

Scottish Literary Review

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Volume 1 Number 2 • Autumn/Winter 2009
(formerly *Scottish Studies Review*)

ASSOCIATION FOR SCOTTISH LITERARY STUDIES

**The Poets at His Feet:
The Afterlife of ‘Sir Patrick Spens’**

The ballad of ‘Sir Patrick Spens’ is one of the most read and anthologised of the British popular ballads.¹ William Aytoun and Edmond Stoune chose ‘Spens’ to begin their *The Ballads of Scotland* (1858). Albert Friedman, in *The Viking Book of Folk Ballads of the English-Speaking World* (1956), writes that it ‘may well be the finest thing in Scottish balladry’.² Stephen Greenblatt, as General Editor of the eighth edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (2006), includes ‘Spens’ among only six popular ballads. In ‘A New Approach to Old Heroes’, Mary Briskin puts Skipper Spens as a character on the level of Beowulf and Robin Hood.³ John Powell calls it ‘the finest ballad in the English language, nay more, the greatest ballad in any language, actually alive in our tradition’.⁴ Harold Bloom declares it his favourite ballad.⁵

‘Sir Patrick Spens’ first appeared in print in 1765, published by Bishop Thomas Percy in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, based on ‘two MS copies transmitted from Scotland’.⁶ Two decades later, Johnson published a musical version in *The Scots Musical Museum* (1787-1803), followed by an expanded ballad version in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-3) by Sir Walter Scott. By the end of the nineteenth century, Francis James Child, in his seminal *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-98), had gathered and published eighteen versions of ‘Spens’.⁷ Most scholarship has been concerned with the original authorship of ‘Spens’ and whether it has basis in historic events. The most recent and thorough work on this subject has been by William Bowman Piper who shows that Percy crafted the Scottish ballad by editing words and verses, and adding his own elements. Percy worked from a few different sources, including previous revisions from Dalrymple and Warlaw.⁸ Piper supports and advances T.E. Henderson’s theory of a century earlier which proposes that the ballad was most likely based on a voyage in 1589. The safest and easiest stance, however, is best put by William Allingham:

There is no old [existing] MS. of the ballad. All the 'foundation' which really seems attainable is this, that in old times there was much intercourse between Scotland and Norway, and between the royal courts of the two countries, and that some shipwreck, not altogether like this, may probably have happened. In fine, let not our readers trouble themselves about the connection of this, or any other of these ballads, with 'authentic history,' and they will be gainers in comfort, and no losers otherwise.⁹

Though inquiry has been made as to the origins of the ballad, little has been conducted on its afterlife since Percy's publication and Child's collections. 'Afterlife study' reveals the ways in which a poem or story has inspired subsequent authors and poets, and provides a useful case study in how cultural perceptions, tastes, and interpretations evolve over time. In addition to the continual anthologising, teaching, and singing of the ballad itself, 'Spens' has been an inspiration and reference point for original works of poetry, music, prose, film, and fine art. This essay focuses on how both British and American poets have found inspiration in 'Spens', beginning with the poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Romantics, and continuing through works created into the twenty-first century. The primary purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the ballad's variety of influence across several literary periods and to show that poets have drawn on 'Spens' in generally three ways: for its moon imagery; as a symbol of the heroic mariner who suffers at the hands of foolish landmen; and as *the* example of the ballad form. In the essay's final section, I examine in further detail why poets have alluded primarily to these three aspects, as well as possible reasons why 'Sir Patrick Spens' has remained so popular, both for poets and for readers. Perhaps part of the explanation for its endurance is because the ballad elegantly and economically includes major elements of sea voyage narratives, a genre which has remained significant as one of the oldest in Western literature—in both poetry and prose—beginning perhaps with Homer's *Odyssey*.

THE MOON IMAGERY

In the ballad of 'Sir Patrick Spens', several visual images resonate, notably the skipper reading the letter on the beach, the women waiting on land, and the drowned lords lying underwater at the dead skipper's feet. Any of these images

could be inspirational yet they do not appear as often or as significantly in afterlife poems, the works that allude to 'Spens', as compared to the singular image of the new moon as an omen of a storm. In the first publication of the ballad a sailor tells the skipper:

Late late yestreen I saw the new moone
 Wi' the auld moone in hir arme;
 And I feir, I feir, my deir mastèr,
 That we will cum to harme.¹⁰

Henderson claims that the new moon foretelling a storm was once a common belief in Scotland.¹¹ The ballad of 'Sir Patrick Spens' probably did not invent this topos but it is listed in the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*: 'New moon with old moon in her arm a sign of storm', citing Child as the source.¹² Current meteorology does not support the belief that a moon such as this precedes heavy weather but a new moon does mean a higher tide, so if a storm arrives coincidentally there will be a larger surge at the shoreline and more aggressive wave energy near shoals or banks. Regardless of its meteorological veracity, in 'Spens' the vision of the new moon is not meant to represent any foolish supernatural belief. It proves true; the storm does come. In fact, in one early nineteenth-century version of 'Spens', recorded by Reverend Robert Scott, the skipper himself observes the lunar omen.¹³

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the first poet found to publish an allusion to 'Spens' in his own work, explores the image of the new moon. Coleridge read Percy's *Reliques*, and was, according to John Livingston Lowes, 'deeply interested in the English and Scottish popular ballads'.¹⁴ This influence is clear in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' with his choice of metre, word choice, and spelling, especially with his first version in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Coleridge also seems to have been interested in the moon as an omen, and since we know he read 'Spens' near the time of the writing of the 'Rime', it is reasonable that the ballad added more facets to his interest regarding the moon's influence on mariners. For example, Coleridge describes in the 'Rime' the impossible image of a star within the 'horned Moon' while all the mariner's shipmates are cursing him and losing their souls. Coleridge wrote later that he heard that it was the sailor's supernatural belief 'that something is about to happen when the star dogs the moon'.¹⁵

Coleridge's more definitive and overt use of 'Spens' is found in his

'Dejection: An Ode' (1802), published just three years later. Coleridge uses the moon stanza, altered from Percy's version, as an epigraph. In *Starting Lines to Scottish, Irish, and English Poetry* (2000), Fiona Stafford examines with care and insight Coleridge's use of 'Spens' in this poem.¹⁶ 'Dejection' is in part about a loss of passion, whether for love or creativity; the narrator describes a sublime evening with a storm on the way but he is unable to feel its beauty, only to see it. The poem begins by referring to the narrator of 'Spens' as 'the Bard', suggesting that if his meteorology were indeed accurate, the evening in which this poem is set would see a storm because of the visibility of this type of new moon:

Well! If the Bard was weather-wise, who made
The grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence,
This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence.¹⁷

The narrator continues later in the first stanza:

For lo! the New-moon winter-bright!
And overspread with phantom-light,
(With swimming phantom-light o'erspread
But rimm'd and circled by a silver thread)
I see the old Moon in her lap, foretelling

The coming on of rain and squally blast.¹⁸

Two decades later, Shelley also includes a new moon foretelling a storm in 'The Triumph of Life':

Like the young moon—

When on the sunlit limits of the night
Her white shell trembles amid crimson air,
And whilst the sleeping tempest gathers night—

Doth, as the herald of its coming, bear
The ghost of its dead mother, whose dim form
Bends in dark aether from her infant's chair.¹⁹

Perhaps this image is from a reading of 'Spens' or, as Donald Reiman suggests, Shelley might have derived this indirectly from Coleridge whose influence is evident in much of Shelley's verse.²⁰

The first directly inspired poem that this study found written outside of Britain also uses the new moon as an omen. In 1839 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published 'The Wreck of the Hesperus', originally entitled 'The Ballad of the Schooner Hesperus'. Longfellow draws heavily on the moon imagery of 'Spens', using exact phrases and patterns from the Percy version. Longfellow even includes a sailor who warns the captain of a winter storm that will kill all hands:

Then up and spake an old Sailòr,
Had sailed to the Spanish Main,
'I pray thee, put into yonder port,
For I fear a hurricane.

'Last night, the moon had a golden ring,
And to-night no moon we see!
The skipper, he blew a whiff from his pipe,
And a scornful laugh laughed he.²¹

On December 30 of the same year, Longfellow wrote in his diary about how easily the ballad came to him over the course of one evening: 'It hardly cost me an effort. It did not come to my mind by lines but by stanzas'.²² Longfellow does not mention how he borrowed a few lines from 'Spens' in the process. Martin Ostrofsky recognises the parallels to 'Spens' in 'Hesperus' but does not point out the direct copying that is nearly irrefutable (though perhaps unconscious), even as he writes of Longfellow's devotion to the British ballads, Percy, and Scott.²³ In August of the year of writing 'Hesperus', Longfellow traveled to New York to stay with a friend. He wrote: 'During the heat of the day, I sit at home in the cool, large rooms'.²⁴ Samuel Longfellow explains that during this visit his brother 'took carelessly from the shelf a volume of Scott's *Border Minstrelsy*' which included a version of 'Spens'.²⁵ By the beginning of January, Longfellow is writing to a colleague in Rome: 'I have broken ground in a new field; namely, ballads; beginning with the "Wreck of the Schooner Hesperus"'.²⁶ However, 'Hesperus' does not exactly mirror 'Spens'. Though Longfellow's captain does not heed the learned advice of a crewmember,

he is, as Calhoun puts it, more 'the original male-who-never-asks-for-directions'.²⁷ In 'Hesperus' it is not a callous ignorant king who spurs the disaster but the captain himself who causes the death of the ship's crew, including his own daughter, by going out to sea in these foretold conditions.

After 'Hesperus' it seems that no poets found direct inspiration from the moon imagery in 'Spens' for over 150 years, on either side of the Atlantic Ocean, until 1995, when Tom Clark published 'Excalibur', which leans on the moon imagery of both 'Spens' and Coleridge's 'Dejection'. Clark, an American poet, editor, and biographer who studied in England and lived in Europe for over a decade, begins 'Excalibur': 'While the new moon winter bright swimming/Up overhead holds the old moon cradled'.²⁸ He then paints the colours and movement of an evening sky, a scene similar to that in 'Dejection', by using some of the same words and phrases of 'Spens', yet twisting the image of the old moon by turning the waning sliver into a baby's 'coy smile' with 'darkening hints of menace in its eyes'. To begin the poem's second half, Clark repeats Coleridge's lines and extends them into his:

Well!

If the bard was weatherwise who made
That grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spens
A meteorological talisman,
We'll wake up to a storm before morning.²⁹

Clark, in the same way as Coleridge, Shelley, and Longfellow, uses the description of the moon in 'Spens' as a memorable image but also as a way to explore omen and supernatural belief. In 'Excalibur' Clark uses this new moon before a storm as a parallel to a moment of suspense: the moon is like the instant before King Arthur pulls the sword out of the stone. Unlike the original 'Spens', Clark's 'Excalibur' ends with the realisation that the storm is never as significant as anticipated, and so Clark's new moon seems to reflect a more modern, cynical sensibility.

Why has the portentous moon been the most common visual image for poets interested in 'Spens'? By contrast, in another artistic form, a small collection of painters have been more interested in the image of the women waiting on land, exemplified in the work of Elizabeth Siddal with her piece 'The Ladies' Lament after the Ballad of "Sir Patrick Spens"' (1856), and the Scottish artist James Archer with his 'The Legend of Sir Patrick Spens' (c.1870).³⁰ Both artists

illustrate scenes of melancholy women ashore, gazing seaward. Painters have perhaps depicted this moment in the ballad because it is one of the images that lingers at the end of the tale—it is the only image directly repeated in the text—or perhaps simply because it would be one of the easier to execute artistically.

Several afterlife poets have recycled the image of the lords at Spens's feet, which will be examined in the following section, but the moon remains the most inspirational single visual image. Perhaps the moon is so memorable and provides such a metaphoric starting point because it is vivid and natural, free of human influence and open to interpretation, and associated with femininity and mysticism through mythical stories and folklore. Yet in 'Spens' the moon is more significantly a useful, visual symbol of imminent tragedy. It is a death foretold, a harbinger of no less than a demonstration of nature's sublime power, inevitable and indifferent.

THE MARINER HERO

Though the ominous moon is the most common visual image, more poets have worked with Skipper Spens as a character, highlighting the skilled sailor, a man who suffers at the hand of an ignorant, privileged landsman. 'Spens' does not originate this situation or individual, of course. For example, in the first scene of *The Tempest* (1611), the lower-class mariners are more honourable. While the ship tries to survive a storm, the boatswain and crew hustle about the deck, trying to manage the disaster, while the wealthy king and his nobles impede his progress. The boatswain shouts over the blasts of wind and seas: 'What cares these roarers for the name of the king?'.³¹ The sailors are at sea in the first place, in danger, because they are transporting these noblemen on *their* royal schedule. There are other parallels between 'Spens' and *The Tempest*.³² Prospero himself has some of the same feelings as what Piper describes in the original author of 'Spens': 'a deep bitterness aimed at kingly impunity'.³³ Prospero, a castaway at sea, suffers because of his fellow noblemen, as does Sir Patrick Spens. In addition, Prospero's skills, his 'art', are first shown with his connection to the ocean (controlling the weather through Ariel), just as Spens is first introduced for his skills at sea.

In the ballad of 'Sir Patrick Spens', an old knight, possibly for spite or revenge, recommends Spens to the king, who, while sitting and drinking wine,

orders a ship to venture onto the North Sea at a hazardous time of year. The king has no knowledge of the danger, not enough concern, or is, as William Matchett argues, acting 'deceitfully' against Spens.³⁴ The skipper promptly casts off the docklines and sails out, we assume, for reasons of honour and duty, or for fear of what would happen if he disobeys the command. Bloom writes: 'I love "Sir Patrick Spence" because it has a tragic economy almost unique in its stoic heroism. There is a sense throughout the poem that heroism is necessarily self-destructive, and yet remains admirable... I always think of the lonely heroism of Emily Dickinson and of Emily Brönte, both of whom learned the cost of their confirmation as imaginative creators'.³⁵ Despite Spens's skill and experience, and even the knowledge of his vessel's fate, the storm quickly dispatches him, his ship, and his crew. The ballad ends with the nobles drowned at his feet, emphasising that even in death this mariner is the more honourable, despite any lesser privilege or blood:

Have owre, have owr to Aberdour,
It's fiftie fadom deip:
And thair lies guid Sir Patrick Spence,
Wi' the Scots lords at his feit.³⁶

Poets of the Victorian period had little doubt as to Spens's heroism, and they were the first poets to draw on this aspect of the ballad. In 'The Old Seaport (Culross, Perthshire)' (1852), David Macbeth Moir, a Scottish poet, essayist, and doctor, places Spens on the level of Sir Aubrey Barton, the Scottish High Admiral and privateer:

It spake of swart grey-headed men,
Now dust within their graves,
Who sailed with Barton or with Spens,
To breast the trampling waves;
And how, in shallows picturesque,
Unawed they drifted forth,
Directed by the one bright star,
That points the stormy North.³⁷

Aubrey Thomas De Vere, an Irish poet greatly influenced by Coleridge, also depicts Spens as a hero in his poem 'Robert Bruce's Heart; or, The Last of

the Crusaders' (1884). De Vere refers to Spens as 'that sea-warrior grey'.³⁸ His poem recounts the skipper's death on the return from delivering a bride to Norway, similar to a few versions of the ballad. The spirit of Spens then sails with Sir James Douglas on his way to deliver Bruce's heart to the Holy Land, thus placing Spens's death on par with Douglas's journey and demise; both occur because of loyalty to a Scottish king. In the case of Douglas, however, his devotion is to a king whom he respects and wishes to honour.

We know that Robert Louis Stevenson appreciated 'Sir Patrick Spens' because he mentioned the ballad in *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes* (1878) where he laments all the mariners who died in the North Sea, that 'dear road for Sir Patrick Spens and his Scots Lords'.³⁹ He points out Aberdour as Spens's departure and quotes a stanza about the women waiting for the captain and the others to return.⁴⁰ He then writes: 'Since Sir Patrick sailed from Aberdour, what a multitude have gone down in the North Sea!'⁴¹ In 1887 Stevenson published 'To N.V. de G.S.: The Unfathomable Sea'. Did he have Spens in mind? The opening lines suggest a possibility:

THE unfathomable sea, and time, and tears,
The deeds of heroes and the crimes of kings
Dispart us;⁴²

This is a poem about a love that could have been—one separated by a metaphorical sea. Surprisingly, in 'The English Admirals' (1881), an essay about sea captains, heroism, and their connection to narratives, Stevenson does not mention 'Spens' at all.

Herman Melville, like Stevenson, also used lines from 'Spens' in his prose, and predominantly worked with the theme of the doomed mariner hero. Melville drew on the ballad overtly in his verse. Melville purchased a copy of Child's *English and Scottish Ballads* in 1859,⁴³ but he likely read the ballad earlier or heard it sung during his years at sea, because he references a musical version of 'Spens' in his novel *White Jacket* (1850). Agnes Cannon writes: 'The evidence would seem to indicate that Melville learned most of the songs referred to in his novels during his years at sea either from hearing them sung by his fellow sailors or from the little books known as songsters which were so popular during the nineteenth century.'⁴⁴ In *White Jacket* a sailor named Jack Chase sings many 'salt sea ballads and ditties',⁴⁵ including 'Spens'. Melville inserts two lines

of the ballad into the text of the novel: 'Sir Patrick Spens was the best sailor/That ever sailed the sea.'⁴⁶

Melville draws on 'Spens' more thoroughly in 'The Haglets' (1888), a narrative poem about a fleet of captured Spanish ships that runs aground in rough weather on their return home with a prize. Melville's protagonist is the Admiral of the Royal Navy, in charge of leading the fleet. (In a few versions of 'Spens' the skipper's name is replaced with the actual Scottish admiral Sir Andrew Wood.)⁴⁷ Melville begins 'The Haglets' by focusing on his admiral below the water, long after the shipwreck: 'decayed and coral-mossed,/ a form recumbent, swords at feet'.⁴⁸ Melville repeats 'swords are at feet' in the next stanza. Later in the poem he describes the moon, on the wane, which foretells the death of all hands.⁴⁹ After narrating the details of the tragedy, Melville ends the poem by returning to the image of the Admiral dead on the ocean floor. He writes in the penultimate stanza:

Imbedded deep with shells
And drifted treasure deep,
Forever he sinks deeper in
Unfathomable sleep—
His cannon round him thrown,
His sailors at his feet,
The wizard sea enchanting them
Where never haglets beat.⁵⁰

Haglets appear throughout the poem, as birds indifferent to the death of these men and also as a pun for small hags, i.e. the three Fates themselves.⁵¹ Robert Madison argues convincingly that haglets are shearwaters (*Puffinus sp.*) a pelagic long-winged seabird.⁵² One possible interpretation, though unlikely, is that Melville wanted to connect these birds with storm petrels (*Thalassidroma pelagica*), smaller grey birds that are common offshore in rough weather.⁵³ In parts of Scotland in the nineteenth century, this bird was known as a 'spencie' or 'spensie'.⁵⁴ In supernatural belief and folklore, seabirds often represent the souls of dead sailors, so it is possible that this nickname for the storm petrel has a connection to 'Sir Patrick Spens', though no evidence has yet been found to support this.

The influence of 'Spens' on 'The Haglets' is more directly affirmed when Melville's poem 'The Admiral of the White' is examined.⁵⁵ This poem, in many ways the predecessor to 'The Haglets' in depicting the same incident, is a

shorter piece and much closer to the traditional ballad form, composed mostly in *abcb* quatrains. Henning Cohen claims: 'What Melville seems to be attempting [in 'The Admiral of the White'] was a sea ballad in the tradition of "Sir Patrick Spens"'.⁵⁶ William Stein asserts that the ending was a 'muffled allusion to the ballad of "Sir Patrick Spens"'.⁵⁷ Melville writes:

Like a baron bold from his mountain-hold,
At night looks the Admiral forth:
Heavy the clouds, and thick and dun,
They slant from the sullen North.⁵⁸

He ends 'The Admiral of the White':

Pale, pale, but proud, 'neath the billows loud,
The Admiral sleeps to night;
Pale, pale, but proud, in his sea-weed shroud,—
The Admiral of the White:
And by their gun the dutiful ones,
Who had fought, bravely fought the good fight.⁵⁹

'The Haglets' and 'The Admiral of the White', like 'Sir Patrick Spens', are narrative ballads that depict a disaster at sea. Melville does not state that the admiral and sailors die because of the direct command of a foolish ruler ashore, but the men are bringing a military prize home when they are caught in a storm. They wreck on the rocks because the store of seized metal arms flipped their compass. These mariners are involved in a war that was started and encouraged by superiors ashore. Just as in 'Spens', the admiral is under orders, and, like the sailors in *The Tempest* or even those in William Falconer's 'The Shipwreck' (1762), the mariners would never have gone if it were not for the demands of the Crown.⁶⁰

Melville was further inspired by 'Spens' when he wrote *Billy Budd, Sailor* (pub. 1924). In this novella one of the sailors writes 'Billy in the Darbies', a broadside ballad that serves as an epilogue to the story. The sailor recounts how when out at sea the officers executed his shipmate Billy. The moon shines in through the porthole as the skilled, handsome Billy imagines himself 'fathoms down, fathoms down'. The final words of the ballad are: 'I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist'.⁶¹ Melville's dedication to *Billy Budd* is to

Jack Chase, an actual friend of Melville's, and the same fictional sailor in *White Jacket* who sings 'Spens'. Scholars believe that Melville began the writing of *Billy Budd* after his creation of 'Billy in the Darbies',⁶² apparently written in the same year as 'The Haglets'. Still another possible connection to 'Spens' in *Billy Budd* is in regards to Melville's digression of historical background about mutinies in the Royal Navy. He writes of the Nore Mutiny: "The event converted into irony for a time those spirited strains of Dibdin—as a song-writer no mean auxiliary to the English government at that European conjuncture—strains celebrating, among other things, the patriotic devotion of the British tar: "And as for my life, 'tis the King's!"⁶³ Here again Melville puts forth the character of the skilled sailor who suffers because of his devotion to royalty.

About sixty years after Melville wrote *Billy Budd*, Louise MacNeice also found inspiration in the mariner hero in 'Spens'. MacNeice alludes to the ballad in both 'The North Sea' (1948) and Canto XVIII of 'Autumn Sequel' (1953). He draws on the moon imagery in each of these poems but the larger emphasis is on the character, the loss of the shipmaster. In 'Autumn Sequel' MacNeice parallels the death of Spens with that of King Arthur in his barge. In 'The North Sea' he mentions Spens four times by name, including in the opening lines and in the concluding stanza. Though not in ballad form, the poem plays on the sound and rhythm of 'Spens'. For example, in Sir Walter Scott's version of the ballad, the king's letter says:

'To Noroway, to Noroway,
To Noroway o'er the facm;⁶⁴

MacNeice writes:

Doorway? No more so than your office hours.
Doorway? No more so than your hours in bed
Alone or with a companion.⁶⁵

'The North Sea' is set on a steamer crossing that body of water. The narrator questions notions of time, musing about Spens and the Vikings and the care-less immortality of this sea. MacNeice writes of Spens as 'a man of iron/And master of his craft' who, like everyone else, must 'conform to the sea's routine'.⁶⁶ 'The North Sea' begins with a clear allusion to 'Spens': 'But not for a king's daughter?'⁶⁷

Two contemporary, lesser known poets have also been inspired by the mariner hero in 'Spens': William Fuller and William Hershaw. Like Clark, who writes of the anticlimactic new moon in 'Excalibur', they both add a more pessimistic contemporary perspective. Fuller, an American poet based in Chicago, published 'What Does It Matter Now' in 2000, emphasising the tragedy of Spens's commitment to duty. The poem begins with the line 'Standing around on principle', and suggests that though Spens was 'given only to inner sense' and 'a few facts have died or were revoked', his life ends futilely—as does the poem:

tossed on the sand
he plays with his bones
the lessor finds him there⁶⁸

By entitling the poem 'What Does It Matter Now' and describing the terrestrial scenery that Spens perhaps imagines as his death becomes inevitable, Fuller asks the reader to wonder if all of Spens's high morality was really worth it—or in the end if any endeavour is. The lessor, the property owner, is still alive and in power. Yet Fuller ends with a thoughtful homophone here, as this may be read as 'lesser,' just as the lords in 'Spens' are shown as lesser people, dead at the skipper's feet.

The most recent afterlife poem found is in the form of a sonnet entitled 'Sir Patrick Spens' (2006), written by Hershaw, a poet who retells the ballad from Spens's point of view, instead of through an omniscient narrator. Dunfermline and Aberdour, both mentioned in Percy's version of the ballad, are in life, from where Hershaw comes. Hershaw sets his sonnet in the middle of the storm with the ship about to founder. Spens is frustrated, but resigned to his fate. He does not blame his death and the loss of his ship on the 'gurlly sea' or the moon. He blames it on the spiteful landsman who had recommended him to the king. Hershaw's Spens not only does not respect the king and his court, he hates the nobles aboard:

some fool at Court I'd crossed, officious, smug
condemned the pricks below in cork heeled shoon
and sunk me with a word in the King's lug.⁶⁹

Hershaw ends with Spens declaring: 'A bitter drink then—saltier than French wine/we'll drink the King's good health among the brine'.⁷⁰ Hershaw uses the

original ballad in his own poem to reiterate a theme of the original work: 'Sir Patrick Spens' is the story of a competent mariner who suffers from the power of foolish and callous men ashore.

That the mariner hero is the most common theme for poets inspired by 'Spens' may be ascribed to the power that the figure of the skipper holds, not just to those ashore, but to sailors at sea—why perhaps Melville, as a former sailor himself, connected with this song in particular. On a man-of-war, for example, the vessel depicted in *White-Jacket* and *Billy Budd*, the officers enforced a strict stratification and vast discrepancy in rank, often with a portion of sailors under impressment, forced to work at sea. The common seaman would have felt so distant from his vessel's captain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the master might as well have been a king, with similar powers. Spens would be a likeable hero to these men: a doomed, oppressed, yet skilled mariner. The sensibility of the working-class sailor may have appealed to these afterlife poets, or perhaps they were drawn to the ballad's apparent patriotism. Matchett argues that 'Spens' is a Scottish, nationalist ballad—protesting a king that would drink foreign wine (not Scottish whisky, to which Hershaw alludes) and nobles who would wear foreign clothes.⁷¹

A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE BALLAD FORM

Piper believes that 'Sir Patrick Spens' was originally a written work that led to a second 'popular life' as a song⁷² but John Finlay and other scholars believe, despite the later addition of more contemporary details, that 'Spens' is 'perhaps the most ancient [ballad] of which we are in possession'⁷³, beginning in the oral tradition. Regardless of this debate, poets have used 'Spens' as a prime example of the ballad form, even as its representative. Certainly Coleridge, Melville, and Longfellow found inspiration in the form of the traditional sung ballad, but two Modernist poets, Walter Alexander Raleigh and Edwin Muir, drew particularly on the form of 'Spens' to comment on poetry itself.

Raleigh's poem 'A Literature Lesson. Sir Patrick Spens in the Eighteenth Century Manner' (1900) makes fun of the verbosity of some eighteenth-century poets, thus backwardly praising the concise storytelling of the popular ballad. Raleigh uses 'Spens' as *the* example which need not be tampered with. He humourously amplifies the four-line opening of 'Spens' into twenty-two

lines. His king expounds on his own leadership and evokes the Greek and Roman Gods for guidance. The verse in 'Spens' is simply:

The king sits in Dumferling toune,
Drinking the blude-reid wine:
O quhar will I get guid sailòr,
To sail this schip of mine?⁷⁴

Raleigh expands, in part, to this:

In a famed town of Caledonia's land,
A prosperous port contiguous to the strand,
A monarch feasted in right royal state;
But care still dogs the pleasures of the Great,
And well his faithful servants could surmise
From his distracted looks and broken sighs
That though the purple bowl was circling free,
His mind was prey to black perplexity.⁷⁵

Raleigh recognises that the strength of the ballad form, its emotional force, is in its direct unadorned narrative. Through parody he shows how the more loquacious verse of the eighteenth century loses this quality. Raleigh's poem ends:

Verse II

He spake: and straightway, rising from his side
An ancient senator, of reverend pride,
Unsealed his lips, and uttered from his soul
Great store of flatulence and rigmarole;
—All fled the Court, which shades of night invest,
And Pope and Gay and Prior told the rest.⁷⁶

In his poem, 'Complaint of the Dying Peasantry', Edwin Muir also uses 'Spens' to assert the worth of the ballad form. Though as nostalgic as Raleigh, Muir adopts a more serious tone, focusing on the presumed oral roots of 'Spens'. Muir, who grew up in Orkney, listened to songs and ballads passed down from older relatives.⁷⁷ In his 'Complaint', Muir despairs the loss of the 'old songs',

valorizing oral culture over a print one, seeing 'Sir Patrick Spens shut in a book' and contemporary writers as 'newspapermen'. Muir writes:

Sir Patrick Spens put out to sea
In all the country cottages
With music and ceremony
For five centuries.

Till Scott and Hogg, the robbers, came
And nailed the singing tragedies down
In dumb letters under a name
And led the bothy to the town.⁷⁸

Here, Muir equates Skipper Spens with the independence and honour of the travelling bard, a man of the people, the 'peasantry', who was oppressed and 'put out to sea' to die, thus paralleling the plot of the original ballad.

'Sir Patrick Spens' is a useful example to which Raleigh and Muir can allude as they lament the loss of the ballad form and the oral tradition. 'Spens' was, and is, a well-known, identifiable ballad, and one that demonstrates how a poet can tell a dramatic story with the sparsest of verse. 'Spens' also exemplifies the most common form for the popular ballads: an *abcb* rhymed quatrain, with four beats in the *a* and *c* lines and three beats in the *b* lines; the shifting of speakers without introduction (e.g. from Spens to the sailor in the sixth stanza); the use of adjectival phrases that are formulaic yet symbolically significant (e.g. 'blude-red wine'); and the repeating of significant lines (e.g. 'lang, lang may the ladies...') and images (e.g. men depicted at another's feet). William Ryan writes that 'Spens' has a 'superiority over other ballads which have formulaic similarities'.⁷⁹ One of the reasons why 'Spens' is continually anthologised is because it is a clean representative of this ballad form; M.H. Abrams, in his *Glossary of Literary Terms*, uses 'Spens' as the example under his definition of 'ballad'.⁸⁰

The appeal of 'Spens' for Muir may not only have been in its roots in the oral tradition and form but indeed, as for Raleigh, in the brevity of language. In an essay on Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, Muir praised the 'simple and yet surprising humanity that brings about the finest effects of style in the poem'.⁸¹ He writes of how a dramatic situation can be put forth with the fewest words possible: 'Words which seem just adequate and no more, and in that appear to achieve a more secure finality: all that might have been said being

made superfluous by the few simple words that are said'.⁸² Muir's aesthetic appreciation of Henryson's work transferred to his respect for the popular ballads, and specifically for 'Spens'.

THE ENDURANCE OF 'SPENS'

Poets have used the ballad of 'Sir Patrick Spens' in their own verse in three primary fashions: for the image of the new moon, for the character of the mariner hero, and for its representation of the ballad form. Although the reasons for these particular uses are not entirely clear, there are a few chronological trends. Beginning with Coleridge, the poets of the Romantic period were concerned with the moon in 'Spens', its sublimity and its portent, aligning with some of the literary themes of the era. The use of the moon continues to appear subtly in a few of the Victorian poets, such as Melville and Longfellow, but those inspired by the ballad during this period were much more interested in the character of Skipper Spens as a hero. Though two Modernist poets drew on 'Spens' in order to extol the ballad form, and several contemporary poets have revived the image of the new moon, the majority of the afterlife poems, continuing through to the sonnet of 2006, have continued to draw on the ballad's heroic aspect.

The question remains as to why so many poets have alluded to 'Spens' in the first place? Each poet's motivations for using the ballad are surely complex and individual, as are the reasons that the ballad has continued to be retold and anthologised, but Coleridge's early fascination with the ballad certainly affected its longevity, and it should not be overlooked that because 'Spens' is brief, easy to understand, and dramatic, the poem has been a regular one taught to schoolchildren in various countries for at least 150 years. The ballad has solidified its popularity, or at least its place in the anthologies and in our cultures, and then, in turn, into the consciousness of poets. Yet there remain certain elements in 'Spens' that seem to have a lasting appeal to readers and listeners, even beyond the three areas described above, which have provided an enduring attraction for poets.

Perhaps 'Spens' has inspired so many artists simply because it is a sea narrative. Stories of adventure, discovery, and personal transformation on the ocean have always been popular, from the biblical stories of Noah and Jonah to Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, and Discoveries of the English Nation*

(1589) to *A New Voyage Round the World* (1725)—in which Defoe is already complaining about how many poorly-wrought books about sea voyages have been published. Writers continue to return to these sorts of stories, such as *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (1836), *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Typhoon* (1902), and contemporary bestsellers like *The Life of Pi* (2001). In so few words, the ballad of ‘Sir Patrick Spens’ deftly includes the currents that have kept this genre alive and well, delivering some of the major elements of canonical literature of the sea: a disaster, a reminder of the sea’s omnipotence, and the presence of women waiting ashore.

‘Spens’ is, first and foremost, a disaster story—a plot that has inspired and attracted audiences for centuries. Shakespeare’s storm at the start of *The Tempest* demands the audience’s attention (as does the title). By the eighteenth century, when collectors began to write down the ballads, there was already a long tradition of sea narratives. British readers had been voraciously seeking the journals and accounts from sailors and adventurers who had been exploring the world by way of ships. Philip Edwards explains that in eighteenth-century England ‘the reading public could not get enough in the way of accounts of all the maritime activity involved in extending Britain’s knowledge of the globe and her control of territories old and new. (They literally could not get enough, so fiction writers supplied them with more).’⁸³ When Percy formally brought ‘Spens’ to print, the soil was exceptionally fertile for a tale about a disaster at sea. Interest in the story of a shipwreck did not diminish in the nineteenth century—Longfellow’s ‘Hesperus’, a gruesome wreck, is one of his most famous poems. And today, as exemplified with the popularity of narratives such as Sebastian Junger’s *The Perfect Storm* (1997), readers remain lured to the ocean disaster, as if by the Ancient Mariner’s ‘glittering eye’.

Most sea narratives, even if they do not involve a shipwreck or some sort of tragedy, emphasise the sea’s power and indifference. ‘Spens’ ends with the ocean’s immortality, a theme throughout ‘The Old Seaport’, ‘The Haglets’, ‘The North Sea’, and ‘What Does It Matter Now’, each of which shows the ocean as everlasting and dominant. ‘Spens’ reminds us to be humble to a more powerful watery world. Like so many other works set at sea, the ballad draws on the sailor’s supernatural belief: how the helpless mariner copes with an ocean that he cannot fully understand but must battle anyway. ‘Spens’ shows how the sailor has developed strategies to survive, here interpreting this lunar phenomenon. The ballad ends with the sea washing over the hero, an ecological and deterministic message: the ocean lived before us and will live long after us,

whether this is read as the hand of providence or as a message of ‘green’ environmentalism. The latter appeals to a more contemporary audience coming to terms with humankind’s ability to exert a dramatic influence on the natural world while also living with apocalyptic warnings of devastation due to extreme ocean-driven weather events and rising sea level.

Though it is a rare work set at sea which incorporates a female protagonist, few maritime narratives exist without the influence of women characters ashore. ‘Spens’ emphasizes these women characters, too. As mentioned previously, the description of the women waiting on land is the only image repeated twice. The supporting characters of women ashore—waiting stoically and living with the death of husbands, sons, and brothers—appear throughout maritime literature, in works such as *The Odyssey* (Penelope) and Rudyard Kipling’s ‘The Sea-Wife’ (1893). Though MacNeice and Moir touch on the theme of women, the afterlife poets have not worked with these characters extensively when incorporating ‘Spens’ into their work, and there is, so far, no evidence of a female poet alluding to ‘Spens’ in her verse.

All of these major themes in literature of the sea—the disaster, the humility before an immortal ocean, the minor yet critical attention to the women ashore—all of this is vivid in the simple words of the ballad of ‘Sir Patrick Spens’ but also powerful in its demand for an emotional response. If ‘Spens’ did not directly inspire later ocean narratives—either in poetry or prose—it is surely an early source to this vast flow, and provides clues to demonstrate the elements that remain so powerful and enduring. Further research is needed to continue to collect the afterlife appearances of ‘Sir Patrick Spens’, in all genres and media, in order to provide a larger diagram of how this story has grown and evolved.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, the ballad of ‘Sir Patrick Spens’, either in song or in written verse, has been popular for nearly 250 years, and perhaps over 700 years by the earliest estimates of its creation. Sir Patrick Spens is still down beneath the sea, inspiring generations of poets—lying dutifully at his feet.

The Maritime Studies Program of Williams College and Mystic Seaport

Notes

- ¹ Though I refer to Thomas Percy's version of the ballad most often, which uses the spelling 'Spence', I will use the spelling of the name as 'Spens', as this has been used more often since then, (e.g. by Child and Scott), and is the more Scottish spelling of the name.
- ² *The Viking Book of Folk Ballads of the English-speaking World*, ed. by Albert B. Friedman (New York: Viking, 1966), p. 297.
- ³ Mary E. Briskin, 'A New Approach to Old Heroes', *The English Journal*, 53 (May 1964), p. 359.
- ⁴ John Powell, 'In the Lowlands Low', *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 1 (March 1937), 1-12 (p. 6).
- ⁵ Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000), p. 99.
- ⁶ Bishop Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, ed. by Nick Groom, a reprint facsimile from the first 1765 edition (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996), p. 71.
- ⁷ 'Spens' is 'No. 58' in Child's collection.
- ⁸ William Bowman Piper, 'The Composition of "Sir Patrick Spence"', *Philological Quarterly*, 81, (Fall 2002), 469-491 (pp. 477-8).
- ⁹ William Allingham, *The Ballad Book* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), p. 377.
- ¹⁰ Percy, p. 73.
- ¹¹ Sir Walter Scott, *Sir Walter Scott's Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, ed. by T.E. Henderson, 2 vols (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1902), I, 231.
- ¹² Entry D1812.5.1.5.1 cites 'Child II 20ff,' which references 'Child, Francis James. *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. 5 vols in 10. Boston, 1882-98'. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, rev. edn, 6 vols (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956), II, 328.
- ¹³ Rev. Robert Scott, *The Glenbuchat Ballads*, ed. by David Buchan and James Moreira (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), p. 156.

- ¹⁴ John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (London: Constable, 1951), p. 330.
- ¹⁵ *Coleridge's Ancient Mariner: An Experimental Edition of Texts and Revisions 1798-1828*, ed. by Martin Wallen (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1993), p. 34.
- ¹⁶ Fiona Stafford, *Starting Lines in Scottish, Irish, and English Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 91-141.
- ¹⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poetical Works I, Poems (Reading Text)* ed. by J.C.C. Mays, 6 vols within 16 vols of Bollingen Series No. 75 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), I, pt. 2, 697.
- ¹⁸ Coleridge, p. 698.
- ¹⁹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 505, ll. 79-85.
- ²⁰ Donald H. Reiman, *Shelley's "The Triumph of Life": A Critical Study* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press: 1965), p. 29.
- ²¹ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, ed. by Horace E. Scudder (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893), p. 13.
- ²² Samuel Longfellow, *The Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, with extracts from his journals and correspondence*, 3 vols (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), I, 350.
- ²³ Martin B. Ostrofsky, 'Longfellow's "The Wreck of the Hesperus": A Folkloric Analysis', *Kentucky Folklore Record*, 30 (1984), 109-23.
- ²⁴ Samuel Longfellow, p. 341. This is a letter to Henry's father on 2 August 1839.
- ²⁵ Longfellow, p. 344. This is a note to the diary entry of 19 September 1839.
- ²⁶ Longfellow, p. 353. This is a letter to George W. Greene on 2 January 1840.
- ²⁷ Charles C. Calhoun, *Longfellow: A Rediscovered Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), p. 139.
- ²⁸ Tom Clark, *Like Real People* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1995), p. 153.
- ²⁹ Clark, p. 153.
- ³⁰ Siddal: Tate Gallery, London, N03471, watercolour on paper. Archer: Mackelvie Trust Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, MU/6, oil on canvas.
- ³¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *The Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 1169.
- ³² Piper, p. 11.
- ³³ William H. Matchett, 'The Integrity of "Sir Patrick Spence"', *Modern Philology*, 68 (1970), 25-31 (p. 28).
- ³⁴ Bloom, p. 101.
- ³⁵ Percy, p. 73. ['owr': sic]
- ³⁶ David Macbeth Moir, *The Poetical Works of David Macbeth Moir*, ed. by Thomas Aird, 2 vols, (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1852), II, p. 211.

- ³⁷ Aubrey De Vere, *The Medieval Records and Sonnets* (London: Macmillan, 1893), p. 116.
- ³⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes* (New York: MacMillan, 1896), pp. 148, 151.
- ³⁹ Stevenson cites a version similar to Percy's, with only the spelling altered.
- ⁴⁰ Stevenson, *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes*, p. 151.
- ⁴¹ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Ballads and Other Poems of Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), p. 111.
- ⁴² Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville's Readings*, rev. ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 108, 166.
- ⁴³ Agnes Dicken Cannon, 'Melville's Use of Sea Ballads and Songs', *Western Folklore*, 23 (January 1964), 1-16 (p.1).
- ⁴⁴ Herman Melville, *White-Jacket or The World in a Man-of-War* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 311.
- ⁴⁵ Melville, p. 311.
- ⁴⁶ Child 58-Ab (from Herd's *Scots Songs*, 1769) and 58-D (from Motherwell's MS).
- ⁴⁷ Herman Melville, *Selected Poems of Herman Melville*, ed. by Hennig Cohen (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 107.
- ⁴⁸ In 'The Haglets':
 The wan moon shows in plight forlorn;
 Then, pinched in visage, fades and fades
 Like to the faces drowned at morn. (109)
- In 'The Admiral of the White': 'The moon in her wane swims forlorn;/Fades, fades mid the clouds her pinched pale face.' Herman Melville, *The Collected Poems of Herman Melville*, ed. by Howard P. Vincent (Chicago: Packard, 1947), p. 405.
- ⁴⁹ Melville, *Selected Poems of Herman Melville*, p. 113.
- ⁵⁰ Edgar A. Dryden, 'John Marr and Other Sailors: Poetry as Private Utterance', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 52 (December 1997), 326-349 (p. 341).
- ⁵¹ Robert D. Madison, 'Melville's Haglets', *Leviathan*, 5 (October 2003), 79-83.
- ⁵² William Grant and David D. Murison, *The Scottish National Dictionary*, 10 vols (Edinburgh: The Scottish National Dictionary Association, 1971), VIII, 470. This explains that 'spencie', 'spensie', etc., is a name for the Storm Petrel (*Thalassidroma pelagica*), citing this from an article in an 1808 issue of *Scots Magazine*, from the 1885 *British Birds*, et al. Grant and Murison write that the origin is 'obscure'.
- ⁵³ Melville, *Selected Poems of Herman Melville*, p. 214.
- ⁵⁴ William Bysshe Stein, 'The Old Man and the Triple Goddess: Melville's "The Haglets"', *English Literary History*, 25 (March 1958), 43-59 (p. 45).
- ⁵⁵ Melville, p. 405.

- ⁵⁶ Melville, p. 406.
- ⁵⁷ Dryden (p. 334) and other scholars see threads of *The Tempest* in 'The Haglets'.
- ⁵⁸ Melville, p. 443.
- ⁵⁹ Frederick Busch, 'Introduction', in *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Other Stories*, by Herman Melville (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. xxi.
- ⁶⁰ Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Other Stories*, pp. 303-4.
- ⁶¹ Scott, p. 225.
- ⁶² Louis MacNeice, *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice*, ed. by E.R. Dodds (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 271.
- ⁶³ MacNiece, p. 272.
- ⁶⁴ MacNiece, p. 271.
- ⁶⁵ William Fuller, 'What Does It Matter Now', *Chicago Review*, 46 (Winter 2000), p.101.
- ⁶⁶ William Hershaw, *Fifty Five Sonnets: Coarse and Fine* (Kirkcaldy: Akros Publications, 2006), p.7.
- ⁶⁷ Hershaw, p.7.
- ⁶⁸ Matchett, p.30. One could argue with the details of this in that whisky and its identification as a Scottish product is a rather late development in Scotland according to some historians; otherwise his perspective is convincing.
- ⁶⁹ Piper, p. 11.
- ⁷⁰ *Scottish Historical and Romantic Ballads, chiefly ancient: with explanatory notes and a glossary*, ed. by John Finlay, 2 vols (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1808), I, xiii.
- ⁷¹ Percy, p. 72.
- ⁷² Walter Raleigh, *Laughter from a Cloud* (London: Constable, 1923), p.207.
- ⁷³ Raleigh, p. 208.
- ⁷⁴ Elizabeth Huberman, *The Poetry of Edwin Muir: The Field of Good and Ill* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 75.
- ⁷⁵ Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p.262.
- ⁷⁶ William M. Ryan, 'Formula and Tragic Irony in "Sir Patrick Spens"', *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 44 (1980), 73-83 (p. 73).
- ⁷⁷ M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1988), p. 11.
- ⁷⁸ Edwin Muir, *Essays on Literature and Society*, rev. edn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 20.
- ⁷⁹ Muir, p. 20.
- ⁸⁰ Philip Edwards, *The Story of the Voyage: Sea-narratives in eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 2.

⁸¹ An online bibliographic database with links to poetry, prose, art, music and criticism, entitled "The Afterlife of "Sir Patrick Spens"", is under construction, with a planned launch in 2011.

J. DERRICK McCLURE

August Corrodi's Translations of Burns¹

'We were rowing together on Lake Poschiavo,'² August Corrodi tells us; and his companion, a Mr Scrutton from Oxford, asked him if he liked Robert Burns. *Ueber Alles!* And Corrodi requested his friend to read him a poem from the copy of Burns which he always carried with him, so that he could hear what the Scots sounded like. 'I can't', replied the Oxonian, 'no Englishman can do that'. But the Swiss, Corrodi claimed, were better placed than the English to appreciate Burns: not only do Scots and Swiss-German share a number of words found in neither English nor Hochdeutsch (eg. bawtie – *bauzi*, byke – *beiber*, daddie – *ätti*, dirl – *zirl*, giglit – *gigeli*, raukle – *rüchlig*, thole – *tolle*)³ but 'an invisible bridge' serves to link the two dialects: both are 'curt, rough, sturdy (*kurz, rauh, derb*)', and Swiss-German, like Scots, is reticent in expressing feelings and emotions.

Corrodi's enthusiasm for Burns and his perception of an affinity between Burns's Scots and his own Swiss-German prompted him to translate a selection of poems and songs, producing a text which is a landmark in the fields of both Burns translation and modern Alemannic literature; and his practice furnishes an interesting test-case for the issues raised in translating poetry from one non-standard language to another. The social status and literary development of eighteenth-century Scots and nineteenth-century Swiss-German are comparable — indeed, remarkably similar — in several respects: on the other hand, the task of translating a poet of Burns's stature in a manner worthy of the original is necessarily one of formidable difficulty; and the advantage of a target language of similar social and cultural standing may not be sufficient to compensate if the translator's individual skills are insufficient. These considerations will be illustrated by the examination of Corrodi's translations which follows.

August Corrodi was born in Zürich in 1826, his father a distinguished theological scholar. His mother died when he was only a year old but left him an important legacy: a poem in Swiss-German hexameters, which was one of the things that inspired him eventually to embark on dialect writing. (Another was