

Interpretative Notes for “Helen of Kirconnell - Part Second”

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 |

These notes pertain to the “Part Second” of the ballad, as it was published by Scott in the *Minstrelsy*. While the language and structure of these verses are still atypical of those of traditional ballads, there is a distinct narrative.

Kirkconnell is in Dumfries & Galloway. It is marked on the *Minstrelsy* map, found on the walterscott.eu/education site.

Verse 1 |

The aaab rhyme structure is not typical of the ballad tradition. Neither is the presentation of the entire piece in the first person.

This verse emphasises the grief and despair of the narrator.

Verse 2 |

This is one of the few ballads where firearms are mentioned. In this collection, another notable ballad is “The Raid of the Reidswire”. However, that ballad can be connected to a specific event, where it is known that firearms were used. Scott refers to a carbine being the weapon used in this ballad, and that would suggest that the late 17th Century as a point of reference. However, it may be that Scott uses the word to indicate a long-muzzled firearm and did not intend to identify the specific weapon.

Verse 4 - 5 |

The ballad adopts the tradition that the hero pursued and killed the murderer near to the spot where the heroine was killed. The hero does not return gunfire, but uses a blade.

Verse 6 |

“I’ll make a garland of thy hair”

While the practise of incorporating a deceased person’s hair into jewellery is associated with the late 18th and 19th Centuries, there are surviving examples of the practise from at least the 16th century, so this verse cannot be used as a dating mechanism for this part of the ballad. The hero is expressing his loyalty to his dead true-love. A more common expression in the ballad tradition is the verbal assurance that a lover will not marry again. Examples of this can be found in “The Dowie Dens of Yarrow” and “Willie’s Ladye” on this site.

Verse 7 |

The image of the dead girl encouraging the bereft lover to join her in death is not typical of the ballad tradition. Ballads such as “Clerk Saunders” and “The Unquiet Grave” contain examples of the walking dead rejecting any pleas by the living to join them in death. Indeed, in versions of “The Unquiet Grave”, the dead lover chastises their still-living true love for mourning for him too long.