

## Interpretative Notes for “The Dowie Dens of Yarrow”

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 is one of the most famous ballads in the Scottish ballad tradition. Scott stated that it was popular at the time he collected his various versions, and it is still popular. While many ballads employ triadic repetition, “The Dowie Dens of Yarrow” is notable for its use of binary repetition. “Dowie” means sad or dismal, while a “den” is a dip or hollow in a hillside.

### Verse 1 |

And ere the paid the lawing

This can be translated as “And before they paid what was owed”

### Verse 2 |

“The Dowie Dens of Yarrow” employs a number of repetitions, rather than triads. The repetition of “stay at hame” in this verse is balanced by the “fare ye weel” of the third verse.

The lady warns the lord of her brother’s treachery in this verse.

#### Verse 4 |

This verse contains actions which emphasise the intimacy between the hero and the heroine. She kisses his cheek, which is an obvious indication of emotional connection, and which is echoed later on in the ballad. She also combs his hair. Hair combing is an important supra-narrative act within the ballad tradition. If a character combs their own hair, it indicates a longing for intimacy with another character. Combing another character's hair indicates that the character is with another which she loves. Conversely, actively not combing one's hair upon the loss of a loved one is an emphasis of the extent of grief a character is experiencing.

#### Verse 5 |

This is one of the pivotal verses in this ballad. Instead of being faced with one opponent, the hero is faced with nine, which validates the lady's statement in verse 2.

Scott's verse included the geographic reference of the Tennes bank. This should not be confused with the area around the Tennes burn further South-West, where the reiver The Laird's Jock had his keep. The current spelling of this location is Tinnis, and the name is associated with a farm a little North East of Annan Street.

#### Verse 6 & 7 |

These two verses balance each other, and function as a question and answer set.

#### Verse 8 |

"brand" is an archaic word for sword. It is only used in verse.

#### Verse 9 |

There is some debate whether the "stubborn knight" who tuns through the hero is one of the four wounded combatants or if the treacherous brother had exempted himself from the fight and joins in only at the end.

#### Verse 11 |

Prophetic dreams are common in the ballad tradition. Another notable dream portent can be found in "The Battle of Otterbourne". In this case, it is the heroine who has dreamed the dream, and it may explain why she tries to keep her lord at home in verse 2. The heather pulling is symbolic of foretelling death.

#### Verse 15 |

The first two lines of this verse are a sad echo of the loving actions of verse 4. Here, however, the lady is preparing a corpse.

“She kiss’d them, till her lips grew red”

Here, her lips grow red with the blood from his wounds.

In another of Scott’s versions, the line runs “She drank the red blood frae him ran”.

This blood drinking image caused Francis James Child, editor of the definitive *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, some difficulty - “this is disagreeable, assuredly, and unnatural too”, he wrote in a footnote to his prefatory notes to the ballad. It may be disagreeable, but it is a very powerful image, and may be related to her repeatedly kissing him. This is not a vampiric action.

Verses 16 & 17 |

These are another set. The lady’s father urges her not to grieve in verse 16, noting that he will marry her to a better lord than her dead love. In response, the lady states that the man who lies daed was the finest lord, although she uses metaphoric language: “A fairer rose did never bloom / Than now lies cropp’d on Yarrow”.

In some versions of this ballad which were collected for Scott, the final verse reveals that the lady is pregnant with the dead lord’s child.