

HOW WALTER SCOTT TRANSFORMED FOLK BALLADS INTO LITERARY
POETRY: AN ANALYSIS OF WORK WITH FORMULAS

Nargiza Jumaboyevna Yusupova

Senior Lecturer, Urgench Innovation University,

Khorezm, Uzbekistan

E-mail: [narstzan@gmail.com]

Abstract: This paper examines how Walter Scott worked with the formulaic constructions of Scottish ballads when creating his own poetic works. The main focus is on the poem "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" (1805) in comparison with materials from the collection "Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border" (1802-1803). By analyzing specific examples of the transformation of ballad formulas—stable verbal constructions of oral poetry—we attempt to show that Scott did not simply copy folk patterns but consciously transformed them, adapting them to different artistic tasks. This research may be useful for a more precise understanding of Scott's creative method and his place in the development of Romantic poetry.

Keywords: Walter Scott, Scottish ballad, oral formulaicity, literary processing of folklore, poetic technique, Romanticism

Introduction: Why Formulas?

When we began studying Walter Scott's poetry, one question always interested me: how exactly did he combine folk ballad and literary poetry in his texts? After all, these are completely different things. The ballad was created for oral performance, passed from singer to singer, changing with each performance. The literary poem is a fixed written text, created by a specific author for reading. There would seem to be a chasm between them.

The answer to this question was found in analyzing how Scott handles ballad formulas. In folklore studies, formulas are understood as stable verbal constructions that repeat in different texts: typical openings, endings, descriptions of standard situations (for example, saddling a horse or the arrival of a messenger), and sustainable epithets. American researchers Milman Parry and Albert Lord showed that formulaicity is not a flaw or primitiveness of oral poetry, but its most important structural principle. Formulas help the singer memorize and reproduce long texts, and help listeners recognize familiar elements and anticipate the development of the plot.

Scott knew the ballad tradition perfectly. He not only collected ballads (although his three-volume collection "Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border" remains a classic of folklore studies), but also grew up in the culture of the Scottish Borders, where these songs were a living tradition. And here's what's interesting: in his original poems, he does not abandon formulas, but he also does not copy them mechanically. He transforms them, and it is precisely this process of transformation that seems to us the key to understanding his poetic technique.

What is a Ballad Formula: Examples from Scott's Collection

Before discussing how Scott worked with formulas, we need to show what they are with concrete examples. Let's take one of the most famous ballads from his collection - "The Douglas Tragedy" (this is ballad number 7 in Francis Child's classic classification).



The ballad begins with a typical opening:

"Rise up, rise up, now, Lord Douglas," she says,\
"And put on your armour so bright"

Notice the repetition "Rise up, rise up" - this is a characteristic ballad construction. The doubling of the verb creates rhythm and conveys the urgency of the moment. And the epithet "bright" applied to armor is what folklorists call a sustainable epithet. It appears constantly in ballads, regardless of whether it's actually important that the armor shines.

Then comes the saddling formula:

"O he's mounted her on a milk-white steed,\
And himself on a dapple grey"

"Milk-white steed" and "dapple grey" are not realistic descriptions, but traditional formulas. The color of the horse in the ballad has a rather symbolic meaning and helps distinguish characters. Such formulas are found in dozens of other ballads.

The dialogic formula is particularly interesting. In this ballad, there is a moment when the dying heroine addresses her dead lover:

"Is there any room at your head, Saunders?\
Is there any room at your feet?\
Or any room at your side, Saunders,\
Where fain, fain, I wad sleep?"

The threefold repetition of the question with variation (head - feet - side) is a classic ballad structure. It creates mounting emotional tension. The repetition "fain, fain" (eagerly, gladly) intensifies the heroine's despair.

And finally, the death formula:

"Lord William was dead lang ere midnight,\
Lady Marg'ret lang ere day"

The parallel construction and indication of time ("before midnight" - "before dawn") emphasize the connection of the heroes' fates. Interestingly, the ballad does not describe HOW they died, does not psychologize, does not give details - it simply states the fact through a formula.

These formulas (and there are many other types) constitute the structural basis of ballad poetics. Now let's see what Scott does with them in his own texts.

When Scott Preserves Formulas Almost Unchanged

Sometimes, though not very often, Scott inserts a ballad formula into his text practically unchanged. Apparently, it was important for him to create an effect of recognition, a reference to tradition. For example, in "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" there is this fragment:



"He lighted at Lord David's gate,\
And, as he lighted down,\
He wheeled his jennet round about,\
And round about him ran"

Here the typical ballad construction with repetition of prepositions is preserved: "lighted... down", "round about". Syntactic parallelism is also in place. True, there is one detail - the word "jennet" (a small Spanish horse) instead of the usual "steed". This adds historical specificity and shows the author's erudition, but overall the formula is recognizable.

There are few such direct borrowings in the poem. More often, Scott works with formulas differently - he expands them.

Expansion of Formulas: When One Line Turns into Five

Here begins the most interesting part. Scott takes a concise ballad formula and unfolds it into a detailed description. Let's compare: in a typical ballad, the arrival of a messenger is indicated approximately like this:

"There came a messenger to the gate"

One line, nothing extra. In "The Lay of the Last Minstrel," the same situation looks completely different (Canto I, stanza XIV):

"At the dark postern door,\
There a messenger was seen,\
All booted, spurred, and travel-stained,\
With visage wan and keen;\
He looked with wonder on the scene"

One line has turned into five! Details of appearance ("wan and keen"), condition ("travel-stained"), and emotional reaction ("looked with wonder") have been added. The function of the formula is preserved - to indicate the arrival of a character - but the way it is realized is completely different.

Why does Scott need this? It seems to me there are several reasons. Firstly, the expanded description slows down the pace of the narrative, creates a delay effect, which enhances the drama. Secondly, detailing makes the picture more picturesque - this corresponds to Romantic aesthetics, which valued vivid visual images. Thirdly (and this is perhaps the most important), the expanded description demonstrates the poet's skill, his ability to work with language. Scott seems to say: "I know the tradition, but I can do more than simply reproduce the formula."

Scott applies this strategy of expansion constantly. The ballad landscape of two words ("in the greenwood") turns in his work into a multi-line description with the play of light and shadow, with atmospheric details, with mood. This is no longer a formula in its pure form, but its "genetic memory" is preserved - we recognize the original structure.

Functional Reinterpretation: When the Formula Works in a New Way



Here is the most complex and interesting case - when Scott uses a ballad formula in an unusual context, forcing it to work differently than in tradition.

Ballads have a stable formula for the appearance of the supernatural. Usually it's a sound signal at midnight:

"About the middle o' the night\
She heard the bridles ring"

The ringing of bridles in the middle of the night - and the listener immediately understands: a ghost or magical being is about to appear. The formula is maximally concise because the audience knows the convention.

Now let's look at how a spirit appears in "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" (Canto II, stanzas XII-XIV). Scott, of course, preserves the nighttime, but instead of a simple sound signal, he creates a whole picture:

"The moon on the east oriel shone\
Through slender shafts of shapely stone,\
By foliated tracery combined;\
Thou wouldst have thought some fairy's hand\
'Twixt poplars straight the osier wand,\
In many a freakish knot, had twined"

The description of moonlight playing through Gothic windows, the comparison of stone carving to fairy weaving - this is no longer a ballad formula, but a Romantic poetic picture. But it performs the same function: it prepares the appearance of a supernatural character. The formula is not discarded, but reinterpreted - its essence (creating an atmosphere of wonder) is preserved, but the way it is realized is completely changed.

It seems to us that this reveals a fundamental difference between oral and written text. The ballad performer could create the necessary atmosphere with voice, intonation, pause - so the text could be concise. Scott, writing for a reader, must compensate for the absence of live performance with verbal means. Hence this picturesqueness, detailing, expansion.

Dialogue in Ballads and in Scott: Different Principles

I want to dwell separately on dialogic constructions, because here the transformation is particularly noticeable. In a ballad, dialogue is structured as an exchange of remarks with minimal attribution. Let's take the famous ballad "Edward":

"Why does your brand sae drop wi' blude,\
Edward, Edward?\
Why does your brand sae drop wi' blude,\
And why sae sad gang ye, O?"\
"O I hae killed my hawk sae gude,\
Mither, mither"

The mother asks, the son answers. No authorial comments, no description of their state, no gestures. Emotional tension is created through the repetition of names ("Edward, Edward",



"Mither, mither") and through the very rhythm of questions and answers. The ballad performer conveyed emotions through intonation.

In Scott, dialogues are structured more complexly. When the Lady of Buccleuch converses with the old minstrel in "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" (Introduction), we see not just an exchange of remarks:

"The Duchess marked his weary pace,\
His timid mien, and reverent face,\
And bade her page the menials tell,\
That they should tend the old man well:\
For she had known adversity,\
Though born in such a high degree"

Scott shows the process of communication: the lady observes ("marked"), notices details ("weary pace", "timid mien"), gives an order ("bade her page"), and, importantly, the author explains her motivation ("For she had known adversity"). This is psychological motivation, which is absent and cannot exist in a ballad. The ballad shows actions; Scott shows the internal reasons for actions.

It turns out that the ballad formula of dialogue is preserved in Scott as a structural basis (question-answer, exchange of remarks), but is overgrown with psychological and visual details that make it literary.

The Problem of Time and Space

Another curious aspect is how Scott works with spatial-temporal formulas. Ballads have a set of standard indications of time:

- "About the dead hour o' the night"
- "When the corn grew green and yellow"

And of place:

- "At the foot of yon mountain"
- "By yon burn side"
- "In yonder greenwood"

The word "yon" / "yonder" is very characteristic - it creates a pointing effect, as if the narrator is gesturing. These formulas are conventional; they do not create a specific landscape, but merely denote a typical location.

Scott develops these concise indications into detailed descriptions. The formula "in the greenwood" turns into a picture:

"The way was long, the wind was cold,\
The Minstrel was infirm and old;\
His withered cheek, and tresses gray,\
Seemed to have known a better day"



Here the idea of a path through the forest is preserved, but atmospheric details (cold wind), portrait characteristics of the traveler, and an elegiac mood are added. The conventional ballad landscape is individualized, acquires concreteness.

The same with time. The ballad indicates discrete moments: morning, evening, midnight. Scott shows the passage of time, stretches the moment:

"The sun, ere yet he sank behind\
Ben-Lomond's peak, a saddening sign,\
Had poured his parting rays divine\
On those wild hills"

Sunset becomes not just a time marker, but an independent artistic picture with the play of light, with emotional coloring ("saddening sign"), with a specific geographical reference (Ben Lomond). Time in Scott is not a conventional frame for action, as in the ballad, but an artistic factor that creates mood.

It seems to me that this shows the influence of Romantic landscape lyricism. Scott could not simply indicate "in the greenwood" - he needed to create a Romantic landscape with atmosphere, with emotional tone. The ballad formula gives him a starting point, but he develops it according to the laws of a completely different poetics.

Why Did Scott Need All This?

Let's now try to summarize. Why did Scott work so complexly with formulas - preserving, expanding, reinterpreting them? He could have either simply copied folk patterns (as some imitative poets did), or completely abandoned formulaicity and written in a purely literary vein.

It seems Scott was solving several tasks simultaneously:

First - creating an effect of authenticity. Preserving recognizable formulaic constructions allowed him to connect his text with folk tradition. The reader, familiar with ballads, recognized familiar structures and perceived Scott's poem as an organic continuation of folklore, not an artificial imitation.

Second - historical distance. The use of archaic formulas created a feeling of temporal remoteness, immersing the reader in the heroic past. For the Romantics, this was fundamentally important - to show that there is another time, another era with different values.

Third (and this is perhaps the main point) - creating a new genre. Scott did not want to simply reproduce ballads, nor did he want to write ordinary 18th-century literary poetry. He sought a third path - the fusion of folk and literary, oral and written. The transformation of formulaicity was the instrument of this synthesis. The ballad formula provided a structural basis and connection with tradition, while its literary elaboration allowed the creation of a text that met the requirements of Romantic aesthetics.

Interestingly, Scott himself was aware of this problem. In the preface to "Minstrelsy," he wrote about the difficulty of transmitting oral tradition in writing, about how written fixation inevitably loses something, but also gains something. His poetic practice is an attempt to find a balance between losses and gains.

Influence and Continuation

The model of working with folklore material that Scott developed proved to be very productive. It was adopted by Romantics in different countries. In Russia, for example,



Zhukovsky translated Scott's ballads and learned ballad technique from him. Pushkin called Scott the "Scottish wizard" and highly valued his ability to combine folk and authorial elements.

In Germany, Arnim and Brentano, creating their collection of folk songs "Des Knaben Wunderhorn" (1805-1808), acted similarly - they not only recorded folk texts but also gave them literary treatment. True, the German Romantics went further than Scott in terms of free adaptation, but the principle itself was close.

What amazes most is that Scott's experience remains relevant to this day. The problem of the relationship between folklore and authorial creativity, oral and written, traditional and individual, continues to concern writers. And the solutions that Scott found two hundred years ago can still serve as a guide.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: What Remains Beyond the Scope

Of course, we have not considered all aspects of the problem. Many unresolved questions remain. For example, how consciously did Scott transform formulas? Was it a deliberate artistic device or an intuitive feeling of the poet? It's difficult to say for sure.

Another question: how did Scott's contemporaries perceive this work with formulas? Did they recognize the ballad structures? Or was it for them just an interesting poetic style, without connection to folk tradition? Additional research on reception is needed.

And finally, I would like to expand the analysis to Scott's other poems - "Marmion," "The Lady of the Lake," "Rokeby." Perhaps in different works the strategies for working with formulas differ. This is a topic for further work.

But the main thing, it seems to us, is clear: Scott was not a simple collector and retransmitter of folklore. He was a poet who consciously created a new poetic language based on folk tradition. And the analysis of how he worked with ballad formulas helps to understand the mechanism of this creative process.

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