 12 |

The leaping of the character in this verse has been interpreted in two ways. It may be a physical representation of his frustration and grief; or it may suggest an attempted, unsuccessful escape

Verse 13 |

“He looked over his left shoulder”

This is an example of a supra-narrative ballad formula. In short, this line provides information about the character's emotional state, rather than simply presenting a physical act.

This formula family was identified as the “He looked over his left shoulder” formula family by Flemming G. Andersen. The formula can represent an active, aggressive stance by a character, or if the character is subordinate to another, it can represent their despair and inability to defend themselves, either in words or deeds. Very rarely, it can be used to indicate contentment, but it is more frequently associated with tense, dangerous or aggressive situations. Either way, it appears within ballads at a pivotal moment of personal confrontation.

This is the passive version of the “He looked over his left shoulder” formula. Tied up and condemned to die, Hughie the Graeme is powerless to defend himself and as such he presented as the less dominant of the two main characters. Here, the formula indicates the character's despair, which is expanded in the following verse, where all he can do is assure his grieving father that he will go to heaven

Verse 14 |

The promise of heaven in this verse is perhaps included to indicate that Hughie is innocent of the crime he has been accused of.

In historical terms, it is unlikely that a reiver would call on God: in 1525 Gavin Dunbar, the Bishop of Glasgow issued his “Monition of Cursing” against the Border Reivers, effectively excommunicating them en masse.

Verse 15 |

The entire ballad pivots on this verse. In the *Minstrelsy* version of the ballad, Hughie’s wife has been unfaithful, with the bishop, and it would seem that Hughie is being dispensed with., by the one or the other.

Scott identifies the bishop in question as being Robert Aldridge (incumbent 1537-1556), although he is unclear as to why he mentions this man and none of the other 16th century bishops who held the post. It may have had something to do with his political flexibility:

Of the morality of Robert Aldridge, bishop of Carlisle, we know little; but his political and religious faith were of a stretching and accommodating texture. Anthony a Wood observes, that there were many changes in his time, both in church and state; but that the worthy prelate retained his offices and preferments., during them all. (*MSB* (1803) III: 92)

You can read more about him in the online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography – <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/315>

Other bishops were:

Owen Oglethorpe, who has a page in the online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography –(1556-1559) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20617>

John Best (1561-1570), who has a page in the online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography – <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/47410>

Richard Barnes (1570-1577), who has a page in the online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography – <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1471>

John May (1577-1598), who has a page in the online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography – <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18421?docPos=2>

Henry Robinson, (1598-1616), who has a page in the online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography – <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23840?docPos=1>

Verse 16 |

The final verse of “Hughie the Graeme” has parallels in other reiver ballads, such as “Johnie Armstrang” and “Hobbie Noble”. Instead of accepting death, the characters rail and accuse their killers. In “Johnie Armstrang”, the embittered “To seik het water beneith cauld ice” verse captures the anger and despair of the character of Armstrang,

while the ballad's narrative reflects the tone, in the "John murdered was at Carlinrigg" verse. In "Hobbie Noble", the character's final words are defiant:

"Yet wad I rather be ca'd Hobbie Noble,
In Carlisle where he suffers for his fau't–
Than I'd be ca'd the traitor Mains,
That eats and drinks o' the meal and maut."–

In "Hughie the Graeme", the defiance is strongest of all, for he call for revenge for his death, and the man he calls on for revenge is Johnie Armstrang:

"Here, Johnie Armstrang, take thou my sword,
That is made o' the metal sae fine;
And when thou comest to the English side,
Remember the death of Hughie the Graeme."

This may be an attempt to associate the character of Hughie with a famous historical individual. However, in addressing an Armstrong, the ballad can be viewed as making reference to the links between the Armstrongs and the Grahams. While the Armstrongs were predominantly a Scottish family, they collaborated with the Grahams in the Middle and West Marches, and the two families frequently intermarried.