

Interpretative Notes for “Willie’s Ladye”

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 |

The tale concerns Willie, his wife and his mother, who puts a curse on the wife to prevent her giving birth to the baby she is carrying. The character of the mother is a witch. It should be noted, here, that there are other mother-characters in the ballad tradition, who work curses, or who oppose their children’s wishes by the use of magic. The more familiar role of the opposing step-mother was originally fulfilled by mother characters. This ballad presents curses, benign spirits, and the means to break malignant spells.

Verse 1 |

The wife has been brought into the home environment from abroad. A ballad character in a foreign environment can be vulnerable to harm of various sorts. There is an indication that the character of the wife is beautiful from the mention of her “yellow hair”. Pale skin, blue eyes and yellow hair (for both sexes) indicate beauty in the ballad tradition.

The opening verse states that the mother has brought great care (concern) upon the wife.

Verse 2 |

The wife is pregnant, but cannot seem to give birth. The ballad vindicates Willie of any collusion with his mother, as he is presented as mourning over his travailling wife. He is aware that his mother is responsible for the danger his wife is in and tries to bribe her into releasing the spell she has cast.

Ballads such as these may have had their origin in an attempt to explain medical and physical conditions, which could be not adequately explained due to lack of knowledge. For example, traditional tales concerning fairy changelings may concern babies who failed to thrive and subsequently died. This ballad may have its roots in babies which fail to be born due to incorrect positioning. Even in the near past (the end of the 19th Century and the outset of the 20th Century), the suspicion of magical intervention may have been suspected.

The character of the lady may be presented as sitting in the ballad, as this was the accepted position for giving birth up to the 1800s. Birthing chairs were often used, but when male doctors became more common than the traditional female local midwives, a prone position was encouraged, which made the process easier for those assisting a birth, although perhaps not for the mother to be.

Willie offers the first gift of a cup decorated with gold and silver.

Verses 3 & 4 |

The malign intentions of Willie's mother is stated clearly in verse 3, while Willie's despair is emphasised in verse 4. Willie is presented as a true lover, as he promises that he will not marry any other woman but the wife he is currently married to. Such statements are more usually associated with female characters.

Verses 5 & 6 |

A second gift is offered to the mother – a horse shod with silver and gold. Scott glosses “chess” as jess “the name of a hawk's bell”. The jesses are in fact the tethering straps which are attached to a hunting bird in falconry. In this verse, these tethers are tied to the horses mane and have bells attached to them.

The wife suggests the second gift.

Verse 7 |

The mother rejects the second gift.

Verses

9 & 10 |

A third gift is offered to the mother – an ornate girdle (or belt) which is decorated with and silver.

The wife suggests the third gift.

Verse 11 |

The mother rejects the third gift

Verses 13 & 14 |

Another character is introduced in this verse. The “Billy-blind” is a representation of a benign house spirit such as a Brownie. The character appears in ballads transmitted by Mrs Brown.

The spirit tells Willie what to do in order to discover what spell has been cast. He is to shape a lump of wax into the shape of a child, pretend that the child has been born and is going to be christened, and invite his mother to the christening.

There is at least one missing stanza in the *Minstrelsy* version. The listener must suppose that that Willie does as he is instructed, and that his mother attends what she thinks is the child’s christening.

Verses 15 & 16 |

The various parts of the spell are revealed by the mother in these verses. With the exception of the inclusion of the animal sacrifice, the constituents of the spell suggest constraints, restraints and barriers.

They are:

Nine witch knots, which must be untangled from her hair
Kaims o’ care, which must be removed from her hair

The bush o woodbine must be taken down. Woodbine is another word of honeysuckle. The ballad suggests that taking down the twisting, interlocking branches of the plant will help release the lady from her condition.

The left foot shoe - the show has to be loosened, again suggesting something which is tied tightly.

The “master” kid which run underneath the lady’s bed must be killed. There is a suggestion here that the young male animal passing under the woman’s bed is blocking the arrival of a male infant.

There were a number of traditions which were adhered to when women were in labour: all the locks in a house were undone, knives, nails or swords of iron were placed in the room to keep fairies at a distance. After a wedding, very often any knots on the wedding couples

clothes were unfastened in the belief that this would speed conception. By inference, tying knots makes conception of birth difficult.

Verses 17 & 18 |

Willie completes the tasks which break the spell on his wife and she gives birth to a son.