Sir Walter Scott's Continuous Interest in Germany

Paul M. Ochojski
Seton Hall University

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

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Sir Walter Scott's Continuous Interest in Germany

In the study of Anglo-German literary relations, the extent of Sir Walter Scott's interest in things German has been generally neglected. Certainly the biographers of Scott after John Gibson Lockhart tend to overlook his borrowings from German literature. Andrew Lang, Robert Chambers and Richard Hutton in Victorian times paid scant notice to Scott's relationship to Germany. More recently, the biographical studies of Scott by Donald Carswell and Stephen Gwynn in 1930, by John Buchan and Una Pope-Hennessy in 1932, by Sir Herbert Grierson in 1938, and by Hesketh Pearson in 1954 have all either ignored it altogether or given it a line or two as a youthful interest. More specialized scholars have, of course, not let the relationship go unnoticed. F. W. Stokoe in *German Influence in the English Romantic Period* devotes a chapter to Scott, but concludes that Scott neither acquired much knowledge of German literature nor was permanently affected by it. Margaret Ball in her study, *Walter Scott as a Critic of Literature*, writes, "His special interest in the German was an early mood which seems not to have returned." This is the general opinion: that after 1800 or so, after his apprenticeship to the German muse had been completed with his translations and adaptations, Scott's interest in Germany and its literature ceased. A brief review of his career will demonstrate that this opinion needs correction.

Walter Scott's interest in Germany began on April 21, 1788, when as a seventeen-year-old law apprentice he attended Henry Mackenzie's lecture on the German drama, a drama then as little known in Britain as that of Persia. Although Mackenzie did not read German and depended on French translations, he succeeded in stimulating an interest in the plays of Goethe and Schiller. Walter Scott, writing of the lecture some forty-two years later, recalls the powerful effect it had

---

1 This article is an expansion of a paper read before the Comparative Literature 6 group at the MLA meeting on December 27, 1963.

2 Cambridge, 1926, p. 86.

3 New York, 1907, p. 18.
WALTER SCOTT AND GERMANY

on him, this discovery of German dramatists who "disclaiming the pedantry of the unitles, sought at the expense of occasional improbabilities and extravagancies, to present life in its scenes of wildest contrast."4

Shortly before Christmas, 1792, a German class was formed of Scott and several close friends after they had found a teacher in the person of Dr. A. F. Willich, a native German, translator of Kant and one-time physician to the Saxon Ambassador. The German class met until the spring of 1795 and resumed the following winter. Scott's study of German was more enthusiastic than profound, for according to Dr. Willich, he would not lay the proper foundation in grammar, but preferred to grope his way by his knowledge of Scottish and Anglo-Saxon cognates.5 Although he later owned a German dictionary, his orthography remained poor, and many "howlers" in his use of German are traceable to his intuitive approach to the language.

It was in the autumn of 1794, according to Stokoe, that Scott heard of William Taylor's translation of Bürger's "Lenore," a reading of which had caused a considerable stir among his Edinburgh friends.6 He determined to read the original, but was unable to procure a copy as German books were then almost impossible to find. Fortunately his kinsman and clan chief, Hugh Scott of Harden, in 1795 married the daughter of Count Brühl, the Saxon Ambassador. Scott met her soon after her arrival, and his interest in German literature caught her fancy. She not only procured him a copy of Bürger's poems, but in 1796 some works of Goethe and Schiller as well. Scott's translations of Bürger's "Lenore" as "William and Helen," and of "Der Wilde Jäger" as "The Chase," were published in October of 1796, and so began his career as an author. Later that same year, according to Oliver Farrar Emerson's article, "The Early Literary Life of Sir Walter Scott," he translated Bürger's "Das Lied von Treue" as well, and in 1797 went on to translate some Goethe pieces.7 The song of Rugarino in Act II of Claudia von Villa Bella became "Frederick and Alice," another ballad, dealing like his previous ones, in the supernatural. The "Klagegesang von der edlen Frauen des Asan Aga" became "The Morlacian Ballad." "The

4 "Essay on Imitation of the Ancient Ballad," Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, 2 vols. (Paris, 1838), II, 157 ff. Most editions of Scott's works do not contain this essay which was written in April, 1830.

5 Stokoe, p. 62.

6 Stokoe, Appendix II, p. 176.

7 JEGP, XIII (1924), 32.

[165]
STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

Erl-King," also from Goethe, completed his ballad translations for that year.

It was also in 1797 that Scott made the acquaintance of James Skene, a barrister like himself, who had just returned from three years of study in Germany with a good stock of German books which Scott promptly borrowed. With Skene he was active that year in the newly-formed Edinburgh Light Dragoons, preparing to ward off a feared invasion by the revolutionary French. Scott named his battle-cry "Lenore" and composed a war song for his troop. It was based on Schubart's Kupied, which Skene had taught him. During this same year Scott, as his journal shows, was also reading German plays. A May 28 entry mentions reading Lessing's Nathan der Weise and a July 5 entry of reading Gerstenberg's Braut. Manuscript notebooks still at Abbotsford, dated 1796 and 1797, contain three plays translated but never published: Ifland's Die Mündel, which Scott titled The Wards, Babo's Otto von Wittelsbach, and Maier's Fust von Stromberg. Even after five years of German studies his translations are full of crude errors, but his choice of plays shows his rising interest in medieval material. About this time also Scott attempted a translation of Schiller's Fiesco, which he said he found "sublime," but in 1827 when he wanted to send it to Mrs. Mary Ann Hughes he was unable to find it and it has remained lost.

His fifth translation of a German play was the most important one for his career. Sometime in 1798 Scott read Goethe's Götz von Berlichingen, one of the plays praised in Mackenzie's lecture ten years before. When "Monk" Lewis, that fellow-worker in the Teutonic vineyard with whom Scott had been corresponding about a projected horror miscellany, visited Edinburgh in the fall, Scott was able to let him read the finished translation. Lewis was impressed, and arranged for the publication of Scott's Goetz of Berlichingen, which occurred in London in February, 1799.

Unfortunately 1799 was a bad year for German drama in Great Britain. The craze for Korzebue which had swept all other plays off the stage had caused a violent reaction, led by the Anti-Jacobin Review, to set in, and all German literature suffered. To make matters worse, Scott's Goetz appeared almost simultaneously with that of Rose Law-

*These plays are studied by Duncan Mennie, "Sir Walter Scott's Unpublished Translations of German Plays," MLR, XXXIII (April 1938), 234-240.

renee. Each elicited but three reviews, which, while favorable, could not prevent the work from soon sinking into oblivion.

Scott's Goetz may have been a minor literary achievement, but scholars agree that it had a decisive effect on his career. It taught Scott the literary uses of history, by which he was to give the historical novel to the world. Soon after he had finished Goetz, Scott completed another play, The House of Aspen, a reworking rather than a translation of Veit Weber's Die Heilige Vébme. Through Lewis he attempted to interest Kemble, the theater director, to produce it, but the Antis-Jacobin had done its dirty work and German-style plays were not producible. Not until 1830 was it to make a public appearance, and that in print.

After 1800 Scott turned with his Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border to the exploitation in poetry of his own native materials. According to his biographers, his youthful German phase was over, never to return. Many of the statements of Scott himself in later years seem to bear this out. Thus in a review of 1806, he deprecates Bürger and "the taste for outrageous sensibility which disgraces most German poetry." In a letter to Lady Abercorn, dated May 17, 1811, he refers to The House of Aspen as "a sort of half-mad German tragedy which I wrote many years ago, when my taste was very green, and when like the rest of the world I was taken in by the bombast of Schiller. I never set the least value upon it. . . ." In another letter, one to Mrs. Mary Ann Hughes, dated December 15, 1827, he writes of the translated plays written when he was "German-mad," that "they are in general sad trash, and if you read ever so little German, you would see how inferior they are to the original."

While Scott in his maturity belittled his early flirtation with the German muse, a study of his works, his journals, and his letters, reveals that he made constant use of his knowledge of German language and

---


11 Ball, p. 18.

12 Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott, 2 vols., (Boston, 1894), I, 218.

literature, and kept up his interest in things German. Not only have scholars such as Alois Brandl, Jean Carré, and F. W. Stokoe found the influence of Götz on the Lay of the Last Minstrel and Marmion, but William Macintosh in Scott and Goethe: German Influences on the Writings of Sir Walter Scott, claims that thirteen of the Waverley novels show German influence. Most of this influence turns out to be Scott thriftily putting to use his laboriously acquired German knowledge. Many novels contain a sprinkling of German words and phrases, often misspelled in Scott's intuitive orthography. Sometimes, as in Guy Mannering, Quentin Durward, The Betrothed, and St. Roman's Well, he puts German into the mouths of Flemish, Dutch, or other non-German characters. While Ivanhoe contains a scene like one in Götz, and Egmont supplied a love-scene to Kenilworth, Scott's reading in de la Motte-Fouqué is shown by borrowings in Guy Mannering and The Monastery. Schiller contributed some mottoes for chapter-heads in Ivanhoe and Kenilworth, and suggestions for scenes in those novels and in Quentin Durward and Anne of Geierstein as well. These examples demonstrate, not the extent of German influence on Scott, but the fact that in the years 1814-1829 when these novels were appearing, both the German language and its literature remained familiar to him.

Scott's interest in things German is reflected not only in his literary work, but runs like a thread through all the multifarious activities of a lifetime. His German affinities are apparent in the names he gave his domestic animals, his German acquaintances, his library, his correspondence, his journals and miscellaneous writings. Characteristic is his association of ten years' duration with Heinrich Weber, who served as his secretary from 1804 to 1814. Weber, a German, relieved Scott of much drudgery in translating, copying and the like, and put at Scott's disposal his not inconsiderable knowledge of the earlier German literature. Scott in turn helped Weber to edit the works of Beaumont and Fletcher, and contributed an abstract of the Eyrbyggja Saga to Weber's Illustrations of Northern Antiquity. Weber often dined with the Scotts, and when in 1814 he became insane, it was Scott who supported him in a private asylum until Weber's death in 1818. Weber's

14 Galashiels, [1925], passim.
15 For a detailed study of Scott's use of German material in his works see Paul M. Ochojski, Walter Scott and Germany: A Study in Literary Cross-Currents, diss. Columbia, 1960, University Microfilms MIC 61-255.
WALTER SCOTT AND GERMANY

sad fate often came to Scott’s mind in later years, as his journal entries show.\(^\text{16}\)

It was not only close contact with Germans such as Heinrich Weber, and his kinswoman, Mrs. Hugh Scott of Harden, that sustained Scott’s interest in German literature. The *Catalogue of the Library at Abbotsford* shows that Scott owned over three hundred German books, which Stokoe lists in the appendix to his study.\(^\text{17}\) These include the works of Wieland, de la Motte-Fouqué, Goethe, Schiller, Tieck, Bürger, the Grimm brothers, Brennanzo, von Arnim, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and the Schlegels. The remainder are mostly collections of medieval legends, history, and antiquarian lore. According to their dates of publication, over half of them have been acquired after 1800, again demonstrating that Scott’s German reading was not a mere youthful enthusiasm. Abbotsford also housed a fine collection of German swords, which Scott delighted in showing to visitors interested in Germany.

Scott’s familiar for over fifteen years at Abbotsford was his cousin “Hinse von Hinsfeldt,” named out of one of the *Kindermärchen*, and a second horse, one he gave to his son Walter, was also named “Lenore.” But it is in his letters that Scott shows again and again his continuing interest in Germany. Many of his correspondents—Lady Abercorn, Mrs. Hughes, Joanna Baillie, John Morritt, John Richardson, Daniel Terry, and Robert Southey—shared his interest. To mention but two: on July 8, 1819, Scott writes John Morritt, who had apparently suggested a vacation at a German spa, “I am fond of German literature and should find much amusement at one of their watering-places,” but he adds that he intends to vacation at home.\(^\text{18}\) To John Richardson, who was about to leave for Germany, he writes in October or November, 1823, “I envy you your German tour, and always think time may give me such an enjoyment.”\(^\text{19}\)

Among Scott’s lifelong friends was another Scottish Germanophile, Robert Pearse Gillies, who attributed the stimulation of his German interests to Scott. Gillies was a skillful translator and a zealous propagandist for German literature in *Blackwood’s* magazine. Scott en-

\(^{16}\) See those for March 10, 1826, January 14, 1827, and April 15, 1828, in any edition of the *Journals*.

\(^{17}\) *German Influence in the English Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 1926), Appendix I, p. 175.

\(^{18}\) *Familiar Letters*, II, 47.

couraged him to found the *Foreign Quarterly Review* as a journal devoted to foreign, especially German, literature.

Another assiduous Germanist was Scott's son-in-law, John Gibson Lockhart, whom Scott first met in 1818. Lockhart had just returned from Germany and Scott was eager to hear of his meeting with Goethe in Weimar. Upon hearing that Goethe liked forestry, he said, "I am glad that my old master has pursuits somewhat akin to my own."20 In October that year Lockhart spent a weekend at Abbotsford and Scott borrowed from him the 1808 edition of *Faust*, for which he was full of praise. When he heard that Coleridge was working on a translation, he is said to have told Lockhart, "I hope it is so. Coleridge made Schiller's *Wallenstein* far finer than he found it, and so he will do by this."21 This statement, while evidence of Scott's poor judgment as a critic, does reveal a continuing interest in German letters.

Less than six months later occurred an event which shows the sustaining role of German in Scott's life. In the spring of 1819 Scott was driven almost out of his mind by the excruciating pains of an attack of gall-stones. James Skene, who was visiting him, reported that Scott had him read a Bürger ballad aloud in German for him to translate. Later he had Skene judge it, and when Skene pronounced it good, Scott admitted that he had done the translation as a sanity test.22 Lockhart reports a similar episode in the *Life of Scott*, but in his version it was "Der edle Möringer" which was the subject of the test.23 "The Noble Moringer" was published in the *Edinburgh Annual Register for 1816*, which appeared late in 1819. On the other hand, the Bürger ballad, which Skene maintains was the object of the sanity test, has never turned up. As Scott himself said that it would not be used further, this does not rule out the possibility that it did once exist. That Skene, who knew German well, would mistake "Der edle Möringer" with its forty-three stanzas in Scott's translation, for a Bürger ballad, which he said was a short one, seems unlikely even allowing for the lapse of years. The various circumstances surrounding the translations, impromptu and in Scott's hand in Skene's version, dictated by Scott while he lay in bed in the version of Lockhart, also

---


21 Lockhart, p. 326.


23 Lockhart, p. 337.
WALTER SCOTT AND GERMANY

point to two episodes, each involving a different poem. The important thing, however, is that Scott in his agony and fear of insanity should turn to German for assurance.

Another occurrence that reveals how close German still lay to the well-springs of Scott’s psyche is recorded in his journal. On May 11, 1826, just five days before his wife died, and when her death was daily expected, he wrote:

Der Abschiedstag ist da,
Schwer liegt er auf dem Herzen . . . schwer.

These lines are from the Kaplaid of Schubart, which Scott had used for his Edinburgh Dragoons as their battle-song some thirty years before. Whether out of faulty memory or deliberately, he changed the word Seele in the original to Herzen. The lines are so poignantly appropriate to the sad occasion.

His journals reveal other lapses into German in a rather natural fashion, as though that language furnished him with the just-right phrases. Thus on December 5, 1825, working on the Life of Napoleon, he refers to Danton, Marat, and Robespierre, as “the heilige Kleeblatt.” And on December 18, 1825, he refers to the unidentified bankers who threaten him with ruin as “the unbekannten Obern.” The German proverb, “Kommt Zeit, kommt Rath,” he uses twice; once on March 4, 1826, and then again on March 28, 1827. In an entry for January 10, 1828, he refers to the breaking up of an incipient snow-storm with the expression, “At last Die Wolken laufen zusammen.” On January 12, 1829, preparing to leave Abbotsford for Edinburgh, he closes the journal entry with, “Der Abschiedstag ist da.” In the last year of his life, beginning his futile health-seeking European journey, he writes on November 5, 1831, consoling himself for the slow progress of the ship with a “Meanwhile Fröhlich.” These uses of appropriate German phrases and words are in themselves not significant, for Scott lapses just as familiarly and more frequently into Latin. They do show that German, even near the end of his life, was still a part of his mental equipment.

Scott was anxious for his sons to learn foreign languages, as his letters to them show. In June, 1820, he admonishes his son Walter, stationed in Ireland with the Eighteenth Hussars, to learn French and German.24 In a later letter he writes that he is sending him a German novel. When the Hussars were India-bound, Scott succeeded in having Walter transferred to another regiment which was to be sent to

24 Familiar Letters, II, 82.
STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

Germany. In a letter to Walter in Germany, dated February 25, 1822, Scott asks him to visit the Baron de la Motte-Fouqué, ever his favorite German author.25

During the years that the Waverley novels kept coming out at the rate of one or two a year, Scott still enjoyed the reputation of being a Germanophile. At the very least he was still considered enough of a German expert to be asked advice or to set the seal of his approval on the works of likeminded individuals. When Edgar Taylor's translation of Grimm's Märchen was published in 1823, a presentation copy was sent to Scott, who promptly acknowledged it and praised the work.26 When George Huntly Gordon, who had succeeded Heinrich Weber as Scott's secretary, bogged down in his attempt to translate Fouqué's Die Fabeln Thiodolfs des Isländers, Scott offered to help him, writing that it would cost an old hack like him very little trouble.27

It was about the same time that Scott was preparing his essays on romance, chivalry, and the drama for the 1824 supplement to the Encyclopædia Britannica. These show again that Scott had kept up his interest in German literature. In the "Essay on Drama," for example, in giving a capsule history of German drama, he quotes Schlegel's attack on the Ritterstücke which had followed in the wake of Götz. It was these very plays that Scott had been so enamoured of as a young translator.

Scott's Life of Napoleon, which appeared in 1827, also shows evidence of reading in German sources: the histories of von Gentz, von Müffling, and Varnhagen von Ense. Scott, in contrast to many of his British contemporaries, is quick to give the Prussians credit for helping defeat Napoleon. In the work he also shows a good grasp of recent German history.

Occasional German visitors to Abbotsford helped to keep Scott abreast of the situation in Germany. In his journal for June 27, 1827, he reports the visit of Gustav Schwab of Königsberg, who gave him a flattering picture of Prussia, but who told him also that the Germans were becoming restive under autocratic rule. Another German, Baron von Meyersdorf, is reported in the journal entry for March 23, 1829, as telling Scott that a political explosion is imminent not only in Germany, but in Poland and Russia as well.

25 Ibid., p. 136.
27 Macintosh, p. 47.
WALTER SCOTT AND GERMANY

In 1827 his contacts with Germany were especially prominent. On February 15, Scott received a letter from Goethe, and in his elation confides to his journal, "Who could have told me thirty years ago I should correspond and be on something like an equal footing with the author of Goetz?" Goethe's reaction to Scott's reply can be found in the conversations with Eckermann. Suffice it to say that Scott and Goethe continued to hold each other in mutual esteem.

In July of 1827, the Foreign Quarterly Review published a thirty-seven page article by Scott entitled, "On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition." It was really a review of some works of F.T.A. Hoffmann, the Leben und Nachlass, Die Serapionsbrüder, and the Nachtstücke. During its composition in early May of 1827, he refers to it almost daily in his journal. With typical modesty he complains on May 5, "I think I have forgot my German very much..." Yet the essay, while not a generous appraisal of Hoffmann, shows that Scott had read not only the works of that author, but still remembered enough of Wieland, the Grimm brothers, Musæus, and Fouqué to make references to their uses of the supernatural as well.

On August 28, 1831, a group calling themselves "The Philogermans" sent Goethe a testimonial letter and an engraved seal for his eighty-second birthday. "To the German Master: From Friends in England" it was engraved, and the fifteen signatures number among them that of Scott as well as those of Carlyle, Wordsworth, Southey, and Lockhart. But the sands of time were running out for both Scott and Goethe; a little more than a year later both men were dead. Scott was never to meet Goethe, and when he did see Germany at last, it was as a dying man in a semi-coma from the decks of a Rhine steamer.

These are some of the facts about Walter Scott's continuing relationship with Germany, its language and literature. It is true that Scott never matched Carlyle's knowledge of German literature, or Coleridge's of German philosophy; but it is not true that "his interest in the German was an early mood which seems not to have returned."

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY

[173]