

12-31-2018

Claimed by the Stage: Popular Dramatization and the Legacy of The Lady of the Lake

Mary Nestor
Clemson University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Theatre History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nestor, Mary (2018) "Claimed by the Stage: Popular Dramatization and the Legacy of The Lady of the Lake," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 44: Iss. 2, 13–22.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol44/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

CLAIMED BY THE STAGE: POPULAR DRAMATIZATION AND THE LEGACY OF *THE LADY OF THE LAKE*

Mary Nestor

Walter Scott's narrative poem *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) was one of the first true publishing blockbusters, inspiring a host of nineteenth-century tourists to seek out the real Loch Katrine and hunt for the fictional Ellen Douglas's island bower. However, while *The Lady of the Lake* came to be associated very much with the real location of Loch Katrine and the Scottish Highlands through tourism, Scott's poem itself is clearly engaging with the locale of the Trossachs and broader Scottish history as a fictionalised version of itself. The text of this poem contains only a few instances where the plot is affected by the supernatural—chiefly the prophecies of Allan-Bane and Brian the Hermit—yet the language Scott employs to evoke a mysterious, other-worldly and ballad-like image and tone within this work is rife with references to the fay, wizards and other aspects of folklore. This aspect of the text contributes significantly to the overall experience of reading the poem, which does not consist purely of trying to follow the story, but is an experience of the richness of historical setting, fictional and fictionalised characters, and the evocation—rather than depiction—of a past culture. The use of fantastic language and the integration of elements of the supernatural and folkloric within the poem distinctly separate the events and characters of the poem from their “real” counterparts. However, by the late twentieth century the popular conception arose that Scott's writing promotes tartantry and a cheapened version of Scottish culture fit only for tourists, and at the same time the readership of this work was severely diminished.

The question which arises, then, is what is the relationship between the early dramatizations of this poem and the arc of its readership? Why did the idea that Scott promulgated a false version of Scottish culture come to permeate popular consciousness? While the connection between *The Lady of the Lake* and literary tourism may partially account for the dismissal of this work from the canon, it does not fully explain why such a commercially successful, genre-bending and critically acclaimed work lost its audience. For that, one must look to the primary vehicle of popular entertainment in

the nineteenth century: the melodrama—a form which was by definition the purview of popular culture and which throughout the nineteenth century continually sought for the extremes of sensationalism, song, scenic technology and design.

Due to the patent licensing laws which were still in place in Britain in the early nineteenth century, the vast majority of theaters were barred from producing “legitimate” spoken-word plays, so popular performance was dominated by the melodrama. Aside from a requirement to include sections of music, this genre was somewhat malleable in form but came to include elements of spectacle, dumbshow and even dance which coalesced in an emphasis on sensationalism. As a result, transforming Scott’s narrative poem to this genre necessitated abbreviating and reframing the poem in a way which foregrounded plot above all else and largely flattened the complexities which provide context for the reader of Scott’s poem.

Three different dramatizations of Scott’s poem appeared within two years of its first publication and became mainstays of British and American theatres well into the late 1800s. Thomas Dibdin’s adaptation of *The Lady of the Lake* for the Surrey Theatre was not only the first to appear after the publication of the poem in 1810, but also was ultimately the most successful dramatization of the poem on the British stage.¹ The second adaptation by John Edmund Eyre for the Theatre Royal in Edinburgh in 1811 had only a short production life in Britain, but was by far the most successful in America.² Eyre’s adaptation was followed soon after by Thomas Morton’s *The Knight of Snowdown* in the same year at Covent Garden. Arriving as they do early in the life of the melodrama as a popular phenomenon on the British stage, the dramatizations of *The Lady of the Lake* appear to have benefited from the growing popularity of this emerging industry of stage spectacle and sensationalism. These dramatizations were revived frequently in variously revised and updated versions, occasionally with elements from the Dibdin and Eyre adaptations combined into one production.³ While it is impossible to prove how any one of these three melodramas individually could have influenced the popular understanding of Scott’s poem, collectively the dramatizations of *The Lady of the Lake* engage in simplifications of Scott’s poem which can be construed to have impacted upon the development of the popular conception of the original text over time and may have contributed to the poem’s decline in readership from its height as a publishing blockbuster in the early nineteenth century.

¹ Philip H. Bolton, *Scott Dramatized* (London: Mansell, 1992), 12.

² Elise K. Kirk, “‘Hail to the Chief’: The Origins and legacies of an American Ceremonial Tune,” *American Music*, 15.2 (1997): 123-36 (125).

³ For documentation of revivals, see Bolton, *Scott Dramatized*; Kirk, 125.

Dibdin's adaptation of the poem, *The Lady of the Lake: A Melodramatic Romance in Two Acts*, is not only chronologically the first but also the shortest of the three dramatizations. The dialogue of this melodrama generally maintains the same major rhyming scheme as that of the poem, iambic octosyllabic couplets, and indeed transposes a considerable amount of Scott's narration and dialogue with little alteration into character speech—albeit not always in the same place in the plot or even delivered by the same characters, as when lines spoken by King James in the poem are given to Ellen in the script. The transposition to the genre of the melodrama in this case involves an emphasis on dumbshow and the integration of both on- and off-stage musical pieces to propel the storyline. With regard to this dramatization Philip Cox contends that “when the [Dibdin] adaptation is read it often appears as simply an edited and slightly rearranged version of the original poem.”⁴ However, the heavy component of pantomime in the representation of the plot as indicated by the lengthy stage directions offers a more immediate difference from poem to play than Cox here acknowledges, and Dibdin is certainly not presenting a one-to-one replication of Scott's poem in his version for the stage. For example, these sections of dumbshow provide a considerable amount of both action and character response which in the poem is given through dialogue or narration—a shift which is consistent with the heavy emphasis on spectacle in melodrama.

It is also worth noting that Dibdin maintains the element of the supernatural in the form of prophecies by Allan Bane and Brian the Hermit in an adaptation which otherwise focuses on the realistic events of *The Lady of the Lake*, as this is perhaps indicative of an element which audiences who were familiar with Scott's poem would have expected to find in a stage version of the poem regardless of its interpretation of the original and is consistent with the shift to the genre of the melodrama. In all, Dibdin's approach to adapting Scott's writing to the melodramatic form is much more focused on telling a story from a beginning to a satisfying conclusion than is the narrative poem on which it is based and therefore acts to limit the complexities of the original text, which is particularly noteworthy in that it would have done so through a medium which strove to provide a complete experience of the stage through music, scenery and spectacle. This is relevant in that the audience is more likely to take the elements of the romance genre and allusions to the fantastic present in the narrative at face value when presented in this medium. In a discussion of Scott's minstrel poetry as a whole, Andrew Lincoln contends that “Scott himself ... insists on the deceptive nature of romance imaginings, and emphasises their

⁴ Philip Cox, *Reading Adaptations: Novels and Verse Narratives on the Stage, 1790-1840* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 59.

distance from the contemporary world even as he suggests their relevance to that world.”⁵ Taking *The Lady of the Lake* at face value, then, becomes a problematic side-effect of this dramatization as for a significant portion of the audience it would become a proxy for Scott’s poem and its interpretation of the text would become their own.

While the script for Eyre’s *The Lady of the Lake: A Melo-Dramatic Romance in Three Acts* is twice the length of the Dibdin version, the approach Eyre takes to the transposition of the poem is similar to that taken by the previous dramatization, in that the script appears to be mostly a mixed abridgment of Scott’s descriptions and dialogue from the poem. However, there is the important difference that it does not retain the rhyming scheme of Scott’s poem and its dialogue mostly consists of iambic pentameter blank verse. There are some lines swapped from one character to another, and the addition of a few scenes not directly derived from the poem, such as a dialogue between Lady Margaret and Allan-Bane which provides background to the story prior to the arrival of Ellen and Fitz-James at the lodge, but broadly speaking Eyre’s adaptation offers its audience all the highlights of Scott’s poem in a manner similar to Dibdin’s dramatization. However, in their 2012 piece discussing Scott’s narrative poems, Alison Lumsden and Ainsley McIntosh point out that excerpting the highlights of *The Lady of the Lake* does not do this poem justice:

A closer examination of the poem itself rather than just the set pieces and images that are so easily extracted from it, however, serves to suggest that Scott is offering a far more complex engagement with the limits of romance, and indeed, Romantic poetry more generally.⁶

This analysis supports the notion that the necessarily abbreviated versions of *The Lady of the Lake* presented in these two adaptations by Dibdin and Eyre—even if they remain fairly “faithful” to the plot of the poem—flatten the complexities and commentary present in Scott’s original. In other words, any adaptation which significantly compresses this poem and only focuses on the most memorable aspects of the narrative and setting will be more likely to be perceived by its audience as a straightforward romance than an engagement with the genre of the romance and a critique of its limits.

As with Dibdin’s version, in Eyre’s adaptation both dumbshow and music are integral to conveying the narrative in addition to, rather than merely as accompaniment to, the dialogue. However, Eyre’s melodrama

⁵ Andrew Lincoln, “Walter Scott and the Birth of the Nation,” *Romanticism*, 8.1 (2002): 1-17 (6).

⁶ Alison Lumsden and Ainsley McIntosh, “The Narrative Poems,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Fiona Robertson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 35-46 (44).

version of *The Lady of the Lake* contains a greater emphasis on the action scenes out of the poem than the rendition which preceded it. For instance, while Dibdin's adaptation contains a rather peaceable meeting between Roderick Dhu and Malcolm Graeme near the beginning of the first act, the corresponding scene in Eyre's dramatization calls for a fight between Malcolm and Rhoderick Dhu during which Ellen and Lady Margaret intervene and the Douglas comes between them, closely following the scene in Scott's poem with the exception that Douglas's angered speech to the two rivals is omitted.⁷ Although both Dibdin and Eyre include the ritual quenching of the fiery cross by Brian the Hermit, Dibdin waits until the opening of Act II to provide this scene while in this second adaptation Eyre uses it to close out the first act, which since this is a longer piece results in this scene appearing to come much sooner in the course of the plot and contributes to the sense of this melodrama as the action-adventure version of *The Lady of the Lake*. These alterations to the pacing and feel of the narrative are important as—in concert with the other shifts made by this adaptation—they further eliminate the otherworldly sense which helps to differentiate it from the real history and culture of Scotland.

The longest dramatization of *The Lady of the Lake* by far is Thomas Morton's *The Knight of Snowdown: A Musical Drama in Three Acts* and, as is signalled by the shift in the title, Morton's adaptation also differs from its source text more drastically than do either the Eyre or Dibdin dramatizations. Indeed, the "Advertisement" states that the dramatist's "judgment has directed him to select, rather than to copy."⁸ In this dramatization there are several characters who are either original to this adaptation or only mentioned in passing in the poem but who play significant roles in the plot of Morton's melodrama. For example, Norman, the groom called from his wedding by the passage of the fiery cross, is a significant figure in the action and furthermore the principal "bad guy" of Clan Alpine in this adaptation is "Red" Murdock, a henchman of Roderick Dhu who is another minor character from the poem. Further additions include a comic character named Macloon—a member of the Douglas Clan educated in the south and who pines over Ellen throughout the play—and the son of the Douglas, who is simply referred to as the "Young Douglas" and whose capture by the Earl of Mar's men is the focus of much of the conflict in the script. One of the most significant omissions is the character of Malcolm

⁷ Edmund John Eyre, *The Lady of the Lake: A Melodramatic Romance in Three Acts* (London: W. H. Wyatt, 1811), 15.

⁸ Thomas Morton, *The Knight of Snowdown: A Musical Drama, in Three Acts* (London: Sharpe and Hales, 1811), 5. University of Aberdeen Special Collections Manuscript WSF2. Subsequent citations for this work will be given in the body of the essay.

Graeme, whose place as the love interest for Ellen is taken here by Roderick Dhu—which thus also necessitates significant changes in the character and involvement of Roderick in the plot. Roderick Dhu does not receive a fatal blow during his fight with King James and, rather than dying an unchanged bastion of Highland violence, in the end he is pardoned and united with Ellen in much the same manner as Graeme is in Scott's poem—changes which significantly alter the implications of the narrative it should be noted.

The Knight of Snowdown, rather than employing an enchanted and mysterious tone in its representation of the narrative as is the case in Scott's poem, is in its essence a melodrama of action and comedy which partakes in the legacy of Restoration theatre. The characters of Brian and Allan Bane, therefore, simply do not accord with the ideology of the specific sub-genre Morton adopts for his transformation of Scott's poem, and Blanche of Devon's presence as a victim of Highland violence is likely too disconcerting for the more comedic tone of this adaptation, hence their absence from Morton's dramatization. As a result of all this, in Morton's adaptation the demarcation between the real Scotland and the fictionalised world of the poem collapses and renders Scotland, and specifically the Highlands, an "other" land.

Furthermore, much of the conflict of this play—both that which has already taken place and which occurs on the stage—is between Earl/Clan Mar and the Douglas/Alpines rather than that of the Highland Clans against King James and his retinue as it is in the poem. At the beginning of the play it is established that Clan Mar has taken Douglas's son captive, apparently the result of the new character Macloon's cowardice in retreating and leaving the boy behind, and a large part of the plot revolves around the tensions resulting from the young Douglas's abduction and his subsequent rescue by Roderick. Ellen also goes to the keep where the young Douglas is held in search of her father, who has been captured, and is momentarily a prisoner of Clan Mar before Roderick appears and rescues the young Douglas who has narrowly avoided execution (54-55). In a convoluted ploy worthy almost of a Shakespearean comedy, Roderick ransoms Douglas by turning himself in for the reward to Earl Mar and then using the same money to pay the ransom and stop the execution at the last minute (60-61). Roderick thus becomes the prisoner of Earl Mar and Douglas goes free. Ellen goes to Stirling to plead for Roderick's life instead of for her father as in the poem (66). It is important to note that while this plot is radically different from the narrative as written by Scott, it is fully consistent with the conventions of melodrama and since dramatization was not covered by copyright law at the time adaptors were under no obligation to consult with the author of the original before creating their own version and there were no adverse consequences to being "unfaithful" to the adaptive source.

In general, Morton's adaptation takes a slightly mocking tone in its representation of the Highland characters, and there is the distinct impression that this version was written to appeal to English audiences and not to Scottish ones at all. This mildly derisive representation of the Scottish characters may perhaps explain why Dibdin's version of the poem was more successful in Scotland over the course of the nineteenth century than Morton's and when taken in the context of the simplifications of the previous two adaptations of this poem may also go some way to supporting the idea that the dramatizations of *The Lady of the Lake* as a group contributed to an erosion of the complexities of Scott's poem.

To illustrate the ways in which the process of adapting *The Lady of the Lake* to the stage is problematic in the context of the broader reception of the poem, I will now examine an excerpt of Act II, scene 4 of Dibdin's dramatization. This excerpt is significant in that it not only demonstrates the altered character of Lady Margaret but also transposes dialogue from the poem into an original scene resulting in a significant departure from the tone and plot of the original, demonstrating the intriguing way in which even replicating Scott's words nearly verbatim can still result in something new. If regarded in relation to the status of this adaptation as a melodrama, the alteration of Lady Margaret's character to enable Ellen to be the subject of more menace and uncertainty than she is in the poem makes perfect sense. She is the dastardly landlord to Ellen's innocent housewife—melodramatic tropes which proliferated on the stage throughout the nineteenth century. As the theatre historian Michael Booth asserts: "Through hundreds of melodramas runs the frantic heroine, hair streaming out behind her, dress "*in disorder*," emotions in turmoil, the forces of evil in close and determined pursuit."⁹ The menace of Margaret enables Ellen to become this "frantic heroine" pursued by "the forces of evil." In this scene Lady Margaret has confined Ellen to a cave on the Island but Malcolm Graeme has returned to free Ellen:

MAR. [*Apart.*] So, traitress! [*Draws a dagger.*] thou wouldst thus depart!
Yet—hold a while, my bursting heart— [*Observes them.*]

ELLEN. Malcolm, though dear my life must be,
Since it is worthy care from thee,
Yet, while my father is a man,
Outlaw'd and exiled, under ban,
The price of blood set on his head,
With me 'twere infamy to wed!
No—mark! A stranger gave this ring;
He said 'tis passport to the king.

⁹ Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), 27 (emphasis in the original).

My father! oh, should it be true,
That this has power to pardon you!
Then, Malcolm, from each danger free—

LADY M. Hold! *Grateful* Ellen, ere you flee,
Ask Margaret's leave. Rash youth, for you,
Who dare my vassal's faith subdue,
Advance not! All of strife is vain;
This dagger proves thy Ellen's bane.

MUSIC. —Enter NORMAN and SANDY, c.—Margaret forces
Ellen off, L.—Malcolm engages the two Men, and they follow off,
fighting, R.¹⁰

In this passage the character of Margaret is seen as a forceful and commanding presence—not the loving mother-figure for Ellen as she is described in Scott's poem. She is not a woman who shies away from giving orders or from the intent to harm a fellow member of the “weaker” sex. This is confirmed later in the script when Margaret takes command of the Clan Alpine troops after the disappearance of Roderick Dhu and appears at Stirling Castle as a prisoner of war (23).

Furthermore, the scene quoted above also provides an excellent example of dialogue taken almost word-for-word from Scott's poem which is employed in this dramatization to a very different effect than in its source material. The speech which Ellen directs to Malcolm Graeme in the above dialogue corresponds most directly not to any speech by Ellen to Malcolm in the poem, but to several lines from Fitz-James's suit on his return to Loch Katrine and Ellen's answer to him:

[Fitz-James] Sweet Ellen, dear my life must be,
Since it is worthy care from thee;
Yet life I hold but idle breath
When love or honour's weighed with death.

...

[Ellen] But first—my father is a man
Outlawed and exiled, under ban;
The price of blood is on his head,
With me 'twere infamy to wed.¹¹

As this excerpt shows, within the poem these lines comprise part of a man's courtly address of a woman he is attempting to win over and the woman's

¹⁰ Thomas Dibdin, *The Lady of the Lake; A Melodramatic Romance in Two Acts* ([1810]; rptd Boston: W. V. Spencer, [?1856]), 19 (emphasis in the original). Subsequent citations in parentheses in the text.

¹¹ Walter Scott, *The Lady of the Lake*, ed. William J. Rolfe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1908), 100-101, Canto IV: lines 401-404; 427-430.

straightforward rejection of his suit and her explanation for doing so. However, their transposition in the melodrama to an address by Ellen towards Malcolm converts these lines into exposition of the conflicted desires of a woman for a man who she knows loves her but she believes she will be unable to marry unless there is a drastic change in her political circumstance. So while at a glance Dibdin may appear to be following the words written by Scott very closely, the end result is no closer to the text it adapts than if Dibdin was employing only original dialogue in this new scene. Even if an adaptation may cut and paste Scott's words with an eye for that elusive goal of 'fidelity' it will still inevitably be a reinterpretation which engages with new perspectives on plot and character and fundamentally diverges from the experience of reading Scott's poem.

At this point it is time to return to the primary question of this paper: why did interest in this poem disappear? While it is true that poetry readership tastes shifted dramatically at the beginning of the twentieth century, with ballad-like narrative poetry falling out of favor, this alone cannot account for its decline in popularity. Clearly there was still a feeling that *The Lady of the Lake* possessed cultural currency well into the twentieth century, as it was adapted to the silver screen in 1928 and later into comic book form in 1950—adaptations which, it should be noted, engaged in many of the same problematic simplifications evident in the dramatizations discussed here. This perhaps indicates that a conception of *The Lady of the Lake* had taken life in popular consciousness independent of Scott's poem, and in some respects had even supplanted the original in popular culture.

The remediation of a lengthy work into a compressed form and new genre inevitably supplants the multiple levels of meaning possible in the original with a more limited interpretation. Linda Hutcheon argues that "a *shown* dramatization cannot approximate the complicated verbal play of *told* poetry or the interlinking description, narration, and explanation that is so easy for prose narrative to accomplish."¹² If this is the case, then the transformation to the medium of the stage in itself is a process of limitation. Even the most "faithful" of these dramatizations presents a rendition of *The Lady of the Lake* which is a far more linear and singular representation of the narrative scope than that experienced by the reader of Scott's poem. Whatever its level of attempted fidelity to *The Lady of the Lake*, each of these adaptations subtly shifts the relationship of the poem towards the Highland landscape. As a group, then, I argue that these dramatizations contributed to a corresponding shift in the popular perception of how Scott's poem engages with the Highland landscape it depicts and helped to shape

¹² Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 23 (emphasis in the original).

the legacy of *The Lady of the Lake* long after they had ceased to be produced on the stage.

Clemson University