

Interpretative Notes for “The Broomfield-Hill”

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 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.

Overview |

An alternative title for this ballad is “The Broomfield Wager” and this should be viewed as a wager ballad, although the wager statement is missing from this version. The lady fears losing her virginity, but the man she fears

Verse 1 |

The hero and heroine have agreed to meet at the broom. The hero arrives first, in the morning.

Broom is a type of plant - *Cytisus scoparius*

Verses 2 - 3 |

Safety can usually be found within the walls of a bower. While the lady’s physical safety is assured is she stays inside, if she does not keep the tryst he has made with her lover, she is frightened that he will call her false: the Dictionary of the Scots Language / Dictionar o the Scots Leid defines mansworn as: “to swear falsely, to perjure. Rare exc. in ppl.adj. mansworn , -sweirt, perjured, false “. See www.dsl.ac.uk for more information.

Verse 5 |

A broom-cow is a twig of broom.

Verse 8 |

There is a suggestion that a spell has been cast over the hero, in order to render him sound asleep when his lady keeps their tryst in the afternoon. In this verse, she leaves tokens to show that she has been there. She pulls broom flowers and strews them on his hals bane, that is his collar bone.

Verse 9 - 10 |

The hero talks first to his horse, asking why it did not wake him when the lady was near him. The horse assures him that it tried to wake him by stamping and making noise with its bridle when the lady was present.

Coft means bought.

Verses 11 - 12 |

The hero then talks to his goss hawk, asking why it did not wake him when the lady was near him. The goss hawk assures him that it tried to wake him by flapping its wings and ringing its bells - these would be bells attached to its jesses.

A goshawk is a large hawk. Defining characteristics include: grey and yellow beaks, yellow legs, bright red eyes and white flashes over their eyes. You can read about them online at: <http://www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/g/goshawk/index.aspx>

Verse 13 -14

The hero urges his horse to carry him to the lady, and adds the threat that if it does not, then he shall feed the horse to the birds of the greenwood. The horse responds by saying it is pointless to ride the horse to death in chasing her, as the lady has fled.