

The Lay of the Last Minstrel

The Lay of the Last Minstrel: A Poem. By Walter Scott, Esq. London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, Paternoster-Row, and A. Constable and Co., Edinburgh, by James Ballantyne, Edinburgh, 1805.

Composition

Among the poems that Scott intended to include in the third volume of the *Minstrelsy* was 'a long poem [...] a kind of Romance of Border Chivalry, in a Light Horseman sort of stanza' (letter to George Ellis, December 1802). This was the first draft of the *Lay of the Last Minstrel* which Scott had begun in Lasswade in summer or autumn 1802. The four-beat lines that create its distinctive galloping rhythm were influenced by a recital that Scott had heard of Coleridge's *Christabel*. As Scott, at the Countess of Dalkeith's suggestion, wove the local legend of the goblin Gilpin Horner into his original tale of Border rivalries, the poem rapidly grew too long for inclusion in the *Minstrelsy*, and he began to conceive of it as a separate volume. As he worked on the poem he received warm encouragement from friends such as George Ellis, William Erskine, and George Cranstoun, and from William and Dorothy Wordsworth who paid Scott an unexpected visit in September 1803. Professional and other literary engagements (including the expanded edition of the *Minstrelsy*) delayed completion of the poem, as did Scott's move to Ashestiel. The *Lay* was eventually finished in August 1804 and published on January 12, 1805.



Synopsis

The poem deals with a sixteenth-century Border feud. The story is told, over a century and a half later, by an aging minstrel who receives hospitality at Newark Castle from Ann, Duchess of Buccleuch. In return, he recites a tale concerning the Duchess's family. He sings of her ancestor, the widowed Lady of Branksome Hall, whose husband has been killed in a quarrel with a party that included Lord Cranstoun. Fiercely opposed to the love affair that develops between Cranstoun and her daughter, Margaret, she resorts to sorcery in an effort to prevent their marriage. She sends one



of her retainers, Sir William Deloraine, to Melrose Abbey to recover a magic book from the tomb of the wizard Michael Scott. On his way back, Deloraine meets and fights with Cranstoun and is wounded by him. Cranstoun bids his page, a goblin-like figure who has mysteriously attached himself to him, to take Deloraine to Branksome Hall. The goblin page discovers Michael Scott's book on Deloraine's person and, in a spirit of pure mischief, uses it to lure Lady Branksome's infant son into the woods. Here the boy is captured by his mother's English enemy, Lord Dacre. Lord Dacre has gathered together a force to punish Deloraine for breaking a truce and plundering the lands of Sir Richard Musgrave. They lay siege to Branksome and demand that the Lady hand over her wounded retainer. She proposes instead that Deloraine defend himself against the charge in single combat with Musgrave. As a Scottish force is rapidly approaching, Dacre reluctantly accepts, promising that, should Deloraine prove victorious, he will return the Lady's son. With the help of his goblin page, Cranstoun assumes the form of the wounded Deloraine and defeats Musgrave. The child is restored, and the grateful Lady agrees to the marriage of Cranstoun and Margaret. At the wedding feast the ghost of Michael Scott appears and reclaims the goblin-page as his own servant.

Reception

The *Lay* was an immediate publishing phenomenon, bringing Scott instant fame. There were six editions within three years, with sales rising to 27,000 copies within a decade, unparalleled figures for poetry. In the first instance of Scott's impact upon tourism in Scotland, the description of the moonlit Melrose Abbey (Canto II, stanza 1) brought a stream of sightseers to the ruined Abbey and led to it becoming a popular subject with nineteenth-century painters. The poem's fans included even the Prime Minister, William Pitt, who recited passages from the poem at his dinner table.

The critics too were broadly favourable. Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review* thought that many passages were 'in the very first rank of poetical excellence'. The *Critical Review* praised the skill with which Scott had refined the 'rich but unpolished ore' of ballad poetry. The *Annual Review* thought it 'elegant, spirited, and striking' and welcomed the move away from the stiffness of classical poetics. Other journals, though, such as the *Literary Journal* and *Monthly Review*, thought Scott guilty of prosaic and irregular versification, and found the plot both obscure and far-fetched. Many critics too (including Jeffrey) considered the goblin page beneath the dignity of the poem. Nonetheless, the *Lay*'s success with the public determined the line that Scott's work was to take over the next nine years.

<http://www.walterscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/works/poetry/minstrel.html>