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Notes and Documents

Hogg's Use of Scots in "Kilmeny"

For many centuries now there has been no common standard of literary usage in the Scottish language. Some writers, like Lewis Grassie Gibbon and W. P. Milne, have based their Scots firmly on the usage of a particular district. Others have written in a Scots which draws on the language of all districts and periods—Hugh MacDiarmid is probably the person to have taken this farthest, but a similar process can be seen at work in poems by Burns and Robert Louis Stevenson, among others. Nor is there any standard practice with regard to the degree to which literary Scots differs from standard English. The difference can be vast, as in the Lallans poetry of the twentieth century, or it can be restricted to relatively few usages, as is the case, for example, in James Hogg's best-known poem, "Kilmeny."

Needless to say, there have been controversies over the relative merits of the approaches outlined above, and it will be the purpose of this note to examine the worth of the kind of approach exemplified in "Kilmeny." This is not an approach on which praise has always been lavished. In his book on Hogg, Mr. Louis Simpson describes the language of "Kilmeny" as "a mixture of Scots and English words and phrases," and goes on to say that "the tone of 'Kilmeny' is charmingly Scottish,' yet one must admit that the language seems rather facile."¹

Mr. Simpson sees the language of "Kilmeny" as a bastardised mixture, a dilution of pure Scots with foreign English material. This is not quite fair, however. Scots and English, after all, are not entirely separate languages, but rather different forms of the same language. They are related in the same sort of way as the English of America and the English of England—that is, they are variants of the same language which have evolved over the centuries in different communities. In view of this it would be wrong to assume that the kind of Scots used in "Kilmeny"—"thin Scots" as it has been called—is necessarily a falsifi-

¹Louis Simpson, *James Hogg: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh, 1962), pp. 58-59.

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cation of the Scottish language. The critic of Scottish literature must remember that a considerable proportion of the Scottish language has always been indistinguishable from the English of England.

In this context, it is interesting to remember that many of Scotland's finest poems are written in thin Scots. Most of the old ballads would give the English reader very little trouble, as a glance at any anthology of Scottish poetry will confirm. Tom Crawford, in his book on Burns, remarks that "some of the very best of the songs contain few distinctively Scottish words."² Even the works of the Old Makars contain very many passages whose language would puzzle the present day English reader more on account of its antiquity than of its Scottishness.³ If Hogg is to be condemned, he will have august company in the dock.

At this point another possible objection to the kind of language used in "Kilmeny" suggests itself. Why is it desirable to write in Scots at all, if your Scots is going to be so very like English? The reason is simply that the introduction of even a single Scots form can produce effects that cannot be adequately reproduced in ordinary English. It would be impossible to find a satisfactory translation for words like *dreich*, *douce* and *scunner*, for example. Perhaps even more important are the different shades of meaning conveyed by many Scots forms, as opposed to their English counterparts. There is an interesting example of this in "Kilmeny," in the lines—

Where gat you that joup o' the lily sheen?
That bonny snood o' the birk sae green?

This is asked of Kilmeny by her astonished friends after her return from her seven-year visit to Heaven. The English form "birch" would be much weaker in this context than the Scots form, which immediately evokes the associations of the word "birk" as it is used in the old ballads. Take, for example, these lines from "The Wife of Usher's Well"—

It neither grew in syke nor ditch,
Nor yet in ony sheugh;
But at the gates o' Paradise,
That birk grew fair eneugh.

² Thomas Crawford, *Burns, A Study* (Edinburgh and London, 1960), p. 193.

³ An example is the penultimate stanza of Henryson's "Testament of Cresseid," in which the most obscure word is without doubt "ressoun" in the fourth line. This word appears in the same sense in line 796 of the first Book of Chaucer's "Troilus and Criseyde."

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This is but one random example. Many things can be said in Scots which cannot be satisfactorily reproduced in English. In view of this, the reasons why Scots has survived for so long as a literary language, in spite of the great pressures against it, are by no means difficult to deduce.

However, there remains the question—what kind of Scots should be used? Hogg answered this in "Kilmeny" simply by choosing those forms, whether Scots or English, which seemed most natural and appropriate to his subject. Thus when he attempted to produce a lofty and religious tone—as in the scenes in Heaven—he turned to standard English, as all Scots have instinctively done since the Reformation.⁴ On the other hand, in order to produce a picture of homely comfort, he used homely Scots, as in the line—"the ingle lowed wi' an eiry leme."

In other words, Hogg in "Kilmeny" made use as required of the whole language of Scotland, spurning neither its "Scots" nor its "English" elements. This, I think, is a solution to the linguistic problem in Scottish literature which may still have relevance today. The modern writer can indeed follow Edwin Muir's famous advice in *Scott and Scotland*⁵ and—as David Hume would have put it—remove all the Scotticisms from his language. These Scotticisms, however, can be of very great value. What would—say—*Sunset Song* or *The House with the Green Shutters* be if they were reduced to standard English?

Another possible course of action would be to write in Lallans, which could perhaps be described as an attempt by the writer to remove everything except the Scotticisms from his language. Some Lallans writers have succeeded in this so well that their language bears very little relation to anything actually spoken in Scotland, and although, in some poems by Hugh MacDiarmid, Lallans has been a vehicle for poetry of the highest order, it is to be doubted whether a language which most Scots need a glossary to understand is the best medium for Scotland's literature. If a literary language is to retain its vigour, it must constantly renew itself by contact with the living, spoken language; and this Lallans, in its extreme form, cannot do.

This sort of contact with the spoken language is still possible for

⁴ Cf. Crawford, p. 3.

⁵ Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland* (London, 1936), p. 126ff.

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thin Scots, because a large number of distinctive Scots expressions remain colloquially alive. Thin Scots, of course, also has the advantage of retaining our precious heritage of Scotticisms, and it seems to me that—*pace* Mr. Simpson—its use in "Kilmeny" is by no means the least attractive aspect of an unusually interesting poem. It would be a great pity if this useful literary tool fell into neglect because of vague and unfounded ideas about its supposed linguistic impurity.

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