

1981

Notes and Documents: Dunbar; Robert Bloomfield on Burns; Alexander Smith on Burns; Scott's Halidon Hill

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Recommended Citation

(1981) "Notes and Documents: Dunbar; Robert Bloomfield on Burns; Alexander Smith on Burns; Scott's Halidon Hill," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol16/iss1/19>

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Notes and Documents



In the course of her denouncement of married life, the widow in Dunbar's *Tretis of the tua mariit wemen and the wedo* describes her relationships with the crowd of gallants who court her favors now that death has liberated her from two unsatisfactory husbands:

And mony blenkis ben our, that but full fer sittis,
That mai, for the thik thrang, nought thrif as thai wald.
Bot, with my fair calling, I comfort thaim all:
For he that sittis me nixt, I nip on his finger; (490)
I serf him on the tothir syde on the samin fasson;
And he that behind me sittis, I hard on him lene;
And him befor, with my fut fast on his I stramp;
And to the bernis far but sueit blenkis I cast:
To every man in speciall speke I sum wordis (495)
So wisly and so womanly, quhill warmys ther hertis.¹

This vignette has provoked diverse responses from the critics. Tom Scott sees it as a "fantasy of female power," wherein the widow pictures herself as a fertility goddess generously bestowing her sexual favors on all petitioners at some orgiastic pagan festival.² A. E. Hope, supposing the scene conceived in terms of social rather than psychological realism, argues that sexual promiscuity was sufficiently rife in late fifteenth-

century Scotland for Dunbar's audience to find the activities unusual only in the imbalance of male to female participants. He looks back to the early Christian era for illustration of the widow's behavior, finding her prototype in the sixth-century Byzantine empress Theodora as described by the historian Procopius.³

We need not go culturally so far afield, however, to find a parallel to the coquetry of the widow. A scene very close to that described by Dunbar was the occasion for a *torneyamen* composed by the Provençal poet Savari de Mauléon. Savari was in love with a lady he refers to by the name of Guillemette de Benagues, and fancied his affection for her reciprocated. She, however, had secretly intimated similar feelings for two rival suitors. On a certain day, when all three knights were visiting the viscountess, she managed to flirt with all three simultaneously, and so adeptly that none was aware what was happening to the others. Once having left the lady's presence, however, the rival lovers boasted about the tokens of affection bestowed on them. Savari, chagrined to discover this evidence of his mistress's coyness and duplicity, kept silent. Supposing himself, nevertheless, to have been privileged with a special mark of affection transcending those accorded his rivals, he approached two friends, Hugues de la Bachélerie and Gaucelm Faidit, to hear their opinions about the relative merits, as love signs, of Guillemette's responses towards her three suitors. The debate with Hugues and Gaucelm forms the subject matter of the *torneyamen*, which begins with the following stanza:

Gaucelms, tres jocx enamoratz
 Partisc a vos et a'N Ugo;
 E quascus prendetz lo plus bo
 E layssatz me qual que us vulhatz:
 Qu'una domn'a tres preyadors,
 E destrenh la tan lor amors
 Que, quan tug trey li son denan,
 A quascun fai d'amor semblan;
 L'un esguard'amorosamen,
 L'autr'estrenh la man doussamen,
 Al terz caussiga'l pe rizen:
 Diguatz al qual, pus aissi es,
 Fai maior amor de totz tres.⁴

[Gaucelm, I want an opinion from you and from Hugo about three types of dalliance; each of you should choose what he considers the best, and leave me the least favored. Take the case of a lady who has three suitors; their solicitations put her under

such pressure that when all three are in her company she intimates affection for each of them. On one she casts loving glances, she softly squeezes the hand of another, and she smiles at the third while pressing his foot with her own. Which of the three, in the situation described, has been given the greatest demonstration of love?]

The issue is debated in a further eight stanzas of identical rhyme scheme to that quoted. Savari's statement is followed by arguments from Gaucelm and Hugo, and this sequence is maintained throughout, each speaker being allotted a stanza. Gaucelm prizes amorous glances; Hugo opts for holding hands; both dismiss the foot contact as hardly qualifying for an expression of love at all, and leave Savari to defend it. The debate being inconclusive, it is ultimately resolved to submit the question to a court of ladies for a final decision.

Savari, who died circa 1231, was a mercenary who for many years actively supported the cause of the English king John, fighting on his behalf both on the continent and in England. H. J. Chaytor furnishes a good brief account of his military exploits and general biography, and refers to him as "one who may well have brought to England some taste and enthusiasm for the lyric poetry of his native land."⁵ It seems reasonable to assume that the poem we have been discussing, the only surviving example of Savari's work, should have circulated among his circle of acquaintances in England, and even if the poetic artefact achieved no greater measure of dissemination than this, the same is not necessarily true of the circumstances constituting the occasion for the poem. Whether formal courts of love as depicted by the poets were a social reality or a literary fiction, it is certain that, in the context of a burgeoning interest in the psychology and sociology of love, there was extensive informal discussion of such *questioni d'amore*. Consequently, these pseudo-judicial problems in the ethics of courtly love religion must have achieved in oral literature an independent life, divorced from the written works which incorporate and preserve them. If Dunbar's account of the widow's activities derives ultimately from Savari's poem, then it is probably through this intermediary of oral literature.

The situations portrayed by the two poets are sufficiently alike that the contrast between them is instructive, even if the possibility of influence, either direct or oblique, is ruled out. The Provençal poem exhibits an engaging formalism, consistently subordinating the immediate situation to abstract analysis of its social and moral significance. This is mani-

fest from the beginning of the debate in the way the actual circumstances promoting it are subsumed into the poem proper in a depersonalized, speculative form, already distanced considerably from the real-life account as given in the prose biography of the poet. Guillemette, like countless heroes and heroines of medieval romance, finds herself confronted with a problem to resolve. She is constrained by the importunings of her three suitors to devise a means of satisfying each of them, and this challenge she overcomes triumphantly through a graceful stratagem which does not, in itself, provoke criticism. When the two rival lovers are guilty of a breach of etiquette in boasting of the favors they have received, her conduct is subjected to unexpectedly rigorous scrutiny, Savari attempting to order hierarchically as expressions of love the gestures stemming from the impromptu coquetry to which she had recourse, but even so the debate is conducted in such a way as to protect the essential elegance and courtliness of the behavior examined. When we hear talk, in the course of one spokesman's defense of holding hands, about "la blanca mas ses guan" (the unglowed, white hand), the poet seems momentarily to be evoking the sensual realism of the situation described, but the remark is made in the context of refuting a disputant's claim that holding hands is a commonplace gesture of welcome that the lady might have extended to anyone, and this is very much the pattern throughout the whole debate. Everything is done to distract the reader's attention away from the action as literal event, and to engage his interest in its significance as social gesture within the framework of a fully codified system.

By contrast, the physicality of the scene as described by Dunbar is sufficiently intrusive to push it towards grotesquerie. The most obvious change Dunbar effects is to engage his female protagonist with at least five male consorts, holding hands with two of them, and touching a third by leaning back in her seat. Simply increasing the numbers in this way vulgarises the widow's behavior by comparison with that of Guillemette, but it is primarily Dunbar's style, particularly his use of the alliterative line, that contributes most to the grotesque coloration of the scene as he presents it. The alliterative pattern (see particularly lines 490-3) consistently emphasizes the relationship between the type of contact and the physical disposition of the suitors, creating an overwhelming impression that the widow's sole concern is to maximize the degree of sensual gratification available to her within the context of so public a gathering.

If we assume that Dunbar was familiar in some fashion with the episode as described by Savari, an assumption favored by the fact that the two accounts resemble one another quite

closely, and are not, to the best of my knowledge, duplicated elsewhere before Dunbar's time, then their relationship has even more interesting implications. It would provide a minor piece of evidence on the positive side of the vexed question as to whether or not Dunbar knew and was influenced by medieval French literature. And it would inform this brief scene with the kind of complexity of artistic vision that is apparent in the *Tretis of the tua marit wemen and the wedo* as a whole, playing off, in a kind of mock-romance, the grotesquely realistic behavior of the matrons of the court of James IV against the exquisitely idealised *amor courtois* of early thirteenth-century France.⁶

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NOTES

¹ *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. W. Mackay Mackenzie (London: Faber & Faber, 1932), p. 96.

² *Dunbar: A Critical Exposition of the Poems* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), pp. 200-1.

³ *A Midsummer Eve's Dream* (New York: Viking, 1970), pp. 165-6.

⁴ Text of the poem is given in M. Raynouard, *Choix des Poésies originales des Troubadours* (1816-21; repr. Osnabrück: Biblio-Verlag, 1966), II, 199-206. The biographical sketch (*razo*) from which details of the occasion for the *torneyamen* were drawn is given in Raynouard, V, 439-42, and in *Biographies des Troubadours*, ed. Jean Boutière and Alexander H. Schutz (Paris: Didier, 1950), pp. 317-20.

⁵ *The Troubadours and England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. P., 1923), pp. 68-74.

⁶ See, in this connection, the remarks by James Kinsley, "The *Tretis* of the tua marit wemen and the wedo," *Medium Aevum*, 23 (1954), 31-35: "The centre of the *Tretis* is the contrast...between the ideal world of courtly poetry and the 'spotted actuality' of the three women's minds and habits." The range of stylistic contrast possible in alliterative verse, exemplified in the *Tretis*, is explored by John Leyerle, "The Two Voices of William Dunbar," *UTQ*, 31 (1961-2), 316-38.

I recently acquired the Clement Shorter copy of the first (quarto) edition of Bloomfield's *The Farmer's Boy* (London, 1800). Bound between the half-title and title-pages is an untitled holograph poem written on one quarto leaf of paper watermarked 1806, initialled by Bloomfield and addressed to the "Spirit of Burns." Though Bloomfield is certainly a poet of the second rank, his tribute to Burns merits publication: the lines are unusually vigorous (Bloomfield's muse is rarely passionate) and it is not difficult to understand Bloomfield's sympathy for another poet who, like himself, had achieved fame despite an obscure origin, poverty and ill health. The text of the poem, with the poet's note, follows:

Spirit of Burns, the daring child
 Of glorious freedom, rough and wild,
 How have I wept o'er all thy ills,
 How blest thy Caledonian hills!
 How almost worship'd in my dreams
 Thy mountain haunts, thy classic streams,
 How burnt with more than lowland fire
 To mark thy giant strength aspire
 In patriot themes; and then to prove
 Thy wond'rous powers in themes of love!
 Spirit of Burns, accept the tear
 That rapture give'st thy memory here
 On the bleak mountain top.--Here thou
 Thyself had rais'd the gallant brow
 Of conscious intellect, to twine
 Th'imperishable verse of thine
 That charm'st the world.---

From a poem unpublish'd, and
 which very probably will remain so.

R.B.
 Feb. 1809.

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Recently, M. J. W. Scott has noted the importance of Alexander Smith's identification with his Ayrshire predecessor, Robert Burns.¹ In addition to his well-known "Memoir," for the Golden Treasury Burns of 1865,² Smith published another Burns study, in 1854, which seems to have been missed by all Smith's bibliographers, and misdescribed by Burns's.³ The source of the confusion is Thomas Brisbane, who wrote that in 1852 Smith read to the Addisonian Literary Society an essay on Burns, that it "appeared almost verbatim shortly afterwards" in a Glasgow newspaper, and that "a considerable amount of it was made available" in the later "Memoir."⁴ The earlier essay is in fact entirely different from the "Memoir," and is much more revealing of the young Smith. It appeared in two parts, under the heading "Literary Sketches. Robert Burns. A Lecture by Alexander Smith," in the *Glasgow Miscellany*, no. 3 (January 28, 1854), 2-3, and no. 4 (February 4, 1854), 2-3. Instead of the later biographical summary, Smith gave, in the first part, an impassioned argument that Burns's national significance was rooted in ordinary peasant life; in the second part he is chiefly concerned to explain Burns in the face of moral criticism. The last paragraph of part 2 is especially interesting: "Burns sprang from the workers, and of them he sang....he has shown that poverty's so-called 'unconquerable bar' may be o'erleaped by genius....he has taught them self-respect." There is perhaps a personal assertion here, as between the publication of the first and second parts, Smith had himself leapt the "unconquerable gap," having been freed from his work for the textile factory by his election on January 31 as Secretary to Edinburgh University. This early essay gives additional evidence that Smith was conscious of his Scottish literary antecedents and of Burns as a role model for the Victorian working-class poet.

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NOTES

¹ *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 14 (1979), 99.

² Alexander Smith, ed., *Poetical Works of Robert Burns*, 2 vols. (London, 1865), I, i-xcvi (and in Globe edition, 1868).

³ William C. Henry, "A Study of Alexander Smith and His Reputation" (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Northwestern, 1942), pp. 423-9; Richard Murphy, "Alexander Smith as Man of Letters" (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Pittsburgh, 1939), pp. 215-9; *NCBEL*, 3 (1969), col. 550-1; [James Gibson], *The Bibliography of Robert Burns* (Kilmarnock, 1881), p. 78.

⁴ *Early Years of Alexander Smith* (London, 1869), p. 39.

Scott's *Halidon Hill*, "A Dramatic Sketch, from Scottish History," was written in 1822 for possible inclusion in a work to be edited for charity by Joanna Baillie.¹ It is a two act historical tragedy in verse. Despite Scott's reservations about writing for the stage (a characteristic of "closet" dramatists like Scott and Byron who gave serious thought and effort to writing for the contemporary stage), one might suggest that he gave thought to its production. This is indicated by the fact that it was written during the period that Richard M. Mears (Dissertation, 1953) notes to be the highpoint of historical tragedy on the English stage, 1815 to 1830,² and because certain characteristics of it display affinity with those very stage plays. As a result it is difficult to agree completely with Mears that "...Scott ignored the needs of the stage in favor of his message" (p. 121). As Hillhouse and Welsh note, although there are contemporary reviews of Scott's play, "...later critics have paid them little attention except for casual mention in the biographies."³ J. O. Hayden, in *The Romantic Reviewers*, indicates the mixed reception Scott's play received in the periodical press of his time. While Hayden praises its characterization and poetry, he does not attempt to analyze "its merits as drama."⁴

Those critics who have considered it as a play have usually judged it by means of the predispositions of their general out-

look. Thus Allardyce Nicoll sees its prime significance to be the analogue it provides for Scott's fictional efforts in the novel.⁵ He relegates it to the closet because of its alleged empty method of characterization, its dull rhetorical artifice, and the consequent bombast of its style and construction. Brewer, in *Shakespeare's Influence on Sir Walter Scott*, reads the play in relation to his book's thesis. Thus, it is a history play according to Shakespearian model, structurally, in characterization, and as the result of its selected point of view (p. 213). He enumerates analogues between *Halidon Hill* and Shakespeare's *Henry IV* (1) and *Henry VI* (1), and not unexpectedly concludes that "*Halidon Hill* is the richest of Scott's dramas in Shakespearian influence" (p. 216). In his dissertation, Mears devotes the most space to the play yet afforded it by the critics. He sees it as "the most completely historical play" (p. 114) that he considers. But he asserts that its didactic concern for Scottish national character, and its alleged lack of human action, indicate why it is not a successful play (p. 116).

A new reading of *Halidon Hill* as a play contributes to its understanding, and helps to put into proper perspective the objections of those critics who have to date either condemned or qualified its effectiveness as a serious work of art.

Halidon Hill differs from the successful historical tragedies in verse of its day in more than reputation. It deals with Scottish history, and makes its contemporary message known through a distancing of time, and not place, as was popular in the historical tragedy of stage success which portrayed ancient Rome, medieval Italy, or Renaissance Germany. As Mears and others have pointed out, Scott manipulated history in his account of the Battle of Homildon, which he calls *Halidon Hill*, so as to avoid direct comparison with the battle presented in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. Thus, he also replaced Hotspur by creating the role of the Scottish Regent, and added the Swinton-Gordon feud.

One of the other stimuli for Scott's interest in Scotland's history was his desire to isolate examples which related to his conception of the general topic of the defeat of Scottish hopes for independence. This illustrates that history was a means and not an end for Scott, much as in the case of Shakespeare's history plays, whether ancient or English in precedent. (Interestingly, Scott's own novels, and their popularity, are historical facts offered by Mears as reasons for the rise in popularity of historical tragedies in verse.)

The plot of *Halidon Hill* involves the return of a Templar, De Vipont, from the Holy Land before the battle of *Halidon Hill*. Among the Scottish combatants he finds representatives of two families that consider him a friend. The elder Swin-

ton has killed the father of the younger, Gordon, because the latter's father had killed his own sons. Swinton and Gordon reach accord without bloodshed, offend the other Scottish allies by their words and actions, and depart to their deaths in battle, with the consent by non-intervention of their compatriots. The result is the death of both, and the defeat of the Scots by Edward of England.

In part the verse of *Halidon Hill* unfavorably reflects Scott's experience with the Waverley novels in its excessive use of archaic language. There are too many fies, forfends, nays, inversions (such as Swinton's farewell to his sword-- "Hand of mine again/Shall never, never wield it")⁶ and images of the hunt. Interestingly, the verse succeeds best in its heroic understatement. Swinton says that young Gordon had nothing to fear while a youth, since "I wage no war with children, for I think/Too deeply on my own" (I, 1). This expression of domestic feeling is a consistent theme in the play, epitomized by young Gordon's revelation of his love for Elizabeth. Not only does this suggest that Mears is incorrect in regard to the dramatic emphasis of the play (p. 119), but more importantly, that Scott attempted what Mary Russell Mitford had achieved in *Rienzi*. That is, he included what would be appealing to contemporary taste, and as a result further sacrificed a certain amount of historical accuracy to domestic action.

Swinton's more public, heroic role is understated in lines like:

Darkling we shall not die...
Let this one day be Scotland's...(I, 2) [De Vipont says]

On death--on judgement--on eternity!
For time is over with us. (II, 2) [and Swinton again]

Stand to it yet! The man who flies today
May bastards warm them at his household hearth! (II, 3)

Swinton, like Virginius, the epitomal hero of the archetypal historical tragedy in verse (*Virginius*), may be ideal and lacking in humor, but he illustrates public and private fidelity to values, and is both articulate and consistent. The heroism is not confined to the Scots. Their opponents are noble as well as efficient. King Edward praises the nobility of his opponents before battle by saying: "We have enough of powerful foes on earth,/No need to summon them from other worlds" (II, 1).

Mears makes two points worth considering about *Halidon Hill* as closet drama. First, it "lack[s] a revolutionary theme

[for in it] Politics is replaced by history" (p. 122); and second, it is ambitious for the stage since it is based on an event too impersonal for popular interest (p. 122). *Halidon Hill* could be successfully staged, since its impersonality is of politics and history, an impersonality all the more effective because the event is a vehicle for thought and feeling, and not essential in and of itself. Scott's politics may be at issue, but the play does explore a *fait accompli*, and not an issue in doubt. For that reason the Scottish rebellion it depicts is not a revolutionary topic so much as it is a swan song of individualism, and a comment on the historical road to colonial imperialism.

More importantly, the use of irony in *Halidon Hill* sets it apart. Although Mears is essentially correct in his assessment of it as a thesis historical play (pp. 118-21), and Nicoll considers it a typical closet drama (IV, 193-4), no critic has noted the ironic culmination of the play as a successful dramatic device. Despite their feud, the Swintons and Gordons are united for the greater Scottish cause. But their allies are unable to accept this conciliation, and betray them. The ensuing Scottish defeat at the hands of the English emphasizes the irony of their accord. Reconciliation here leads inexorably to dissolution, for the individual and the State.

It might be further suggested that *Halidon Hill*, on a number of levels, illustrates what Francis Fergusson in *The Idea of a Theater* considers the "...tragic rhythm of action [which] constitutes the shape of [a] play as a whole."⁷ The parts of Fergusson's discussion of the traditional three movements of dramatic action can be fruitfully applied to *Halidon Hill*. The "purpose" of the binding together of the Scottish factions is defeat of the English in order to secure Scottish independence. The reverse interpretation helps explain Percy's sorrow in the face of the coming battle. "'Tis almost pity to see nobles [Scots] fall,/And by a peasant's arrow" (II, 1). The "passion" involves the reconciliation of Swinton and Gordon, prompted by honor and duty. This is expressed by Swinton: "Darkling we shall not die...Let this day be Scotland's" (I, 2), and its reluctant kindling of animosity by the Regent and other Scots. This ill-advised hatred convinces them to let victory slip away, in order that their revenge on Swinton and Gordon be complete. Thus, the reconciliation of one faction allows factionalism to continue, which in turn illustrates the root cause of the "perception" that is both Edward's and the audience's. The perception of sacrifice, its historical if empty heroism, parallels the reason for and appreciation of the English victory, and the rationale for Scottish subjugation.

Scott's *Halidon Hill* successfully explores this tragic rhythm of action, and indicates the "purpose" for the content of the play. He explores history, reason, and imagination to suggest that the battle does not outweigh the characters in importance but rather the reverse. The spiritual content of the play is its progression--by incident, language, and action--from purpose, to passion, to a real (not historically limited) perception of both the congruity and significance of human events.

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NOTES

¹ Margaret S. Carhart, *The Life and Work of Joanna Baillie* (New Haven, 1923), p. 29. See also Wilmon Brewer, *Shakespeare's Influence on Sir Walter Scott* (Boston, 1925), p. 209. Hereafter references to the latter work will appear in the text.

² Richard M. Mears, "Serious Verse Drama in England: 1812-1850," *DA* (1954), University of North Carolina, Dissertation, 1953, p. 57. Hereafter references to this dissertation will appear in the text by page number.

³ James T. Hillhouse, Alexander Welsh, "Sir Walter Scott," in *The English Romantic Poets and Essayists: A Review of Research*, eds. C. W. & L. H. Houtchens (1957; rpt. New York, 1966), p. 152.

⁴ J. O. Hayden, *The Romantic Reviewers 1802-1824* (Chicago, 1969), p. 113.

⁵ Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama 1660-1900: IV--Early Nineteenth-Century Drama 1800-1850* (Cambridge, 1930; rpt. 1960), pp. 193-4. Hereafter references to this work will appear in the text by volume and page number.

⁶ Sir Walter Scott, *Halidon Hill*, in *The Complete Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*, introduction by Charles Eliot Norton (New York, 1894), p. 564. Hereafter references to this edition of the play will be found in the text by act and scene number.

⁷ Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater* (Garden City, New York, 1949), p. 31.