

Interpretative Notes for “Clerk Saunders”

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 |

This ballad is a combination of a murder tale and a ghost story. The character of the clerk appear in medieval poetry as a cunning seducer. Saunders, while exhibiting some similar characteristics, is also a true lover.

Verse 1 |

And sad and heavy was the love
That fell thir twa between

There are several definitions which may be applied to “sad”. It does not mean unhappy. The Dictionary of the Scots Language / Dictionar o the Scots Leid offers the following, which are particularly relevant:

2. Steadfast, constant; determined, resolute. For hardines is nocht ... Bot of sad thocht anerly. That I dred nocht of ded the payne; Leg. S. iii 418. As Quincyane persawing had That scho wes of wil sa sad ; Ib. xlii 36. The thryd bataylle swne sawe thai Cwmmand on in sad aray; Wynt. viii 2540. Na for na lychtlines thai ar nocht changeabill Bot sad of feris; Hay Alex. 2548. For thay ar sad as widdercok in wind; Henr. Test. Cress. 567. Thir

ladies bene echone Als trew and sad as ony tyme aygone; Quare Jel. 264. For euery wicht that is with lufe ybound And sad and trewe in euery faith yground Syne likith nocht to varye nor eschewe; Ib. 474.

3. Of persons: Responsible in judgment; serious in character and conduct; not frivolous or unreliable; stable, sober, grave.

Passing into next main sense. In thewis sad dare thane wes he ere; Leg. S. xxvi 175. The plesant pacok ... Sad in his sanctitud sekerly & sure; Howlat 85 (A). Clerkis ar mare sad of counsale ... and ferrar can se in the ground of a mater na seculeris; Hay I 285/9. For vysmen are ay sad and fulys ay blyth and oft-tymis be the sad continans of a wysman fulis are correkit; Wisd. Sol. (STS) 324. In 3outh be lusti, sad quhen thow art ald; Dietary 63 (Makc.). Henr. Orph. 19. Sad of contenance he was; Wall. i 201. The king gert charge thai suld the byschop ta, Bot sad lordys consellyt to lat him ga; Ib. xi 1334. Ib. ix 1926. Full sendill sad or soundlie set to sleip; K. Hart 85. Richt sad in moving suld thir women be And of schort space & to no fer cuntre; Bk. Chess 2090. Richt sad of langage suld he be ane kyng And weile avysit or he said the thing; Fyve Bestes 357. To write onone I hynt a pen in hand Fortil perform the poet grave and sad; Doug. vii Prol. 145. That ye leif nocht the common weal on dwne ... bot that ye be kend for sad e men; 1517 Acta Conc. Publ. Aff. 87. Scho postis to Setounis hous with a verray few, and thay not all of the sad dest company; Buch. Detect. (1727) 28. Gif 3e be secreit, sad, and solitair, Peirtlie thai speik that privalie 3e play; a1586 Sat. P. xxxvii 41. Learne to be sad, silent, sober, and sanctified; Hume 86/205. absol. as noun The sad dest said, with sable countenance, 'Allace, brother, thow raius'; Rolland Ct. Venus i 321.

See www.dsl.ac.uk for more definitions.

Verses 2 - 3 |

Clerk Saunders suggests that they go to bed together, but Margaret says that they should not until they are married, as she is frightened that her brothers will discover them.

Verses 4 - 5 |

Saunders devises two ploys which allows him entrance into Margaret's room, while ensuring that Margaret will not have to lie to her family.

A napkin is a handkerchief.

Verse 6 - 7 |

The fears of Margaret regarding her brothers are realised in these verses. It should be noted that the torches carried by the brothers are flaming torches, not modern ones.

Verse 8 - 11 |

Six of the brothers debate what they should do with Saunders. The seventh does not speak, but acts: he stabs Saunders through the body with his sword. This type of active character also appears in "Kinmont Willie", when the rescuers meet with the false Sakelde: three groups debate with him, but the leader of the fourth group, Dickie of Dryhope, does not speak one word but runs Sakelde through, killing him.

The Dictionary of the Scots Language / Dictionar o the Scots Leid offers the following definition, which is particularly relevant:

n. 1. To thrust, pull or draw (an object) off, over or through (another, between the fingers, etc.) e.g. in order to wipe it (Slk. 1825 Jam.; Sh. 1971), in sharpening or cleaning a sword, or the like.

See www.dsl.ac.uk for more definitions.

Swords are often described as being “bright brown” in ballads

Verse 12 |

This is arguably one of the most poignant verses in the ballad tradition. The man lies dying and his lover, unaware, is held in his arms. The language of this verse is an ironic echo of that of the first verse.

Verse 15 -16 |

Margaret is inconsolable and declares that she will never be comforted. This is comparable with the reaction of the character of the girl in “The Dowie Dens of Yarrow” whose lover is killed by her brothers.

Verse 17 |

The “clinking bell” is a dead bell, also known as a “mort”, “lych”, “passing” and “skellet” bell. This was a hand-bell, which could easily be carried. A parish or town often had a bell dedicated for this purpose. These bells could be baptised and in the ringing of them, evil spirits would be dispersed and kept away from the dead body. The dead bell is part of the ritual connected to the care of the dead - body and spirit. Others are discussed in “A Lyke-Wake Dirge”.

As late as the nineteenth century, a dead bell was rung to announce a death and afterwards, the details of the funeral would be announced.

In earlier centuries, a dead bell could also be rung during funeral processions, or rung to remember a deceased person on the anniversary of their death - although this was usually done to honour the soul of someone who had left substantial monies, lands or property to the church

This verse contains an effective example of ballad “leaping”. “Leaping” is when there is a sudden scene shift. In this verse, Saunders’ burial is portrayed in the second line, but in the third line his ghost appears and the time, according to the fourth line, is “an hour before the day”.

Verse 18 |

The dead of the ballad world are revenants rather than ghosts. They are the walking dead. They are sentient and can communicate rationally. Saunders wants Margaret to return the pledge of love he gave to her, which releases her from the bond and, we must presume, allow him to rest at ease.

The Dictionary of the Scots Language / Dictionar o the Scots Leid offers the following definition:

2. Loyalty as pledged to another; (a) pledge or oath of allegiance or loyalty; (a) binding promise or agreement. (a) For scho hyr treutht brokine had Til hyme that mykil of hyre mad; Leg. S. xxx 349. Thou sal deir by thy treuth thou to me brak; Doug. iv vii 42. Quha rewardit him ... for his treuthe and lawtie keipit to his native cuntrey; Leslie 190. To the end that under treuth thei mycht eyther gett the castell betrayed, or [etc.]; Knox I 183. Lo heir a toy and licht conset ... onlye for ane treuth and prove To ladye maistres myne; Maitl. Q. 251/37. [They] declarit vpone thair treuth that [sic] sould be freindis to this incorporatioun; 1657 Kirkcudbr. B. Rec. II 1040. Donald Groat ... declared upon his word of treuth he was bot of the age of 9 yeires or thairabout quhen his father dyed; 1666 S. Ronaldshay 52. (b) [To] be content & payit of vj marcis for a 3er tocum ... in trouth of concorde to be maide betwext the saide partiis; 1458–9 Aberd. B. Rec. MS V ii 810 (14 Feb.). (c) I ... sall ... be scortly at your grace my selff for declairyng of my part and threwhth touertis your grace at all tymis; 1553–4 Corr. M. Lorraine 381. (d) John Herron ... promised on his truth that [etc.]; 1698 Penninghame Par. Rec. I 17.

b. To gif or plicht (one's) treuth, to give a pledge or promise (of fidelity, allegiance, etc.).

See **Plicht** v.1 a, b for further examples. (a) Trewht; 1556 Carte Northberwic 72. (b) Syr Robart to gyf his trowth to the forsayde John and the forsayde John to gyf his trowth to ... Syr Robart; 1385 Red Bk. Grandtully I 139*. [Both parties] haf bath bodely geuyn vthir thair trowthis [before witnesses]; 1432 15th Rep. Hist. MSS App. viii 44. I Nycholaus Ramsay of Dalhousy takis 3ow Cristiane Ros to my spousit wyf and thairto I gyf 3ow my trowth; c1552 Soc. Ant. II 413. (c) She and he else hath their troth plight; Sir Eger 1154.

See www.dsl.ac.uk for more definitions.

Verse 19 - 20 |

Margaret's continuing loyalty to and love for Saunders are emphasised in this verse. She does not care that he is dead, she would still welcome him back into her bower, but her refuses.

The corporeal nature of the dead Saunders is presented in this verse: this is a walking corpse, rather than a ghost. He says that his mouth is cold and that "it has the smell, now, of the ground".

Verse 21 |

As with the revenant sons in "The Wife of Usher's Well", Saunders must leave Margaret before daybreak: the hours of night are the hours when the dead can walk.

Verse 22 |

The question Margaret asks Saunders suggests that she may be pregnant: travelling is childbirth.

Verse 25 |

Despite her love for Saunders, or perhaps because of it, Margaret returns his troth. However, this is almost presented as having some kind of physical form. In Scott's version of this ballad, she strokes the troth on a "chrystal wand". It would seem that here, Margaret is taking some care not to touch Saunders. He has physical proof of the returned troth, but she has not touched him, perhaps in deference to the warning he gives her in verse 20, when he warns her that if he kisses her, she will soon die.

Verse 26 |

Saunders makes a promise to Margaret that if the dead should ever come to claim the living, then he will come for her. This should be viewed as a statement of continued affection rather than as any threat.

Verse 27 |

It's hosen and shoon, and gown alone.

Hose are long socks or stockings, while shoon are shoes. A gown is a night-gown.

Verse 28 - 30 |

Margaret's enduring love for Saunders is emphasised by her wish to lie down beside him. He says that there is no room - and there is none, as his bed now is his grave.