*Journal of*
**Irish and Scottish Studies**

1495 ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

# 'out-of-the-way reading' and 'hoary-headed tradition': Walter Scott's Supernatural Scholarship and Poetry

NATALIE TAL HARRIES
*LLMVC, University of Aberdeen*

Scott's practice of 'out-of-the-way reading' and interest in the superstitions of 'hoary-headed tradition' informs his supernatural scholarship, which underpins and completes the presentation of supernatural themes, characters, and circumstances in his poems. This article examines Scott's comparative treatment of scholarly publications and popular traditions as supernatural sources and outlines his approach to the incorporation of supernatural elements in his poetry, with particular reference to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *The Lady of the Lake*. It argues that Scott mediates the tension between the rational and the supernatural, and scholarship and superstition, by balancing scepticism and belief in the poetic text and its accompanying notes. It also demonstrates how Scott's dissemination of supernatural material is influenced by his views on authorial responsibility and his identification of distinct reading circles. An analysis of Scott's methodology supported by close readings of the poems reveals the complexities in his poetic portrayal of the supernatural and his scholarly engagement with supernatural sources. Scott aligns himself with an older poetic tradition in his rejection of classicism and decision to draw upon the superstitions of his native country instead, allowing him to preserve and recast the popular traditions of Scottish history and folklore and the supernatural associations of Scottish settings as he appreciates that both are an intrinsic part of Scotland's unique character.

**Keywords:** Walter Scott; Supernatural; Superstition; Romantic Poetry; The Lay of the Last Minstrel; The Lady of the Lake

Scott's fascination with witchcraft, Demonology, ghosts and supernatural folklore began at an early age as he later recalls: 'Among much reading of my early days, it is no doubt true that I travelled a good deal in the twilight regions

**Contact:** Natalie Tal Harries <natalie.harries@abdn.ac.uk>

https://doi.org/10.57132/jiss.376

of superstitious disquisitions.'[1] This admission corresponds with Scott's account of his early reading in his letters:

> I was too much permitted to study what I liked and when I liked which was very little and very seldom. To mend the matter I stuffed my brains with all such reading as was never read and in the department of my memory where should be a Roman Patera lo! there is a witches cauldron.[2]

In another letter to Robert Surtees, he celebrates the progress of his friend's 'demoniacal collection' and suggests that they should 'compile a system of Daemonology, with the choicest examples which out-of-the-way reading and hoary-headed tradition can supply.'[3] Scott's supernatural scholarship is focused on the examination of material supplied by these two sources. His description of his esoteric reading as 'out-of-the-way' is interesting as Samuel Taylor Coleridge employs the same expression to convey his own enthusiasm for 'all out of the way books,' and uses it as a collective term for unusual texts on 'Metaphysics, & Poetry, & "Facts of Mind" – (i.e. Accounts of all the strange phantasms that ever possessed your philosophy-dreamers from Tauth the Egyptian to Taylor the English Pagan).'[4] The practice of 'out-of-the-way reading' then, as defined by Scott and Coleridge, is a form of literary or scholarly exploration into the unknown: an intentional choice to veer off the beaten track of ordinary reading and engage instead with 'all such reading as was never read.' Several Romantic poets share this interest in out-of-the-way books; however, certain areas of interest and specialisation are also clearly distinct. As Scott says, 'I am more apt to pray to Thor or Woden than Jupiter, think of the fairies oftener than the Dryads, and of Bannockburn and Flodden more than Marathon and Pharsalia.'[5] Scott, like Coleridge, enthusiastically pursues his out-of-the-way reading of esoteric texts but, as this quote indicates, he is much more interested in magic, witches, fairies, Scottish history and the folklore of 'hoary-headed tradition' than he is in mysticism, metaphysics and the 'philosophy-dreamers' of classical antiquity.

The scope of Scott's scholarship is represented by his library at Abbotsford. This 'bibliomaniacal collection,' as Scott describes it, contains over 15,000 volumes and manuscripts on a vast array of subjects and demonstrates both the

1. Walter Scott, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (London, 1830), 2. Hereafter, *Demonology*.
2. Walter Scott to the Rev. Mr Berwick, 10th April 1810 in Herbert Grierson (ed.), *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. 2 (London, 1932–7), 322. Hereafter, *LWS.*
3. *LWS,* 2.246.
4. Samuel Taylor Coleridge to John Thelwall, 19th November 1796 in Earl Leslie Griggs (ed.), *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1956–71), 260.
5. *LWS,* 2.322–3.

range and diversity of his reading.[6] Scott's core collection of supernatural texts, his most obviously out-of-the-way books, contains hundreds of titles on magic, alchemy, witchcraft and demonology, housed in a special alcove of the library which he referred to as 'the Witch corner.'[7] Professor Alison Lumsden, Honorary Librarian at Abbotsford, has demonstrated the significance of the position of books in the library by confirming that Scott's placement of the items in his collection has been accurately preserved over time, and identifying 'hot spots' within the library where areas with the best natural light for reading are also where Scott placed his most beloved books. Lumsden observes that the favoured position of Scott's supernatural texts, on either side of the library window, suggests that they are a particularly treasured part of his collection. The fact that they are among the books safely secured in sturdy bookpresses is indicative of both their value and their status as restricted items as Scott explains that such precautions are necessary 'for security of such books as are particularly valuable, as well as those which are for any reason unfit to be exposed to the general class of readers.'[8]

In addition to his library, annotations and marginalia in his books, and references to texts in his letters and journals, Scott's out-of-the-way reading can be traced in the extensive notes to his long narrative poems. The notes serve many purposes, often providing historical context, explanations of unusual subject matter, descriptions of folklore and local beliefs or superstitions, and supplementary literature. Although Scott uses the notes to elucidate aspects directly related to the poetic text, he is also prone to interesting digressions, and impromptu disquisitions inspired by his reading and seemingly loosely associated to the text itself. Alison Lumsden argues that the notes 'are best understood as a kind of *surplusage*' indicative of Scott's 'inability to resist the act of story telling' and demonstrates how they form an important part of the 'paratextual dialogue' of the poems:

> It is clear that the function of Scott's notes goes far beyond what we would normally recognise as the function of annotation. Such notes cannot simply be dismissed as an antiquarian or Enlightenment exercise in documentation, since what they document is no longer what is certain, verifiable and supported by witness, but a far more complex amalgamation of written authority, local folklore, literary heritage and what can only be described as parallel narrative. Rather than creating a taxonomy

6. Walter Scott, *Reliquiæ Trotcosienses,* Gerard Carruthers and Alison Lumsden (eds) (Edinburgh, 2004), 45. Hereafter, *Reliquiæ.*

7. *LWS,* 10.245. In addition to the volumes in 'the Witch Corner' Scott's collection of chapbooks and popular printed texts contains a wealth of supernatural material.

8. *Reliquiæ,* 37.

> of knowledge, as the notes to *Minstrelsy* do, they bring many different forms of knowledge into play to create additional, or even alternative, forms of discourse to those offered by the text proper of the poem.[9]

As Lumsden points out, 'the notes were *always* intrinsic to the narrative poems', because they were composed contemporaneously rather than added later as most of Scott's notes to the Waverley Novels were, so the Edinburgh Edition of Walter Scott's Poetry reinstates them in their proper place.[10] They also offer a unique insight into Scott's creative process and provide a record of the texts that he was actively engaged with during the composition of the poems. The notes do not simply add an extra dimension to the poems; they are the other half of the poems, and they form an integral part of the reading experience. Scott mediates the tension between the supernatural and the rational by balancing superstition and scepticism throughout both parts of the text, and while his supernatural scholarship informs and underpins the verse, it can be traced in detail in the parallel narrative of the notes.

## 'the Marvellous in poetry'

In a letter to Dr Currie, Scott comically asserts his status as an 'initiated Ghost-Seer' in his request for information on Welsh and Scottish apparitions, and clarifies his views on the employment of the supernatural in poetry:

> Ghosts like many other things have of late been put out of fashion by a promiscuous & ill-judged introduction of tales relating to them. I differ from many of my contemporary Ghost-raisers upon this subject. I think the Marvellous in poetry is ill-timed & disgusting when not managed with moderation & ingrafted upon some circumstance of popular tradition or belief which sometimes can give even to the improbable an air of something like probability.[11]

Scott clearly states that in order to effectively incorporate supernatural elements in poetry it is necessary to ensure that they are founded upon an established tradition or belief to make them plausible. His use of the word 'marvellous' to

9. Alison Lumsden, 'Towards the Edinburgh Edition of Walter Scott's Poetry' in Susan Oliver (ed.), *Walter Scott: New Interpretations. Yearbook of English Studies*, 47 (2017), 127–142, 142; 141. 'Scott and the Art of Surplusage: Excess in the Narrative Poems' in Caroline McCracken-Flesher and Matthew Wickman (eds), *Walter Scott at 250* (Edinburgh, 2021), 116.

10. Lumsden, 'Towards the Edinburgh Edition of Walter Scott's Poetry', 141.

11. *LWS*, 1.121.

signify the supernatural is confirmed by his later essay 'On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition':

> Yet this inclination to believe in the marvellous gradually becomes weaker. Men cannot but remark that (since the scriptural miracles have ceased,) the belief in prodigies and supernatural events has gradually declined in proportion to the advancement of human knowledge; and that since the age has become enlightened, the occurrence of tolerably well attested anecdotes of the supernatural character are so few, as to render it more probable than the witnesses have laboured under some strange and temporal delusion, rather than that the laws of nature have been altered or suspended. At this period of human knowledge, the marvellous is so much identified with the fabulous, as to be considered generally as belonging to the same class.[12]

A dwindling belief in the marvellous, or supernatural events, is directly correlated to the advancement of human knowledge and the tendency to favour rational or scientific explanations over the possibility of supernatural causes 'since the age has become enlightened.' The suggestion that this intellectual progress may have unintended negative consequences is clear, and the disintegrating distinction between 'the marvellous' and 'the fabulous' provides one example of a resulting cultural shift. The muddling of marvellous and fabulous is indicative of the dominance of rationality over any degree of belief in the supernatural rendering separate categories, or classes, redundant. For Scott, however, the distinction is of great importance. When he refers to the marvellous he means the supernatural, not the fabulous or the fantastic, but something more subtly defying the laws of nature, grounded in reality and anchored by popular tradition or belief. Scott's out-of-the-way reading and supernatural scholarship are thus a crucial part of his creative process as they inform the synthesis of supernatural aspects within his work and allow for their integration into the traditions and superstitions of the region or historical period in which the poem is set. Scott draws upon 'popular tradition or belief' in his portrayal of the legendary wizard Michael Scott and the goblin page Gilpin Horner in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and his creation of the character of Brian the Hermit in *The Lady of the Lake*, and his poetic representation of these supernatural figures is accompanied by a scholarly survey of the source material in the notes.

In *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, the 'wonderous Michael Scott' is presented as a wizard of 'dreaded fame' whose magical feats, including cleaving 'Eildon hills

12. Walter Scott, 'On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition; and particularly on the Works of Ernest Theodore William Hoffman', *Foreign Quarterly Review*, 1.1 (July 1827), 60–98, 61.

in three' with a few magic words, serve as illustrative examples of his power.[13] In the notes, Scott's informs us that 'Sir Michael Scott of Balwearie flourished during the 13th century' but by 'a poetical anachronism, he is here placed in a later æra' and indicates that his pursuit of learning in foreign countries and addiction 'to the abstruse studies of judicial astrology, alchemy, physiognomy, and chiromancy' led to his occult reputation.[14] The comprehensive note that follows demonstrates the range of sources encompassed by the scope of Scott's supernatural scholarship. He quotes historical accounts, including Thomas Dempster's, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Scotorum* [Ecclesiastical History of the Scots Nation] (1627) and John Lesley's *De origine, moribus, ac rebus gestis Scotiae* [On the Origin, Manners and Affairs of Scotland] (1578), and he also refers to an earlier literary reference to the 'renowned wizard' in Dante's *Divine Comedy*.[15] Whilst the published accounts provide the source material for his examples of Michael's magical abilities, some of the most important features are influenced by local folklore or 'hoary headed tradition':

> A personage, thus spoken of by biographers and historians, loses little of his mystical fame in vulgar tradition. Accordingly, the memory of Sir Michael Scott survives in many a legend; and in the south of Scotland, any work of great labour and antiquity, is ascribed, either to the agency of *Auld Michael*, of Sir William Wallace, or of the devil. Tradition varies concerning the place of his burial: some contend for Holme Coltrame, in Cumberland; others for Melrose Abbey. But all agree, that his books of magic were interred in his grave, or preserved in the convent where he died.[16]

Vulgar or otherwise, these local legends provide the basis for Scott's narrative and the variations of the tale allow Scott to choose those most suited to his poetic purpose, namely that Michael Scott was buried with his magic book at Melrose Abbey. The other sources provide further context and a historical justification for the incorporation of 'the Marvellous' in relation to the character, but 'vulgar tradition' is considered equivalent to the scholarly texts cited and in some cases it is afforded a greater degree of authority. For example, Scott presents and challenges the biographical account given by Walter Scot of Satchells in *A True History of Several Honourable Families of the Right Honourable Name of Scot* (1688) immediately after his account of the oral tradition, suggesting that in some cases 'vulgar tradition' is more authentic than scholarly publications. In a later note,

13. Walter Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel,* 5th ed. (London, 1806), 2.XIII. Hereafter, *Lay.* Unless otherwise specified, quotations from the text are taken from the fifth edition as it includes significant additions to the text.

14. *Lay*, Notes on Canto II, 250.

15. Ibid., 250–1.

16. Ibid., 251.

Scott refers to a commentator on Chaucer, who 'omitted as trivial and fabulous' one of the *Canterbury Tales*, 'the story of Wade and his boat Guingelot,' resulting in 'the memory of the hero, and the boat, being now entirely lost.'[17] This serves as a justification for the inclusion of further material on the legendary wizard as Scott explains that he has 'noted one or two of the current traditions concerning Michael Scott' so that 'future antiquaries may lay no such omission to my charge.'[18] It is also reveals Scott's self-conscious portrayal of himself as a scholarly and responsible author.

Scott tells us that the 'idea for Lord Cranstoun's Goblin Page, is taken from a being called Gilpin Horner, who appeared, and made some stay, at a farmhouse among the Border-mountains.'[19] This is characteristic of Scott's approach as he alternates between the justification of supernatural material with supporting scholarly or locally verified sources, and the casual, implicit endorsement of supernatural events. Scott tells us that the idea for a goblin page is drawn from a local tale, but he does not say that it is taken from an account of a being called Gilpin Horner. He says that it 'is taken from a being,' with no qualifier to imply that the being may not actually exist, and no clarification to suggest that he is not a supernatural being. In the absence of both, the reader is enticed into accepting the implied supernatural aspect, reassured by the scholarly approach and seduced by subtle signifiers of veracity. Scott employs a similar approach in a note on Robert Kirk's treatise on 'Fairy Superstition' in the Magnum Opus edition of *Rob Roy*. He adopts a rational tone, bordering on scepticism, in his summary of the text itself as he describes Kirk's seemingly devout belief in the fairy people and his illustration of them 'with the usual powers and qualities ascribed to such beings in Highland tradition.'[20] However, in the following paragraph Scott's tone changes as he discusses the legend surrounding Kirk's death:

> But what is sufficiently singular, the Rev. Robert Kirke, author of the said treatise, is believed himself to have been taken away by the fairies, in revenge, perhaps, for having let in too much light upon the secrets of their commonwealth. We learn this catastrophe from the information of his successor, the late amiable and learned Dr. Patrick Grahame, also minister at Aberfoil, who, in his sketches of Perthshire, has not forgotten to touch upon the *Dun Shie*, or fairy mound, when he sunk down, in what seemed to mortals a fit, and was supposed to be dead. This, however, was not his real fate.[21]

17. Ibid., 255.
18. Ibid., 255.
19. Ibid., 261.
20. J.H. Alexander, Peter Garside and Claire Lamont (eds), *Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels 25a: Introduction and Notes from the Magnus Opus,* vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 2012), 442.
21. Ibid., 442.

Scott's scepticism seems to fall away as he recounts this tale and the sudden absence of ambiguity, especially in the final line, is interesting as the legend of Kirk's death is afforded a suspension of disbelief that is not accorded to the text itself. Although we are told it is 'believed' at first, it is also presented as if it is believed and the only other qualifier—'perhaps'—is applied to the suggested motive of the fairies. The act itself is reported simply as a catastrophe, the perception of the event as a fit followed by death is dismissed as mortal misconception, and there is no trace of doubt in the final assessment that death was not Kirk's real fate. Scott emphasises the eminence of the source, Patrick Graham, to further enhance the authenticity of the tale, which demonstrates his distinction between different types of supernatural sources and illustrates the tension between the rational and the supernatural in his approach.

While there is no doubt that Scott is being playful when he implicitly endorses a supernatural explanation or explicitly authenticates a supernatural tale, just as it is clear that he is being self-conscious when he painstakingly substantiates his incorporation of supernatural material with source texts and verified first-hand accounts, he is also engaged in a more complex process. Gillian Hughes notes how the *Lay* contains 'various disclaimers of the supernatural elements' in the poem itself and, as one might expect, some of the notes 'complete the author's careful disavowal of immersion in the supernatural.'[22] However, she also demonstrates how, in the notes, 'Scott, wearing an antiquarian mask, (…) revels in outlandish supernatural anecdote' and points out that 'multiplying such tales is a powerful argument against the disregard of the supernatural otherwise implied by his irony and carefully stated scepticism.'[23] Scott's approach thus involves a self-conscious employment and enjoyment of supernatural material that is both confirmed and questioned by the text. His supernatural scholarship also underpins and vindicates the incorporation of local superstitions in the poetic text, as his response to early criticism of Gilpin Horner in an expanded note added to the later editions shows:

> As much has been objected to Gilpin Horner on account of his being supposed rather a device of the author than a popular superstition, I can only say, that no legend which I have ever heard seemed to be more universally credited, and that many persons of very good rank and considerable information are well known to repose absolute faith in the tradition.[24]

22. Gillian Hughes, 'Pickling Virgil?: Scott's Notes to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*', *Scottish Literary Review*, 7.2 (2015), 51–62, 57.

23. Ibid., 58–9.

24. *Lay*, 12th ed. (London, 1811), Notes to Canto Second, Note XVII, 267. A full account of the evolution of the notes will be given in the forthcoming critical editions of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *The Lady of the Lake*, volumes 1 and 3 respectively of the *Edinburgh Edition of Walter Scott's Poetry*.

In the course of one sentence Scott deftly promotes the tale of Gilpin Horner from a popular superstition, to a legend, to a universally credited tradition entirely believed by an illustrious, educated and socially elevated crowd. In addition to revealing Scott's anxiety about the creation of supernatural characters, one he manages in the *Lay* by adopting and adapting existing figures from Scottish superstitions instead, this later addition to the notes is indicative of Scott's criteria when appraising the validity of supernatural sources. Scott applies the same measure of authenticity that he uses for his supernatural scholarship to local superstitions, and the highest ranking of these are considered commensurate, published works and oral tales alike. Scott's criteria can be seen as elitist in some ways, as it tends to privilege the accounts of the educated and socially elevated 'persons of very good rank and considerable information' he evokes to authenticate a belief in the tradition of Gilpin Horner. However, this tradition is also a 'popular superstition' and Scott is equally interested in and influenced by 'vulgar tradition,' as he is with the legends of Michael Scott, because he values the evidence of personal experience. This view is supported by Scott's comment on the power of second-sight in the notes to *The Lady of the Lake*: 'If force of evidence could authorise us to believe facts inconsistent with the general laws of nature enough might be produced in favour of the existence of the Second-Sight.'[25] Therefore, if there is enough evidence or the tradition is generally agreed upon, like the internment of the wizard's magic book, it is authenticated in the same manner as a published work that meets Scott's scholarly criteria.

Scott's cross-referenced annotations in two seemingly comparable texts on witchcraft in his library, Dr Francis Hutchinson's *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* (1718) and *A Compleat History of Magick, Sorcery, and Witchcraft* (1715), later attributed to Richard Boulton, provides further insight into his criteria for supernatural sources. His note in the latter text compares the two books and assesses Hutchinson's *Essay* as 'sensible & philosophical' whereas the *Compleat History* may contain 'a good compendium' but as 'one of Edmund Curlls catch-pennies' is likely sensationalist, and Scott seems to implicitly agree with Hutchinson's opinion that it 'very likely may do some Mischief.'[26] This concern is borne out by Boulton's preface as the author expresses his hope that 'the Reading of these Histories may increase our Horror of so great an Enemy of our Salvation,' dismisses several comparable studies as 'too prolix, and intermix'd with long and tedious Relations,' and explicitly states that 'the Design of this Work,

25. Walter Scott, *The Lady of the Lake,* 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1810), Notes to Canto First, Note VI. Hereafter, *Lady*. Quotations from the text are taken from the second edition as it contains corrections and additional notes.

26. Abbotsford Library, https://lib1.advocates.org.uk/Annotations/78577.pdf, [Last accessed 4 June 2024].

is to shew what Power the Devil hath to torment, as well as deceive Mankind.'[27] Although both books contain similar material, Scott values the scholarly text published with good intentions by a well-respected clergyman far more highly than a useful but unattributed compendium with the express purpose of horrifying the reader, which ultimately lacks the morality and scholarly weight of Hutchinson's work. In addition to education and social standing then, Scott's criteria values the intent and integrity of the author as well as their qualifications or authority on the subject.

When it comes to certain supernatural texts, Scott seems to agree with Hutchinson that this material is not necessarily suitable for all readers, and when it is made available to the general reading public great care should be taken to ensure that it is presented appropriately. Again, this may be viewed as elitism or gatekeeping on Scott's part, but in the context of early nineteenth-century Britain it could also be perceived as a form of social responsibility. Both Boulton and Hutchinson's works on witchcraft were written towards the end of the witch trials in England and Scotland, less than a century earlier, and Hutchinson's dedication is alert to the threat of a resurgence:

> If the same Notions were to prevail again, (and Superstition is never far off) no Man's Life would be safe in his own House; for the fantastick Doctrines that support the Vulgar Opinions of Witchcraft, rob us all of the Defences that God and Nature have plac'd for our Security against false Accusations. (…) The credulous Multitude will ever be ready to try their Tricks, and swim the old Women, and wonder at and magnify every unaccountable Symptom and odd Accident.[28]

Unlike Boulton, whose preface warns against the 'Rise of the Art of Magick and Witchcraft' and unequivocally represents witches as 'wretched Persons' in league with the devil who 'bring wicked Spirits under their Command, to put their ill Designs in Practice,' Hutchinson clearly implies that accusations of witchcraft are generally founded on superstitious explanations for mildly unusual occurrences, which are then exaggerated by a misguided and easily influenced multitude leading to the demonisation and false accusation of innocent people.[29] This distinction between the two approaches is the basis for Scott's assessment of Hutchinson's text as 'sensible & philosophical' and therefore superior as, despite Boulton's engagement with philosophy in his assertion of the existence of spirits,

27. Richard Boulton, *A Compleat History of Magick, Sorcery, and Witchcraft*, vol. 1 (London, 1715), ii–iii; xviii.

28. Francis Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*, 2nd ed. (London, 1720), vi–viii. This is the edition owned and annotated by Scott.

29. Boulton, i–ii.

there is a distinct lack of reason and rationality in the tirade against the agents of the 'Enemy of our Salvation' that opens the preface to *A Compleat History.* As Scott later reflects, other 'superstitions arose and decayed, were dreaded or despised, without greater embarrassment, in the provinces in which they have a temporary currency, than that cowards and children go out more seldom at night, while the reports on ghosts and fairies are peculiarly current' but 'when the alarm of witchcraft arises, Superstition dips her hand in the blood of the persons accused, and records in the annals of jurisprudence their trials, and the causes alleged in vindication of their execution.'[30] Scott follows Hutchinson by responding to a genuine concern about the potentially dangerous misappropriation of supernatural material by the 'credulous Multitude' but he distinguishes between superstitions with harmless or temporary effects and those with the power to spread fear, justify murder, and incite destructive social change. For Scott, this authorial responsibility extends to literature as well. As Susan Oliver argues, '[b]y drawing attention to the power of literature to work magic that could be benevolent or malevolent Scott emphasizes the responsibility of authors as *improvisatori* to use their powers of *imitatio* in morally responsible ways' because 'literature has a power of enchantment that enables the imagination to see the world in ways that are creative or destructive, depending on its use' and the 'responsibility for good or bad "affect" lay with the author's use of words.'[31] As Oliver notes, this theme is represented by the book of spells in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel,* which Penny Fielding argues 'acts both metaphorically and metonymically as a locus of power—a trope that condenses diverse ideas about reading and authority, magical lore and political law, onto a single, remarkable object.'[32] From the very beginning of his poetical career, then, Scott was concerned with the power of the book and the responsibility of authors to use their authority and influence with words carefully.

As a collector, scholar, and distributor of supernatural lore, Scott makes a distinction between 'the general class of readers' or 'the uninitiated,' and 'initiated Ghost-Seer[s]' or those who understand 'the peculiar charms on which the value of the books contained in such a collection are likely to be reposed.'[33] Scott thus identifies a distinct circle of readers among his contemporaries with whom he shares supernatural sources, perhaps best demonstrated by his private publication and select distribution of Kirk's seventeenth-century treatise

30. *Demonology,* 192–3.

31. Susan Oliver, 'Walter Scott and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*' in Jane E. Everson, Andrew Hiscock, and Stefano Jossa (eds), *Ariosto, the Orlando Furioso and English Culture* (London, 2019), 209; 194.

32. Penny Fielding, 'Black Books: Sedition, Circulation, and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*', *ELH,* 81.1 (Spring 2014), 197–223, 198.

33. *Reliquiæ,* 37; 45.

on fairy lore in 1815: *An Essay on the Nature and Actions of the Subterranean (and, for the most part,) Invisible People, heretofoir going under the name of Elves, Faunes, and Fairies, or the lyke, among the Low-Country Scots, as they are described by those who have the Second Sight; and now, to occasion further Inquiry, collected and compared, by a Circumspect Inquirer residing among the Scottish-Irish in Scotland.* Inside, the title page reads 'Secret Commonwealth,' and this title was adopted for later editions of the text. The lengthy original title is important as it emphasises the scholarly intent of the author and implies that the reader should adopt a similar attitude of careful, rational consideration to that of the circumspect inquirer responsible for compiling the material within. In the preface, we are told that this 'curious Tract, upon the Fairy Superstition and that of the Second Sight, is printed literally from a Manuscript Copy preserved in the Advocates' Library,' and our attention is drawn to the remarkable fact that these local beliefs have survived into the nineteenth century.[34] The focus on the authenticity of the text, and the persistence of these beliefs or superstitions in certain parts of Scotland, further legitimises the work as an ethnographic study of folklore and tradition. Despite these precautions, only one hundred copies of the *Secret Commonwealth* were printed and Scott selectively distributed some to a chosen few. A note in Scott's own copy at Abbotsford includes an initial list of intended recipients, which suggests that his inner circle of 'initiated' readers was primarily made up of antiquaries, bibliophiles, and scholars who shared his specialised interests.[35] Scott also promises a copy to Lady Macleod of Dunvegan Castle, Skye, whom he had met the year before on a visit to the castle when she asked him 'in courtesy' whether he 'would choose to sleep in the Haunted Chamber' (which Scott says he of course preferred) and regaled him with 'many stories of its terrors.'[36] Although Scott does not make the *Secret Commonwealth* available to the 'general class of readers' he does refer to it in his notes and it is discussed in *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*. Scott thus creates a wider community of readers by allowing them access to the supernatural ideas synthesised in his poetry, and selected fragments of scholarship, carefully contextualised, in the notes.

Like Michael Scott and Gilpin Horner, the character of Brian the Hermit in *The Lady of the Lake* is another adaptation from 'popular tradition or belief.' Brian is a minor but important character as, like Janet the Highland witch and spae-wife in Scott's story 'The Two Drovers,' the narrative turns on the prophecy of this supernatural figure and it ultimately dictates the outcome of the foretold

34. Robert Kirk, *Secret Commonwealth* (Edinburgh, 1815), v.

35. Abbotsford Library, https://lib1.advocates.org.uk/Annotations/79008.pdf, [Last accessed 2 June 2024]. The manuscript note in Scott's copy headed 'Send copies from Edition' lists the following recipients: Francis Freeling and Richard Heber; Dr Patrick Graham; Thomas Thomson; his son, Walter; Archibald Constable; Robert Jamieson; and Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe.

36. *LWS*, 10.372.

conflict, although in both cases the reader is left to decide between the supernatural explanation of second-sight or the rational assumption that the characters are inevitably influenced by the prophecy upon hearing it. In the notes, Scott informs us that the legend of Brian's birth, the 'strange tales' of which are related in the poem, 'is not of the author's invention' and he quotes the recorded incident from Walter MacFarlane's *Geographical Collections relating to Scotland* (1767).[37] In an obscene inversion of the virgin birth, the legend relates how Brian's mother privately warmed herself above the embers of a fire built from the bones of the dead on an ancient battlefield and became impregnated by the ashes. The poem itself casts doubt upon the supernatural explanation as there is no mention of the fire or the ashes and although the maid says 'no shepherd sought her side, / No hunter's hand her snood untied' this is immediately undermined by the fact that she no longer wears the 'virgin snood,' loses her status as maiden, stops attending church, and locking 'her secret in her breast' dies 'in travail, unconfessed.'[38] Scott thus balances supernatural and cynical descriptions of the event and, as the strange tale of Brian's birth is only alluded to in the poem and detailed in the accompanying note, the two must be read in conjunction for a complete version of the story. The grim reality is often more disturbing than the supernatural retelling, but both versions of the story are needed in order to understand the social and psychological contexts for such superstitions and the reason they persist.

Although, as Scott tells us, the legend of Brian's birth is not of his invention, the character is and Scott's account of his creation from the source legend in a later note provides an insight into his creative process as he draws upon local superstitions to create an original character. He explains that in 'adopting the legend concerning the birth of the Founder of the Church of Kilmallie' he 'endeavoured to trace the effects which such a belief was likely to produce' on 'the person to whom it related,' concluding that he likely became 'a fanatic or an imposter,' or a mixture of the two.[39] Scott goes on to say that a 'natural attribute of such a character as the supposed hermit' is that 'he should credit the numerous superstitions with which the minds of ordinary Highlanders are almost always embued.'[40] Brian's superstitious origins and beliefs thus legitimise the further incorporation of supernatural elements in the poem, like the aforementioned prophecy and the terrifying transformation of the landscape into demonic figures from Scottish mythology, which is turn allow for a discussion of them in the notes. Under Brian's 'dazzled eyes' the black cliffs and foaming torrents rise as a 'River Demon,' or, as the notes explain, a 'Kelpy of the lowlands,' an 'evil and malicious spirit, delighting to forbode and to witness calamity' that 'fre-

37. *Lady*, 3.V; Notes to Canto III, Note III.
38. *Lady*, 3.V.
39. *Lady*, Notes to Canto III, Note V.
40. Ibid.

quents most Highlands lakes and rivers.'[41] The mountain mist takes 'form and limb | Of noontide hag or goblin grim,' identified in the notes as a '*Glas-lich,*' in Gaelic, 'a tall, emaciated, gigantic female figure,' and a 'goblin dressed in antique armour, and having one hand covered with blood' called 'Red-hand.'[42] Brian's 'prophet's dream' ends with the 'fatal Ben-Shie's boding scream' and the notes inform us that the 'Ben-Shie implies the female Fairy, whose lamentations were often supposed to precede the death of the chieftain of particular families,' mentions the correspondence with the Irish banshee, and provides details of specific domestic spirits belonging to several great Highland families.[43] By recording these details, Scott uses the notes for his own supernatural scholarship, preserving local superstitions that would likely otherwise be lost to obscurity, which is the same strategy he employed in *Minstrelsy:* 'it has been my object to throw together, perhaps without sufficient attention to method, a variety of remarks regarding popular superstitions, and legendary history, which, if not now collected, may soon have been totally forgotten.'[44]

The symbolic significance of the supernatural creatures that Brian perceives as harbingers of doom and death is somewhat dependent upon the context provided in the notes but, unlike the account of the legend of Brian's birth, Scott uses the poem to convey the supernatural aspect and the accompanying note to undercut it:

> Other spirits of the desert, all frightful in shape, and malignant in disposition, are believed to frequent different mountains and glens of the Highlands, where any unusual appearance, produced by mist, or the strange lights that are sometimes thrown upon particular objects, never fails to present an apparition to the imagination of the solitary and melancholy mountaineer.[45]

Scott alternates between the presentation of unmediated supernatural material in the poem countered by rational explanation in the notes, and the realistic interpretation of superstitions in the poem undermined by an accumulation of supernatural sources in the notes, balancing legend and logic throughout. This characteristic of Scott's approach later provokes James Hogg's complaint that 'with his stories made up of half-and-half, like Nathaniel Gow's toddy' Scott is 'trying to throw cold water on the most certain, though most impalpable, phenomena of human nature,' and Coleridge's criticism that Scott 'is always half

41. *Lady,* 3.VII; Notes to Canto III, Note V.
42. Ibid.
43. *Lady,* 3.VII; Notes to Canto III, Note VI.
44. *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border,* vol. 1 (Kelso, 1802), cix. Hereafter, *Minstrelsy.*
45. *Lady,* Notes to Canto III, Note V.

and half on these subjects (…) appearances are so stated as to be readily solved on the simplest principles of Pathology: while the precise coincidence of the event so marvellously exceeds the ordinary run of Chances, as to preserve the full effect of Superstition for the *Reader,* and yet the credit of Unbelief for the Writer.'[46] Although both Hogg and Coleridge were commenting on Scott's prose, the methodology that they are responding to is also discernible in his poetry. However, Scott's approach, at least in his poems, is neither an attempt to dilute 'the Marvellous' nor discredit 'popular circumstance or belief' and, while he is evidently careful to present himself as a rational and learned author, he does not characterise himself as entirely unbelieving, nor does he convey an unfiltered account of supernatural material. His half and half technique is more complex as it is primarily intended to maintain a delicate balance between supernatural traditions and rational explanation in both scholarship and popular superstition.

## 'the records of human superstition'

In a note on *The Lady of the Lake,* Scott further develops and formalises his theory on the successful employment of 'the Marvellous in poetry' but he adopts a more serious tone and advocates for himself in the third person:

> It is possible he may differ from modern critics, in supposing that the records of human superstition, if peculiar to, and characteristic of, the country in which the scene is laid, are a legitimate subject of poetry. He gives, however, a ready assent to the narrower proposition, which condemns all attempts of an irregular and disordered fancy to excite terror, by accumulating a train of fantastic and incoherent horrors, whether borrowed from all countries, and patched upon a narrative belonging to one which knew them not, or derived from the author's own imagination.[47]

Scott's engagement with supernatural material in the notes demonstrates his belief that the 'records of human superstition' form an important part of the historical record, especially the history of particular places, and corresponds with his hope that he 'may contribute somewhat to the history of my native country; the peculiar features of whose manners and characters are daily melting and dissolving into those of her sister and ally.'[48] He recognises that local superstitions

46. James Hogg, 'The Mysterious Bride' in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine,* 28 (Dec. 1830), 943–50, 943. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, '"Waverley Novels": Copy A' in J. Jackson and George Whalley (eds), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Marginalia IV* (Princeton, 1980–2001), 581.

47. *Lady,* Notes to Canto III, Note III.

48. *Minstrelsy,* 1.cix–cx.

form an essential part of the inherent character of a place and his incorporation of them in his poetry is not only an attempt to preserve them but allows for a more accurate encapsulation of the 'country where the scene is laid.' Scott's objection to 'attempts of an irregular and disordered fancy to excite terror' with 'a train of fantastic and incoherent horrors' that are entirely invented or appropriated from countries that do not form part of the setting aligns with the previously discussed sense of authorial social responsibility involved in the presentation of supernatural material. It also corresponds with his stated preference for the history, mythology and superstitions of his native country over those from classical Greek and Roman traditions in his 'out-of-the-way reading.' In *The Lay of the Last Minstrel,* for example, Scott validates 'the introduction of the River and Mountain Spirits' as they 'may not at first sight seem to accord with the general tone of the romance, and the superstitions of the country where the scene is laid.'[49] He explains that they are inspired by the 'popular fables' of the 'Scottish vulgar' who 'believe in the existence of an intermediate class of spirits residing in the air, or in the waters: to whose agency they ascribe floods, storms, and all such phenomena as their own philosophy cannot readily explain' and 'are supposed to interfere in the affairs of mortals.'[50] For Scott, the supernatural in poetry is thus legitimised by its association with 'popular tradition or belief,' especially if it is 'peculiar to, and characteristic of, the country in which the scene is laid,' and the peculiar characteristics of the country in which the scene is laid are conveyed by its frequently supernatural popular traditions and beliefs. Scott's antiquarian notes credit and cite 'tradition' as a source alongside references to scholarly texts and respected authors. Information is presented 'according to tradition' or is 'confirmed by' tradition, Scott 'quote[s] from tradition' and completes historical tales with the additional 'horrors' of 'popular tradition.'[51] The records of human superstition are rooted in hoary-headed tradition, and Scott ascribes authority and legitimacy to these sources by using them to authenticate and inform the supernatural aspects of his poems alongside scholarly works.

In *The Lay of the Last Minstrel,* Scott chooses the ruins of the 'ancient and beautiful monastery of Melrose' as the setting for the wizard's tomb from the options offered by tradition. The notes argue that it is 'impossible to conceive a more beautiful specimen of the lightness and elegance of Gothic architecture, when in its purity, than the eastern window of Melrose abbey' and its ethereal beauty is accentuated by moonlight and magical associations in the poem:

49. *Lay,* Notes on Canto I, 230.

50. Ibid., 228–9.

51. *Lady,* Notes to Canto Second, Note XIV; Notes to Canto Fourth, XI; Notes to Canto Fifth, III; Notes to Canto Second, Note XIII.

The moon on the east oriel shone,
Through slender shafts of shapely stone,
By foliaged tracery combined;
Though wouldst have thought some fairy's hand
'Twixt poplars straight the osier wand,
In many a freakish knot, had twined;
Then framed a spell, when the work was done,
And changed the willow-wreaths to stone.[52]

Scott presents us with a specimen of stone-craft so incredible that it demands a supernatural analogy, in which the naturally straight poplars are bound into unnatural shapes with willow and supernaturally transformed into stone by fairy magic. As the notes explain, 'in some of the cloisters there are representations of flowers, vegetables, &c. carved in stone, with accuracy and precision so delicate, that we almost distrust our senses, when we consider the difficulty of subjecting so hard a substance to such intricate and exquisite modulation', and it is this aspect of Melrose's gothic architecture that makes it such a perfect supernatural setting.[53] Scott prepares the ground and the reader for the supernatural in his poems by portraying real places in a fantastic framework, but the magical capacity of such settings is often created by natural conditions. The correct way to view Melrose, as the poem tells us, is by the pale moonlight precisely because that is when there is an illusory, transformative property to the façade. The 'gay beams of lightsome day / Guild, but to flout, the ruins grey' but when 'the broken arches are black in night (…) each shafted oriel glimmers white' and by the light of the moon 'silver edges the imagery' and 'buttress and buttress, alternately, / Seem framed of ebon and ivory.'[54] Scott's emphasis on the unfathomably intricate masonry and the phantasmal transfiguration of the abbey by moonlight encourages the reader to 'almost distrust their senses' along with the author, preparing them to willingly suspend their disbelief, what Coleridge terms 'poetic faith,' when they encounter a more overtly supernatural circumstance, character or occurrence (like the retrieval of a magic book, a goblin page, or the disembodied voice of a long dead wizard) later in the poem.[55] As Fiona Robertson demonstrates, Scott's 'belief that readers have some imaginative responsibility to the work before them, even if it is simply a willingness to

52. *Lay,* Notes on Canto I, 241; Notes on Canto II, 249; 2.XI.
53. *Lay,* Notes on Canto I, 241.
54. *Lay,* 2.I.
55. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* in James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (eds) *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,* vol. 2 (Princeton, 1980–2001), 6.

be entertained' is evident in his literary criticism.[56] However, he also recognises that 'the supernatural in fictitious composition requires to be managed with considerable delicacy' by the author:

> The interest which it excites is indeed a powerful spring; but it is one which is peculiarly subject to be exhausted by coarse handling and repeated pressure. It is also of a character which it is extremely difficult to sustain, and of which a very small proportion may be said to be better than the whole. The marvellous, more than any other attribute of fictitious narrative, loses its effect by being brought much into view. The imagination of the reader is to be excited if possible, without being gratified.[57]

Again, the 'marvellous' is distinct from the 'fabulous' and Scott's method of interweaving supernatural strands within the broader tapestry of his poems allows for a controlled integration constantly underpinned by reality. The supernatural may excite a powerful spring of interest but Scott suggests that it is best kept to an undercurrent in order to remain effective. Much like the traditional superstitions that inform Scott's poems themselves, the supernatural interpretation proceeds from a natural occurrence, and as the reader is enticed into accepting the gradual introduction of supernatural elements in the setting they are transported along with the characters into an otherworldly realm.

In *The Lady of the Lake,* Scott employs the same technique in his depiction of a real Scottish location magically transformed by natural conditions and popular superstitions that are both native to the land. Scott's composition of the poem was informed by the time he spent in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs and his account of his travels indicates that he was inspired by the landscape because of both the scenery and its folklore. Scott reflects how the 'many stories of raids, feuds, and creaghs' that he heard during time spent on the banks of Loch Lomond 'have almost unchained the devil of rhyme in my poor noddle,' and he goes on to 'skirmish a little upon the frontiers of Perthshire and Lennox' because he was 'led by the romantic scenery' and 'the number of strange stories connected with it.'[58] Scott not only recognises that these traditional tales form an important part of local history and the 'records of human superstition,' along with printed texts, he also appreciates that the superstitions of his native country are an intrinsic part of the country itself. Scott incorporates supernatural features, mythical allusions, and a personified landscape in the poem to evoke the sense of a magical

56. Fiona Robertson, *Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic, and the Authorities of Fiction* (Oxford, 1994), 62.

57. Scott, 'On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition', 62.

58. *LWS,* 2.247; 261.

realm. These elements are introduced gradually at first, building to a crescendo in the first canto when Fitz-James beholds the loch and Ellen's isle for the first time. Scott begins with subtle suggestions of an enchanted landscape: the moon dances on Monan's rill, the sun kindles Benvorlich's head, and the interaction of these celestial bodies with the mighty mountains confers life upon them as well. The mingled sounds of horns, hunters and hounds among the echoing rocks, glens and caverns elicits a response from the 'awakened mountain' which in turn 'roused the cavern, where 'tis told | A giant made his den of old.'[59] The notes inform us that this 'mountain to the north-east of the village of Callander' derives its name 'which signifies the great den, or cavern, from a sort of retreat among the rocks on the south side, said, by tradition, to have been the abode of a giant.'[60] This suggestion of ancient giants is taken up again and fully developed later in the canto with the representation of the 'mountains that like giants stand / To centinel enchanted land' one of whom, 'huge Benvenue,' created the surrounding topography by throwing crags, knolls and mounds, the 'fragments of an earlier world,' down to the lake.[61] Scott's portrayal of the mythopoeic geology of the area and the mythological elements of the landscape is informed by 'hoary-headed tradition' and emphasises the importance of supernatural associations in the characterisation of Place.[62] Another example is 'Coir-nan-Uriskin,' the 'Goblin-cave,' which Scott identifies as 'a very steep and romantic hollow in the mountain of Benvenue, overhanging the south-eastern extremity of Loch-Katrine':

> A dale in so wild a situation, and amid a people whose genius bordered on the romantic, did not remain without appropriate deities. The name literally implies the Corri, or Den, of the Wild or Shaggy Men. Perhaps this, as conjectured by Mr Alexander Campbell, may have originally only implied its being the haunt of a ferocious banditti. But tradition has ascribed to the *Urisk,* who gives name to the cavern, a figure between a goat and a man; in short, however much the classical reader may be startled, precisely that of a Grecian Satyr. The *Urisk* seems not to have inherited, with the form, the petulance of the sylvan deity of the classics: his occupations, on the contrary, resembled those of Milton's lubbar fiend, or of the Scottish Brownie, though he differed from both in name and appearance.[63]

59. *Lady,* 1.III–IV.
60. *Lady,* Notes to Canto First, Note I.
61. *Lady,* 1.XIV.
62. *Lady,* 3.XXV.
63. *Lady,* Notes to Canto Third, Note XIV.

The possibility of Campbell's straightforward etymology is briefly acknowledged but the marvellous explanation that the cave takes its name from a mythological creature is foregrounded. Once again 'tradition' is presented as a scholarly source, one with the authority to counter the opinion of a respected author. Scott's rejection of classicism in favour of Scottish mythology is also evident here and, just as he is keen to clarify that the River and Mountain Spirits in the *Lay* are drawn from Scottish rather than classical tradition, he is determined to distinguish between the classical conception of a Grecian Satyr and the uniquely distinct character of the 'Highland satyr.'[64]

While some features of the landscape carry mythological associations, others are endowed with human characteristics, especially the trees, flora and fauna. The interaction of these personified plants with the surrounding environment often seems to represent the interplay between humans, the natural world and the spiritual realm. For example, the intermingling of the waving, weeping woods by Loch Achray with the elevated blue pines on the 'bold cliffs of Benvenue' that reach into and merge with the 'delicious blue' of the sky suggests a blurring of boundaries.[65] The elemental divide between earth, water and air collapses as the individual elements of the landscape coalesce into one, creating the sense that the border between the natural and the supernatural, or the physical and the metaphysical, is more malleable than we might think. Scott's use of pines here is also significant. As Wordsworth observes, an experience of the sublime often involves calling upon the mind 'to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining' and, in a natural setting, this attribute is perfectly represented by the pine tree.[66] In Romantic poetry, the 'aspiring pine,' as Charlotte Smith describes it, is characteristically tall and frequently portrayed reaching up into the heavens, or pining for divinity, bridging the divide between the material and the spiritual.[67] Scott's depiction of pines connecting earth and air, both here and later in the canto, further confirms the natural capacity of the Scottish landscape to unite the material and transcendent.

The ethereal properties of the summer evening light in Scotland lends itself perfectly to an illusory transfiguration of the landscape. As Margaret Oliphant later writes, the summer evening in Scotland 'is the time to see. For it is daylight, yet it is not day, and there is a quality in it which I cannot describe, it is so clear,

64. *Lady*, 3.XXVI*n.*

65. *Lady*, 1.V.

66. William Wordsworth, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful' in W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (eds), *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1974), 354.

67. 'The Emigrants' in Stuart Curran (ed.), *The Poems of Charlotte Smith* (Oxford, 1993), 138. For a detailed exploration of literary responses to different tree species during the period see the forthcoming collection, *Romantic Trees: The Literary Arboretum, 1740–1840*, edited by Anna Burton and Amanda Blake Davis.

as if every object were a reflection of itself.'[68] When the light begins to fade the world is 'full of that strange day which was night, that light without colour, in which everything was so clearly visible,' followed by 'the after–light of the wonderful, long, long summer evening, the light without shadows' in which 'if only we had a little more vision in our eyes we might see beautiful folk walking about in it, who were not of our world.'[69] This natural phenomenon is crucial to the magical transformation of the landscape in *The Lady of the Lake*. The narrow inlet that leads into Loch Katrine is depicted as a 'dark-blue mirror' in which the personified features of the landscape, in this case tall rocks and tufted knolls, can trace their faces, and the loch itself appears as 'One burnished sheet of living gold' by the light of the setting sun.[70] In the after-light, the 'shaggy mounds no longer stood, / Emerging from entangled wood, / But, wave-encircled, seemed to float, / Like castles girdled with its moat' and as the light fades and the landscape continues to alter 'each, retiring, claims to be / An islet in an inland sea.'[71] The transformation of the 'shaggy mounds' into floating castles by the enchanted light emphasises their association with fairies and suggest potential entrances to fairyland. Readers who are unfamiliar with fairy lore will find that it is elucidated in the notes. Scott quotes Graham's *Sketches Descriptive of Picturesque Scenery, on the Southern Confines of Perthshire*, one of his primary textual sources for supernatural material in the poem although not an out-of-the-way book itself, as it records 'with great accuracy, the peculiar tenets held by the Highlanders on this topic.'[72] The 'Highland fairies or the *Daoine Shi,'* we are told, are 'believed to inhabit certain round grassy eminences, where they celebrate their nocturnal festivities by the light of the moon' through which mortals can be transported to their 'secret abodes,' and 'in the vicinity of Loch Katrine' there are 'many round, conical eminences' of this kind.[73] Just as the way to 'view fair Melrose aright' is to 'visit it by the pale moon-light,' the magical transformation of Loch Katrine and the Trossachs in the poem, much like the scenery of a play, is contingent upon the correct lighting but, like many of the supernatural elements Scott incorporates, it is peculiar to Scotland and has the capacity to induce hallucinations or visionary insight.[74] The rational explanation, as the poem later observes, is that 'when the setting sun has given | Ten thousand hues to summer even (…) from their tissue, fancy frames / Aerial knights and fairy dames.'[75] At this point in the

68. Margaret Oliphant, 'The Library Window' in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine,* 159 (Jan. 1896), 1–30, 8.
69. Ibid., 18.
70. *Lady,* 1.XIII–XIV.
71. *Lady,* 1.XIII.
72. *Lady,* Notes to Canto Fourth, Note VII.
73. Ibid.
74. *Lay,* 2.I.
75. *Lady,* 6.XXVI.

poem, however, the elements merge under this 'livelier light' and, like the sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan,' Scott's transformation of earthbound hills into wave-encircled castles on floating islets symbolises a transcendence of the material world, which reinforces the suggestion of an entrance into an otherworldly realm.

Ultimately, Scott's synthesis of mythological associations, strange sensory perceptions, symbolism, and superstition culminates in a supernatural transformation of the landscape as so 'wondrous wild, the whole might seem | The scenery of a fairy dream.'[76] However, as Ainsley McIntosh observes, '[d]espite so carefully and deliberately evoking a sense of the supernatural, (…) Scott's magical world is grounded in reality, and its borders are set by the same spatial parameters as those of the natural world.'[77] The magical capacity of the landscape is also dependent upon natural conditions, and its mythology is intermingled with its topography. Although *The Lady of the Lake* is 'fantastically set' in an 'unfathomable glade' and the supernatural transformation of the landscape culminates in the explicit identification of 'this lake's romantic strand' as 'fairy land,' Scott carefully grafts 'the Marvellous' elements upon various circumstances of 'popular tradition or belief' that are not only 'peculiar to, and characteristic of, the country in which the scene is laid' but an integral part of the scene.[78] For Scott, the 'records of human superstition,' both written and oral, are not just acceptable or appropriate, but necessary for an accurate and evocative portrayal of Place.

Scott's rejection of classicism in favour of 'hoary-headed tradition,' perfectly represented by his defiant decision to house a 'witches cauldron' instead of a 'Roman Patera' in the department of his memory and his stated preference for Norse gods over Roman, native supernatural creatures over those from Greek mythology, and the relatively recent history of his own nation over the ancient battles of fallen empires, distinguishes him from many of his contemporaries and aligns him with an older poetic tradition instead.[79] In his essay 'On the Fairies of Popular Superstition,' co-authored with John Leyden in 1801 and published as the Introduction to the 'Tale of Tamlane' in the second volume of *Minstrelsy*, the distinction between the fairies of North and South Britain is emphasised as we are informed that 'the character of the Scottish Fairy is more harsh and terrific than that which is ascribed to the elves of our sister kingdom.'[80] This divergence is traced back to several sixteenth-century poets, especially Shakespeare, who

76. *Lady,* 1.XII.

77. Ainsley McIntosh, 'Land Debateable: The Supernatural in Scott's Narrative Poetry' in Susan Oliver (ed.), *Walter Scott: New Interpretations. Yearbook of English Studies*, 47 (2017), 143–160, 153.

78. *Lady,* 1.XI; XXII.

79. *LWS,* 2.322.

80. *Minstrelsy,* 2.213–4. This observation is further supported by a reference to John Stoddart's *Remarks on Local Scenery and Manners in Scotland, during the years 1799 and 1800,* vol. 2 (London, 1801), 66.

'deserting the hackneyed fictions of Greece and Rome, sought for machinery in the superstitions of their native country' and 'the creative imagination of the bard, improving upon the vulgar belief' thus transformed the perception of English fairies.[81] Consequently, the 'Fairies of South Britain gradually lost the harsher character of the dwarfs, or elves' while their Northern counterparts retained them. The difference in character is also ascribed to the 'face of the country' as 'we should naturally attribute a less malicious disposition, and a less frightful appearance, to the fays who glide by moon-light through the oaks of Windsor, than to those who haunt the solitary heaths and lofty mountains of the North.'[82] Scott follows the example of the sixteenth-century poets he admires by eschewing the 'machinery' of classical Greek and Roman literature, drawing instead upon the superstitions of his native country and operating 'a change in the original which gave them birth.'[83] He revives the legend of Michael Scott, preserves the story of Gilpin Horner, evolves the tale of Brian the Hermit, captures the natural and supernatural peculiarities of Scottish places and endows the landscape with features of fairyland to present an alternative portrayal of the 'face of the country'. Scott also explores and employs the power of the 'creative imagination of the bard' or minstrel to transform 'vulgar belief' and public perception. As Lumsden argues, 'Scott offers us, through his presentation of the minstrel, a meditation on the role of the poet and his relationship to society' and 'seems to credit poetry, and by implication language, with the ability both to communicate something of the past, and in turn to transform our relationship to it.'[84] As Scott regards the records of human superstition as part of the historical record this transformative power arguably extends to the communication of supernatural material and the reader's reception of it. With great transformative power comes great authorial responsibility and Scott's standard for 'sensible & philosophical' supernatural scholarship corresponds with the mediation between rational scepticism and 'force of evidence' that entices and authorises the reader to believe 'facts inconsistent with the general laws of nature' in his poetry.

81. *Minstrelsy*, 2.212–3.
82. *Minstrelsy*, 2.213.
83. Ibid.
84. Alison Lumsden, *Walter Scott and the Limits of Language* (Edinburgh, 2010), 70.