

Interpretative Notes for “The Harper of Lochmaben”

Verse 1 |

“silly”

Silly does not necessarily mean stupid. It can also indicate someone deserving of kindness or sympathy; someone who is feeble or sickly; someone who is unsophisticated; or someone who is of humble or lowly social position.

In past centuries, when most skills and trades required sight, being a musician was one skill frequently associated with partially-sighted or blind people.

“Wanton Brown”

This refers to the Lord Warden’s brown stallion

Verse 2 |

“gude wyfe”

This refers to the harper’s wife.

“wark”

A “wark’ is an enterprise or an undertaking

“Without a mare that has a foal”

A mare is a female horse.

Verse 3 |

“That can baith lance o’er laigh and hie”

To lance means to leap or jump

Verse 5 - 6 |

There is a slight indication that the music which the harper plays has a magical effect. While this may now be a vestigial suggestion in this ballad, other ballads contain references to music or to instruments which have magical properties. Here he plays until everyone dances and then fall asleep.

To “carp” is to sing.

“Till a’ the Lordlings footed the floor”

This may be read as “all the young lords danced”

“shoon”

Shoon are shoes.

Verse 8 |

A “cowt halter” is defined by the Dictionary of the Scottish Language / Dictionar of the Scots Leid as “a halter made of rope or straw, consisting of the moo-piece, or the noose for the mouth, and the hehd-stehl, or the pieces that go along each jaw and fasten on the top of the head. Sometimes it has a chowk-bin, or a piece that is tied round behind the jaws”
See www.dsl.ac.uk for more definitions

Verse 9 |

“bait” is defined by the Dictionary of the Scottish Language / Dictionar of the Scots Leid as To feed (a horse, etc.), esp. on a journey. See www.dsl.ac.uk for more definitions

Verse 13 |

To “nicker and sneer” means to “neigh and snort”

Verses 18 - 20 |

The harper’s plan comes to fruition in these verses. He claims that his mare has been stolen, and that he has previously lost a foal. The Warden, in turn offers to pay him for his harping, which will recompense him for his lost foal, and also to give him another mare.