



Heroes and Saints

Studies in Honour of
Katalin Halácsy

edited by
Zsuzsanna Simonkay
Andrea Nagy

CITATION:

Bacsikai-Atkari, Julia. "Narratives of the Medieval in Walter Scott's Ballads." *Heroes and Saints: Studies in Honour of Katalin Halácsy*. Ed. Zsuzsanna Simonkay and Andrea Nagy. Budapest: Mondat, 2015. 323–336. Print.

Julia Bacskai-Atkari
University of Potsdam

Narratives of the Medieval in Walter Scott's Ballads

This paper examines the narrative macrostructure of Sir Walter Scott's ballads and aims at showing that they are not merely imitations of medieval ballads but the genre itself serves as a central topic in these texts. There are various ways for an author to achieve this kind of effect; one is embedding, whereby the minstrel presenting the ballad is depicted in a frame story: this is frequently employed by Scott and can be observed to a lesser extent in *The Lady of the Lake* and most elaborately in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. Another way is to engage in theoretical argumentations defending the genre of the ballad, as in the introduction to the first canto of *Marmion*. In either case, the medieval genre of the ballad is seen both as an opportunity for the author to express himself and as a (literary) problem.

Among other features, such narrative structures have a significant impact on how heroes are portrayed in Scott's ballads: crucially, the hero is not directly accessible for the readers but is transmitted via two agents. However, by providing an authentic context within which the text appears to be natural, Scott also provides an interpretative framework that facilitates the reader's understanding the hero's character and actions.

1. Romantic Verse Narratives and Medieval Ballads

Scott's interest in the ballad is strongly related to a general raised interest in medieval genres and the medieval in general that can be perceived in the early nineteenth century; in fact, Scott's success can largely be attributed to the fact that he satisfied the needs of his audience in this respect (see Alexander 30–33).

Verse narratives were very popular in English literature between 1798 and 1830, resulting in rather different texts produced by various authors (see Fischer 2–3). The term "romantic verse narrative" denotes a certain literary tendency more than a well-defined or well-definable genre; this tendency involved a strong impact of three major genres: the

epic, the romance and the ballad (Fischer 12–13). All of these genres involve spoken (or sung) recital in their archetypical setups (Fischer 15–35) and hence the relationship between the poet and the audience is immediate. Several gestures recalling this archetypical situation are preserved in the written forms as well; in these cases the reader is frequently supposed to imagine that what is read is actually sung.

Apart from the narrative situation, the relationship between the hero (or heroes) of the text and the participants of the narrative situation (that is, the poet and the audience) also has to be examined. Again, I will restrict myself to certain characteristics that are relevant for understanding some distinctive features of Scott's ballads.

In the epic, the "poet narrates to a like-minded reading or listening public" which is either a national public or "one where everyone shares similar views of the world and which is united by a single all-embracing interest"; accordingly, the content is characterised by an "all-embracing interest and, in the widest sense of the word, heroic theme to which the public in question can relate, in the guise of a story" (Fischer 24).

In the romance, the "narrator addresses an audience (a public) that sometimes is, but does not have to be, limited to a particular social class or nationality" (Fischer 30). The intended public is one "looking for high-quality entertainment" and "was only initially a particular social or national group" but "later included the lower classes who listened to minstrels" (Fischer 31). Content-wise, the romance is characterised by entertaining topics, "with a preference for love, adventure, the miraculous and the exotic and the world of the knights and the court," which are also commonly referred to as "romantic" themes; however, the interest is not merely regional and there is a "marked emphasis on the 'private' aspect" (Fischer 31).

Finally, in the ballad it is either "the people" who "sing for their own entertainment" or a designated "soloist or main singer, who does not however differ socially from them, and who, even if he is a professional singer, never leaves the folk sphere" (Fischer 34). The intended public involves listeners or readers "who are looking for literature of a less demanding kind" (Fischer 35). As far as content is concerned, it can typically be characterised by a dramatic description "of an unusual, real or invented occurrence" and "historical, heroic (at an individual level), romantic, sensational or farcical themes"; in addition, there is "often local interest, and there are often motifs based on popular beliefs" (Fischer 35).

Considering all this, it should be obvious that the three genres can strongly be associated with a certain relatedness of the poet, the

audience and the heroes: the text is supposed to be about a hero who is in some respect crucially relevant both for the poet and for the audience. One of the most important questions is, hence, how a nineteenth-century author may achieve this effect if the medieval topic and the figure of a medieval hero are to be maintained. Note that this is a point where many romantic verse narratives differ from Scott's ballads: several authors, including Byron, concentrated on contemporary topics rather than trying to imitate medieval genres.

When discussing Scott's ballads, it has to be stressed that though this particular genre heavily builds on the original ballad genre (as discussed above), it does not adhere strictly to the conventions thereof and amalgamates several characteristics of the romance or the epic as well. In fact, the success of Scott's ballads also lies in his ability to revive the romance and hence to bring novelty into contemporary epic poetry, as opposed to the rather conventional ballads written at the time, that is, around 1804 and 1805 (see Fischer 87–88). One of the central concerns of Scott was to focus on the story and to provide an entertaining narrative that is easy to read (Fischer 89–90). In other words, despite the fact that his ballads are obviously in a strong intertextual relationship with the three conventional genres mentioned above, the main issue in the texts is not an abstract literary discussion but providing an interesting story.

The strong focus on the story (and hence on the hero) again raises the question of how the medieval is transmitted to a rather different audience. In what follows I will briefly describe two ways that are markedly present in Scott's oeuvre.

2. Embedded Heroes and Minstrels

The main function of the narrator is to provide a bridge between the hero and the audience. Given that the medieval world and the early nineteenth-century readership are inevitably far away from each other in time, a sole narrator is unable to be close to both of them at the same time, provided that the narrator himself is not equipped with supernatural features, which is clearly not the case in Scott's ballads. Hence a logical way of overcoming this apparent difficulty is to double the narrator: one narrator writes the text that the audience reads and the other recites the story at a different time, that is, at a time that is close to the one in which the events take place. Naturally, this doubling has to be marked in the text; otherwise the desired effect of bringing the two time layers together cannot be achieved.

A standard way of doing this is via embedding: there is a frame story that establishes some general facts about the narrator of the embedded story. The frame story does not have to be well developed; in fact, it does not have to be narrative at all. In *The Lady of the Lake*, for instance, the introductory three stanzas serve to indicate that the rest of the text is going to be narrated by “the Harp of the North,” who is addressed by the narrator of the frame text:

Harp of the North! that mouldering long hast hung
On the witch-elm that shades Saint Fillan’s spring,
And down the fitful breeze thy numbers flung,
Till envious ivy did around thee cling,
Muffling with verdant ringlet every string, –
O Minstrel Harp, still must thine accents sleep?
Mid rustling leaves and fountains murmuring,
Still must thy sweeter sounds their silence keep,
Nor bid a warrior smile, nor teach a maid to weep? (1.1–9)

The narrator here addresses the Harp, which is not only the means but also the active agent of producing songs. The next stanza makes it clear that the harp was used on ancient festive days and the period that is described here is a prototypical medieval setting:

Not thus, in ancient days of Caledon,
Was thy voice mute amid the festal crowd,
When lay of hopeless love, or glory won,
Aroused the fearful, or subdued the proud.
At each according pause was heard aloud
Thine ardent symphony sublime and high!
Fair dames and crested chiefs attention bowed;
For still the burden of thy minstrelsy
Was Knighthood’s dauntless deed, and Beauty’s matchless eye.
(1.10–18)

Hence the Harp was used to sing romances about knights and medieval beauties, as these are typical topics associated with this medieval genre. Apart from the topic, the original audience of the Harp was strikingly similar to the characters depicted in the lay, as suggested by the terms “crested chiefs” and “fair dames.” The next (and last) stanza of the introduction indicates that the narrator wishes to play on the Harp, thereby recalling an ancient song and a matching topic:

O wake once more! how rude soe'er the hand
That ventures o'er thy magic maze to stray;
O wake once more! though scarce my skill command
Some feeble echoing of thine earlier lay:
Though harsh and faint, and soon to die away,
And all unworthy of thy nobler strain,
Yet if one heart throb higher at its sway,
The wizard note has not been touched in vain.
Then silent be no more! Enchantress, wake again! (1.19–27)

By using the ancient Harp, the narrator takes on the role of a likewise ancient poet, who is going to recite the rest of the text; the frame story returns only at the very end of the work, when the narrator puts down the Harp and says goodbye to it. It is clear that he is competent enough to use the Harp and hence to evoke the figure of a minstrel; however, it is also evident that he is the son of a markedly different period and though it is not made explicit how far he is close to the reading audience, the fact that he sees the medieval as a past period that has to be explored constitutes a shared experience with the readers. In sum, he is an appropriate mediator between the medieval world (in fact, late medieval) and his audience.

Still, disregarding the frame text, which consists of three stanzas in the introduction and three stanzas at the end, the embedding is not visible throughout the narrated text, which focuses on the heroes accordingly. This is not entirely true in the case of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, which has a more intricate narrative structure. Here the frame story is much more elaborated and the figure of the minstrel is crucial. Consider the beginning of the Introduction:

The way was long, the wind was cold,
The Minstrel was infirm and old;
His withered cheek, and tresses gray,
Seem'd to have known a better day;
The harp, his sole remaining joy,
Was carried by an orphan boy.
The last of all the Bards was he,
Who sung of Border chivalry;
For, welladay! their date was fled,
His tuneful brethren all were dead;
And he, neglected and oppress'd,
Wish'd to be with them, and at rest. (Introduction 1–12)

The minstrel is the last of his kind and hence his status is quite special: any song that he performs is also one of the last traces of old-time minstrelsy. The dramatic change in his situation is also described in the Introduction:

No more, on prancing palfrey borne,
He caroll'd, light as lark at morn;
No longer courted and caress'd,
High placed in hall, a welcome guest,
He pour'd, to lord and lady gay,
The unpremeditated lay:
Old times were changed, old manners gone;
A stranger filled the Stuarts' throne;
The bigots of the iron time
Had call'd his harmless art a crime.
A wandering Harper, scorn'd and poor,
He begg'd his bread from door to door.
And timed, to please a peasant's ear,
The harp, a king had loved to hear. (Introduction 13–26)

Again, just as in *The Lady of the Lake*, the original audience is like-minded: they are close to the characters in the lay itself (and also to the minstrel). The change affecting the audience is the same that caused the minstrel to be the last of his kind: old customs became obsolete and partially also viewed as a criminal act, hence any performance of the minstrel is either necessarily degraded or, if he chooses to perform a lay in the old fashion, a rebellious act.

In this respect, the lay that will be performed by the minstrel throughout the text is claimed to be anachronistic to some degree in the text itself, too; hence, the external narrator further alienates this text from himself via embedding (cf. Cronin 97–98). The other main reason why the minstrel is crucial is that, according to the text, one major function of poetry is remembrance and the recording of the past (cf. Nicholson 137–38) and the last minstrel is the only one who is able to remember aptly since he is the only one who still has direct access to many of the events he relates.

The introduction describes the arrival of the minstrel at the court of the Duchess (Anne, the heiress of Buccleuch), where he is greeted warmly and is asked to perform a lay. The narrative situation hence recalls the old times that were claimed to be lost at the very beginning of the text. Besides the setup being reminiscent, there is also a direct

connection between the Duchess and the heroes of the lay: the minstrel narrates the story of her ancestors and it is also pointed out in the Introduction that he considers both the father (Earl Francis) and the grandfather (Earl Walter) as true heroes:

When kindness had his wants supplied,
And the old man was gratified,
Began to rise his minstrel pride:
And he began to talk anon,
Of good Earl Francis, dead and gone,
And of Earl Walter, rest him God!
A braver ne'er to battle rode;
And how full many a tale he knew,
Of the old warriors of Buccleuch:
And, would the noble Duchess deign
To listen to an old man's strain,
Though stiff his hand, his voice though weak,
He thought even yet, the sooth to speak,
That, if she loved the harp to hear,
He could make music to her ear. (Introduction 45-59)

The connection between the Duchess and the characters depicted in the lay (the Lady of Branksome Hall, her daughter Margaret, and Lord Cranstoun, who finally marries Margaret) is referred to during narration as well, for instance in Canto IV:

Hearken, Ladye, to the tale,
How thy sires won fair Eskdale. (4.10.5-6)

The connection between the Duchess and the heroes is hence pre-given: they are the ancestors of the Duchess, and the immediate predecessors, that is, the father and the grandfather, are also similar to true medieval heroes in their character.

In this way, the Duchess is similar to the minstrel: both of them are inevitably related to a former period, in which the lay was still an authentic form of performance. Given this similarity, it is no wonder that the minstrel starts singing his lay as if he were still in the good old times, as described at the end of the Introduction:

In varying cadence, soft or strong,
He swept the sounding chords along:

The present scene, the future lot,
His toils, his wants, were all forgot:
Cold diffidence, and age's frost,
In the full tide of song were lost;
Each blank, in faithless memory void,
The poet's glowing thought supplied;
And while his harp responsive rung,
'Twas thus the Latest Minstrel sung. (Introduction 91-100)

It has to be stressed that the situation is only reminiscent of the old-fashioned setting: in order to perform in an authentic way, the minstrel has to forget about all the conditions that are different from and alien to the old ones, and one of these is actually "the present scene."

Both the minstrel and the Duchess (and her retinue) are in an intermediate position with respect to the reading audience and the heroes depicted in the lay. The minstrel, being the last one, is aware of the fact that the circumstances have changed and he tailors his narrative accordingly: that is, the various events and characters are described in a way that is understandable also for an audience that no longer has access to them. On the other hand, the Duchess is similar to the (nineteenth-century) reading audience in that she is not a medieval figure, in spite of the semi-medieval setting that surrounds her: hence the readers can more easily identify with the listening audience, since both are relatively inexperienced in the world of original lays. The role of the minstrel in this respect is that of a teacher, as also demonstrated by the following excerpt (Canto IV):

I know right well, that, in their lay,
Full many minstrels sing and say,
Such combat should be made on horse,
On foaming steed, in full career,
With brand to aid, when as the spear
Should shiver in the course:
But he, the jovial Harper, taught
Me, yet a youth, how it was fought,
In guise which now I say;
He knew each ordinance and clause
Of Black Lord Archibald's battle-laws,
In the old Douglas' day.
He brook'd not, he, that scoffing tongue
Should tax his minstrelsy with wrong,

Or call his song untrue:
For this, when they the goblet plied,
And such rude taunt had chaf'd his pride,
The Bard of Reull he slew. (4.34.1-18)

The minstrel clearly wishes to provide an adequate description of the way the battle was fought, with special attention paid to the equipment of the participants. Moreover, he differentiates himself from “full many minstrels” who would provide a more fancy, yet untrue, representation: he refers to his own master as a source of authenticity.

As far as the external narrator is concerned, there is very little to know: his role is merely functional in the sense that he provides all the necessary pieces of information about the minstrel and the setting but he does not step forward as a person. Most of the descriptions are found in the Introduction, at the end of the individual cantos and at the very ending of the text. It is not known, however, how the external narrator has access to these pieces of information: he serves to ensure that the embedded narrative situation is close to being authentic. The Introduction creates the impression that the lay is probably the last one as well: it is performed by the last minstrel, who is “infirm and old,” minstrelsy itself is persecuted and the setting in which this lay can be sung is scarcely found any more. This creates a certain tension in the text, which is reinforced by certain parts that reveal more of the minstrel’s person; it is only the very ending of the text that confirms a safe life for the minstrel: he is given a small house near the castle of the Duchess, where he can spend his old days in peace. In addition, we also learn that, especially during summer, the minstrel kept on singing the old tales to travellers who stopped at his hut:

Then would he sing achievements high,
And circumstance of chivalry,
Till the rapt traveller would stay,
Forgetful of the closing day;
And noble youths, the strain to hear,
Forsook the hunting of the deer;
And Yarrow, as he rolled along,
Bore burden to the Minstrel’s song. (6.580-87)

Hence the minstrel is, in the end, not entirely separated from the world he spends his old days in, which makes it plausible that people should know about him and how he got to the palace of the Duchess.

The focus on the minstrel's person has a crucial impact on how the hero of the lay is represented: in a sense, the figure of the minstrel becomes more important than the hero. It is of course far from being questionable that the story given in the lay itself is entertaining and full of action. The central hero himself, Lord Cranstoun, is also fit for the role: he is an excellent warrior, a noble knight and a true lover. Moreover, he is also central in terms of connecting the various characters and relationships. He was a member of the party that killed the Lady of Branksome's husband and hence he is opposed to the Lady and her family in a typical feudal conflict; however, he is also the lover of the Lady's daughter, Margaret. This setup is quite typical in medieval romances and also in romantic works imitating medieval ones: the (feudal) interests of the family and the personal interests of the lovers are in conflict. The Lady tries to use sorcery in order to separate the lovers, and William of Deloraine is her help in achieving this goal. When Cranstoun wounds Deloraine in single combat, he bids the goblin (Cranstoun's page) to take Deloraine back to the Lady. Moreover, he finally takes on the form of the still wounded Deloraine to fight for the Lady's son against the English and – being successful – he wins back the Lady's son and is hence allowed to marry Margaret. In sum, it can be said that he is not only equipped with excellent capacities but also knows how to use them well and is hence active in solving the conflicts he is inevitably involved in.

The narration of the hero's story is still in a way overshadowed by the minstrel's figure, even though the minstrel only occasionally calls some attention to his personal concerns (such as at the beginning of Canto IV, where he laments the loss of his son). It is mostly the endings of the cantos that draw back the attention to the actual narrative situation and hence to the minstrel's person. In addition, as was mentioned before, the fate of the minstrel is uncertain till the very end of the text and the tension stemming from this is maintained throughout. On the other hand, the narrative itself is relatively scattered: though the central figure is indeed Cranstoun, he does not emerge as a dominant character as far as narration is concerned: there is ample attention paid to other characters and Cranstoun himself is not present in many of the scenes.

In this way, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* has a typical medieval hero, but the focus is not so much on this hero but rather on the medieval world and on how this world can be narrated.

3. Romantic Theory and Medieval Genres

The scattered interest mentioned in connection with the hero in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* is not accidental; Scott himself states in the preface that the poem “is intended to illustrate the customs and manners, which anciently prevailed on the Borders of England and Scotland” (*The Lay of the Last Minstrel* 7). This indicates that, as far as Scott’s contemporary audience is concerned, the chief interest is not so much in a particular medieval hero but rather in the chivalric world as such. The reason behind this is that the reading audience has no direct connection to the depicted world, unlike the Duchess of the frame story. Scott essentially states that the chivalric world is alien to modern readers when he says that the “inhabitants, living in a state partly pastoral and partly warlike, and combining habits of constant depredation with the influence of a rude spirit of chivalry, were often engaged in scenes highly susceptible of poetical ornament” (*The Lay of the Last Minstrel* 7). Accordingly, he chose to employ a relatively archaic kind of versification, which corresponds to the chivalric world he aims at presenting.

More importantly, the overarching aim of presenting the chivalric world has direct influence on how the embedded narrative is formed: it deliberately contains elements that are claimed to be suitable for a chivalric topic. The mediating role of the minstrel is pointed out by Scott himself when he says that “the Poem was put into the mouth of an ancient Minstrel, the last of the race, who, as he is supposed to have survived the Revolution, might have caught somewhat of the refinement of modern poetry, without losing the simplicity of his original model” (*The Lay of the Last Minstrel* 7) – the immediate position is hence also present in the actual poetic characteristics of the text. It is worth mentioning that the date of the story itself is also intermediate in a way, since it is set at the middle of the 16th century, hence in a period that is, strictly speaking, not medieval but quite close to it.

It should be obvious that the main concern is in many respects not the particular story and hero as such, but the imitation of the medieval genre. This also explains why the minstrel’s figure is of particular importance: apart from justifying certain traits of the text, the authentic narrative situation is also part of the medieval genre.

Despite the general interest in the medieval and in medieval genres, it must be noted that the imitation of the medieval genre(s) still requires some justification, as can be perceived in Scott’s argumentation

in the preface to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*: his reasoning implies that the readers may find the style and the form too crude and he argues that this is so because the topic requires matching style and form.

A similar argumentation can be traced in *Marmion*, in the Introduction to Canto I, hence in the poetic text itself:

But thou, my friend, canst fitly tell,
(For few have read romance so well,)
How still the legendary lay
O'er poet's bosom holds its sway;
How on the ancient minstrel strain
Time lays his palsied hand in vain;
And how our hearts at doughty deeds
By warriors wrought in steely weeds,
Still throb for fear and pity's sake;
As when the Champion of the Lake
Enters Morgana's fated house,
Or in the Chapel Perilous,
Despising spells and demons' force,
Holds converse with the unburied corse;
Or when, Dame Ganore's grace to move,
(Alas! that lawless was their love!)
He sought proud Tarquin in his den,
And freed full sixty knights; or when,
A sinful man, and unconfess'd,
He took the Sangreal's holy quest,
And, slumbering, saw the vision high,
He might not view with waking eye.
(Introduction to Canto I 269–90)

Essentially, the narrator here presents a small catalogue of chivalric heroes and claims that these stories and the lays produced by ancient minstrels still have their effect on the modern reader. In other words, it seems that as far as the topic is concerned, the medieval hero is still attractive enough for poets to consider. In fact, the greatest poets themselves endeavoured to write about such themes themselves:

The mightiest chiefs of British song
Scorn'd not such legends to prolong:
They gleam through Spenser's elfin dream,
And mix in Milton's heavenly theme;

And Dryden, in immortal strain,
Had raised the Table Round again,
But that a ribald King and Court
Bade him toil on, to make them sport;
Demanded for their niggard pay,
Fit for their souls, a looser lay,
Licentious satire, song, and play;
The world defrauded of the high design,
Profaned the God-given strength, and marr'd the lofty line.
(Introduction to Canto I 291–303)

The reason why chivalric topics count as anachronistic is hence primarily historical in nature: there was a change in English poetry that meant the end of chivalric and medieval topics – crucially, this change is claimed to have been induced by external forces (that is, the monarch and the court demanded a different kind of poetry), which, in addition to the fact that great poets also embraced the topic once, indicates that there are no poetry-internal reasons to dismiss these topics.

Based on these arguments, the narrator concludes that modern poets, such as him and the addressee, may also venture to write similar texts:

Well has thy fair achievement shown,
A worthy meed may thus be won;
Ytene's oaks—beneath whose shade
Their theme the merry minstrels made,
Of Ascapart, and Bevis bold,
And that Red King, who, while of old,
Through Boldrewood the chase he led,
By his loved huntsman's arrow bled—
Ytene's oaks have heard again
Renew'd such legendary strain;
For thou hast sung, how He of Gaul,
That Amadis so famed in hall,
For Oriana, foil'd in fight
The Necromancer's felon might;
And well in modern verse hast wove
Partenopex's mystic love;
Hear, then, attentive to my lay,
A knightly tale of Albion's elder day.
(Introduction to Canto I 330–47)

The theme is necessarily bound to a former period and, due to the gap mentioned above, the modern poet has to justify his choice when writing in the old style and/or about old themes.

Naturally, there are several other questions that could be examined in connection with the heroes depicted in Scott's ballads, but the main concern of the present essay was to examine how the problem of narrating the stories of such heroes is present – explicitly or implicitly – in these texts. Given that it is to a large extent about the revival of a former (and neglected) poetic tradition, any poet who ventures to write about chivalric heroes in the way the old minstrels did has to face the fact that poetic diction in such cases is no longer straightforward. On the one hand, this means that there is at least some theoretical justification needed to ensure that the reading public appreciates the text. On the other hand, evoking the old tradition may be completed by the introduction of a mediating, authentic agent, in order to evoke the ancient narrative situation as well. Since these features are markedly present in the texts, the focus will shift from the heroes to the problem of narrating about these heroes and about the medieval as such, resulting in necessarily complex structures.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Michael. *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2007. Print.
- Cronin, Richard. *The Politics of Romantic Poetry: In Search of the Pure Commonwealth*. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000. Print.
- Fischer, Hermann. *Romantic Verse Narrative: The History of a Genre*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. Print.
- Nicholson, Andrew. "Byron and the 'Ariosto of the North.'" *English Romanticism and the Celtic World*. Ed. Gerard Carruthers and Alan Rawes. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 130–50. Print.
- Scott, Sir Walter. *The Lady of the Lake*. Cambridge, 1869. Print.
- . *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. London, 1808. Print.
- . *Marmion*. Edinburgh, 1810. Print.