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Hogg's Kilmeny: An Interpretation

Although in the last century and a half many critics have praised the calm and tranquil beauty of James Hogg's "Kilmeny," none of them has interpreted justly the poem's full significance. A majority of the critics have based their readings on an assumption of questionable validity—the assumption that "Kilmeny" is one of Hogg's many poems about fairies. In fact, an examination of the poem suggests that Kilmeny is not taken to Fairyland as the critics assume, but to Paradise. In the words of the poem, she is taken to

That land to human spirits given,
The lowermost vales of the storied heaven;
From thence they can view the world below,
And heaven's blue gates with sapphires glow,
More glory yet unmeet to know.

This seems quite unequivocal; and it should be added that the land of spirits is never called Fairyland in the poem, nor are its inhabitants ever called fairies. In fact, they are very different beings from the fairies of a poem by Hogg written at about the same time as "Kilmeny"—"Old David." Here fairies are malevolent beings who pay tithes to the Devil, as in the old ballads. The spirits of "Kilmeny," on the other hand, are "meek and reverent," and they live in "a land of love, and a land of light," from which they watch anxiously over the world, and "grieve for the guilt of humanity." The only support for the view of the critics is a footnote by Hogg on the sources of the poem in popular traditions, in which he says that Kilmeny is taken

1 Thus W. L. Renwick, in the Oxford History of English Literature (Oxford, 1963, p. 220), calls the poem "a fairy-tale that is neither a museum-piece nor a Shakespearian prettiness." Other typical opinions are—"The Land of Fairy was, as I have said, Hogg's peculiar domain; and 'Kilmeny' is his finest picture of it." (John Campbell Shairp, Sketches in History and Poetry (Edinburgh, 1887) p. 342.) "The real charm of the poem is in its aerial, fading music— for once Hogg has found the right form — and in the nostalgia for a world, Elfland and Eden, that is fading." (Louis Simpson, James Hogg: A Critical Study (Edinburgh, 1962) p. 91.)

2 See Note 1 to "The Witch of Fife" in The Queen's Wake.

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to Fairyland. But surely this footnote cannot cancel out the unequivocal evidence of the poem itself.

If we accept the statement in the poem that the land to which Kilmeny is taken is Heaven, a complete re-examination of the poem’s meaning is obviously required. Before this is attempted, however, it will be convenient to give a brief summary of the poem. In the opening lines, Hogg tells of the mysterious disappearance of the beautiful Kilmeny, and of her return after an absence of seven years. He then turns to her adventures during that time. First of all she is received with rejoicing into the land of spirits, to which she has been taken because of her perfect purity. Then she is washed in the stream of life; and finally she is taken to a green mountain, where she is shown a vision of a lion and an eagle. The poem ends with a description of her brief return to earthly life.

In this myth, as I shall try to show, Hogg articulates a deeply Christian view of the human situation: we live in a world of sin and sorrow, but behind and beyond our misery, in the ultimate depth of being, there is a joy which is eternal. In the words of the theologian Paul Tillich: "The end of the way is joy. And joy is deeper than suffering. It is ultimate." In the words of the poem—

But she saw till the sorrows of man were bye,
And all was love and harmony;—
Till the stars of heaven fell calmly away,
Like the flakes of snow on a winter day.

The poem is an expression of the beauty and peace of that ultimate joy, seen against a background of the sadness of the contrast between the glory of Heaven and our present situation.

Hogg enacts his vision superbly, especially in the great closing scene, in which Kilmeny returns to this world, bringing some of the glory of Heaven with her. She walks in the woodlands to sing her lonely hymns, and

The wild beasts of the forest came
Broke from their boughs and foul its tame . . .
The blackbird alang wi’ the eagle flew;
The hind came tripping o’er the dew;
The wolf and the kid their race began,
And the toad and the lamb and the leveret ran . . .
And all in a peaceful ring were hurled:—
It was like an eve in a sinless world!


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This is the joy of which Tillich speaks; this is the love and harmony we can expect when the stars of heaven fall calmly away. Hogg seems to echo Isaiah's vision of the new Jerusalem: "For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. . . . The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord."4

The joy and the rejoicing of the new heavens and the new earth are even more amply conveyed in the lyrical beauty of the opening section of the poem, in which the glory of Heaven is reflected in the quiet peace of the twilight in which Kilmeny returns, and in the awed wonder of her friends at her strange and holy calm.

As still was her look, and as still was her eye,
As the stillness that lay on the emerant lea,
Or the mist that sleeps on a waveless sea.

The joy of the new Jerusalem is seen, as I have said, against a background of the sin and sorrow of the world. There is no easy way to it; it cannot be realised while the stars of Heaven remain in their places. This is conveyed, in terms of the myth, by the fact that Kilmeny cannot remain in this world after her return. The poem ends thus:—

But it wasna her game, and she couldna remain;
She left this world of sorrow and pain,
And returned to the land of thought again.

This aspect of the poem's philosophy is made explicit in the choric comments of the spirits as they welcome Kilmeny into Heaven. They praise her perfect purity, and contrast it with the general state of sin and sorrow of the world over which they watch.

This brings us to the least successful part of the poem, the scenes in Heaven. Hogg's failure here is not really surprising. The human mind cannot conceive Heaven adequately, and any attempt to describe it directly is bound to end in anti-climax. We can only perceive something of its nature indirectly, through echoes and reflections, as in the opening and closing scenes of the poem. Nevertheless, although the scenes in Heaven are inadequate and vaguely imagined, they do add something to the total significance of the myth. The bathing of Kilmeny

4 Isaiah lxv. 17-18, 25. On Hogg's knowledge of the Bible, which seems to have been extensive, see Mrs. M. G. Garden, Memorials of James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd (Paisley, 1903) p. 13.
in the stream of life helps to emphasise her semi-divine character, and the choric function of her reception into Heaven has already been mentioned. The vision of the lion and the eagle remains to be considered. In this vision the spirits show Kilmeny the future up to the point when "all was love and harmony." Thus, by means of the vision, Hogg shows the reader that he has glimpsed something of the nature of the ultimate destiny of man in the love and harmony which Kilmeny's presence creates on her return to earth.

The vision also gives Hogg a chance to show the reader something of the sin and sorrow of the world, but unfortunately he only produces a superficial and somewhat chauvinistic account of the terrors of the French Revolution, and a pageant of the life of Mary Queen of Scots (to whom, it will be remembered, the song of "Kilmeny" is addressed in The Queen's Wake). In spite of these wanderings from his theme, however, Hogg does convey in "Kilmeny" something of the ultimate peace and joy which Christianity promises, something of the state of things when, in the words of Saint Paul, "that which is perfect is come." This represents a considerable achievement, especially for a man who reached adult years as a semi-literate shepherd; but the merits of "Kilmeny" will seem less remarkable if we remember that Hogg was the author of what Alexander Scott has called "the most philosophically profound of Scottish novels, that tragedy of Calvinism The Confessions of a Justified Sinner." 5

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