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Orality Interjects: Storytelling as Disruption within Walter Scott's Corpus

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Scott's use of multiple narrators and paratextual material to destabilise authoritative readings of his work has been the subject of academic investigation in recent decades. At the same time, his extensive engagement with the oral tradition has been investigated. However, Scott's presentation of storytellers and singers as disruptive figures within the text has been overlooked. This chapter argues that Scott deploys a popular early nineteenth-century perception of storytellers and singers as naïve and uneducated to undermine it, thus creating an additional layer of narrative destabilisation.

As many scholars have argued, oral tradition bearers caused a problem for Romantic writers who relied on the oral tradition but wanted to assert their own literary superiority. One way in which Romantic writers dealt with this problem was by splitting oral tradition bearers into different categories including natural geniuses who were the forerunners of the Romantic writers themselves but conveniently left in the distant past, and mindless transmitters of the oral tradition whose value lied in repeating narratives verbatim. Scott engages with this binary, especially in his notes on the oral tradition. Within his poems and novels, characters deliberately present themselves as the latter, convincing others to dismiss them as harmless. However, despite this narrative layer of dismissal, Scott's storytellers and singers resist the simple, and subtly reaffirm their own disruptive power and autonomy. Through close readings of Lady Heron, Wandering Willie, and Agelastes, this chapter will show how transcribed oral performances add to Scott's destabilisation of narrative authority.

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On 21 October 2021, to commemorate two hundred and fifty years since the birth of Walter Scott, the Scottish Storytelling Centre's international storytelling festival ran 'Global Hearth: Walter Scott and City Writers' – an event that featured four oral storytellers re-telling tales that had originally been created in a written format, including two from Walter Scott. In early 1802, Scott published the first volume of *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. It was a collection of ballads, mainly from the oral tradition, which had been collated, transcribed, added to and edited by Scott himself and a team of collaborators. The fifth edition (1812) contained ninety-six ballads and holds almost a quarter of our surviving ancient Scottish ballads as well as a number of Scott's own creations. Scott saw his final compilation as the best representations of the ballads: the perfected versions. He also presented these ballads through a literary lens, including written editorial notes, explanations, and additions. From 1802 to the twenty-first century, then, Scott's work has been testament to the symbiotic relationship between orality and (written) literature, demonstrating, as Jack Goody has argued, that the two media feed off each other.[1] In the time between 1800 and the present day, many of Scott's stories have constantly been in mediatic flux: they have been told by storytellers, acted or sung on stage and re-told in written translations and adaptations.[2]

Scott also engages with the idea of orality in his fictional works, creating multiple storytelling and singing characters. Although work has been done on the relationship between Scott's written work and the oral tradition, most scholarship has either focused on Scott as a ballad collector or on the symbolic understanding of the Romantic poet as a bard or minstrel figure. Although this research is important, it has obfuscated the role of oral storytellers and ballad singers as part of Scott's authorial project of developing a proliferation of voices which questions the ability of any one voice to hold ultimate creative and historical authority. Instead of focusing on the provenance of the stories and songs Scott includes in his work, and side-stepping the disruptive role of the inset stories and songs themselves, this article argues that Scott employs the popular yet misleading view of oral tradition-bearers as simple and apolitical while the discourse of his poetry and novels displays their power and complexity. It will conclude by arguing that by presenting this hidden complexity while simultaneously denying it, Scott causes the meanings of his work to multiply. Scott's spoken voices, therefore, are an integral part of his wider project of exploring and destabilising authorial authority. Penny Fielding, in *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture, and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction* for example, suggests Scott is destabilising authorial authority though his narrative framing and by chal-

1. Goody, Jack, 'From Oral to Written: An Anthropological Breakthrough in Storytelling,' in *The Novel*, Volume 1 ed. Franco Moretti, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 3–37.

2. For a developed analysis of the adaptations of Scott's work see Rigney, Ann, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

lenging the traditional hierarchical structure of the novel and further through the author's relationship with the reader, as well as further complicating the author's authority with the ideas of blending storytelling and historical fiction and national identity and historical representation.[3]

The power of oral performances has been theorised by post-colonial scholars as a form of resistance. They argue that whereas colonists inscribe their control, using the written word as one of their tools of repression, the oral tradition bearer can create a space of resistance where different stories can be told, marginalised voices can be heard, and everything is subject to change. Jim MacPherson, points to the postcolonial theorist, Guha, and his claim that in storytelling 'The once-again is separated from each previous instance by an irreducible hiatus, which would continue to generate variations and with them wonder, at every retelling'[4] and Macpherson argues that 'it's this sense of wonder which, I think, Guha considers to be a way of resisting the hegemonic historicity of the state.'[5] That is, it is the nature of the oral tradition to resist any authoritative narrative through its ever-changingness which offers competing discourses that challenge the dominant culture. Guha, as a leader in the subaltern studies movement and researcher in elitist bias, underlines here both the availability in the oral to tell a different story and allow stories to change. Its transient nature resists the single story that authority imposes on powerless people.[6] Likewise, Maryam Nabavi argues, in relation to Indigenous Peoples and the power of the oral tradition, that 'resistance efforts which challenge dominant culture in re-articulating and subverting dominant discourse, establish a solid base for effective social change. Oral traditions' use of story-telling indirectly challenges the status-quo by drawing on counter-hegemonic discourse, thereby allowing individuals to make sense of their reality […].'[7] The oral, therefore, has power in the very fact that it is not written down – and this power can be used for the speaker's own ends. Valentina Bold has argued that throughout the *Minstrelsy* Scott positions himself as a figure of authority outside of the tradition he is observing and evaluating.[8] In this

3. Fielding, Penny. *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

4. Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limits of World-History* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2002), 68.

5. Jim MacPherson, personal email to author, April 7, 2021.

6. I've taken this term from: Adichie, Chimamanda, 'The Danger of a Single Story,' *TED Global*. Available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

7. Navabi, Maryam, 'The Power of Oral Tradition: Critically Resisting the Colonial Footprint,' in *Anti-Colonialism and Education: The Politics of Resistance*, ed. George J. Sefa Dei and Arlo Kempf (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2006), pp. 175–192, p. 190.

8. See: Bold, Valentina, 'Ballad Raids and Spoilt Songs: Collection as Colonization,' in *The Flowering Thorn: International Ballad Studies*, ed. T. A. McKean, (2003: Logan: University of Utah Press), pp. 353–362.

way, Bold argues, he is closer to someone who uses the written word to repress others, than the powerful oral performer noted by Guha and Nabavi. But within his fiction Scott uses oral storytellers in ways which form more complex pictures, at times as resistance to a dominant discourse and at times to undermine authority. Their position, though at times in the guise of the simple storyteller, is often complicated by the story they tell or what that story tells us about them. Without positioning ourselves as specialists in the post-colonial theories discussed above, we would like to use these frameworks to discuss some of what is happening with orality in Scott's fictional works. Scott appears to instinctively understand the opportunity the oral tradition presents to subvert certain dominant authorial or narratological power. These powers can be utilised to challenge political movements within society too. This article will show how power and authority are challenged by the many voices which appear when space is given through the use of the storyteller and their stories.

The ballad collections of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although arguing for the importance of the oral, relegate its authority by dismissing and sanitising it. For example, Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) states that:

> In a polished age, like the present, I am sensible that many of these reliques of antiquity will require great allowances to be made for them. Yet have they, for the most part, a pleasing simplicity, and many artless graces, which in the opinion of no mean critics have been thought to compensate for the want of higher beauties, and, if they do not dazzle the imagination, are frequently found to interest the heart.[9]

This justification of the value of the ballads contains a denial of their power. There is an implicit expectation that Percy's readers (who by definition must be literate), have higher critical thinking skills than the creators and transmitters of the ballads. The ballad reader is invited to step outside of the oral tradition and judge it. Over three decades later, Scott is even more explicit. Like Percy, he calls upon the readers of his ballad collection, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802), to view the ballads from a critical, literate perspective. He claims that:

> the reader must not expect to find, in the border ballads, refined sentiment, and, far less, elegant expression; although the stile of such compositions has, in modern hands, been found highly susceptible of both. But passages might be pointed out, in which the rude minstrel has melted in natural pathos, or risen into rude energy.[10]

9. Percy, Thomas, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, (London, 1765. rep. 1847), p. x.

10. Scott, Walter, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, repr: https://www.mirrorservice.org/sites/ftp.ibiblio.org/pub/docs/books/gutenberg/1/2/7/4/12742/12742-h/12742-h.htm.

The word 'rude', of course, has class connotations, and immediately positions the minstrel as 'other'. It is also worthwhile to note that the minstrel's role is passive here: the minstrel 'has melted' 'or risen', suggesting that he has followed his emotional state rather than painstakingly created his work. Likewise, the minstrel is presented as singular, denying the often-corporate origins of stories and songs. In this context, the performer is merely like a written page; he or she is not part of the creative process and therefore does not hold autonomous power. A specific example is provided in Scott's introduction to 'Auld Maitland':

> It is only known to a few old people, upon the sequestered banks of the Ettrick; and is published, as written down from the recitation of the mother of Mr. James Hogg, who sings, or rather chaunts it, with great animation. She learned the ballad from a blind man, who died at the advanced age of ninety, and is said to have been possessed of much traditionary knowledge.[11]

Scott's portrayal of the oral transmitters in this example denies them their agency, making them appear powerless and without autonomy. Firstly, they are an exclusionary group – the song is only known to 'a few old people' in a 'sequestered' area. This is not the orality of the coffee house or the music hall; it is not the popular orality of the people that could lead to social unrest. Even if the oral transmitters are influential in their own communities, their isolation dictates that their influence is limited.

Alongside this dismissal of oral tradition bearers, the Romantics often appropriated orality. Gravil, who has done extensive research on the way in which Wordsworth styled himself as a bard or druid (two terms that Gravil claims Wordsworth conflates), perceives the adoption of the oral as political: 'The variety of druidism selected by Wordsworth's imagination sometimes resists the prevailing liberal or even Jacobin reconstructions of druidism in the late eighteenth century, reverting to 'a more than Roman' sense of druids as men of power'.[12] Wordsworth is allowed power, here, as a literary individual whereas bards and minstrels are stripped of theirs. Scott's own self-representation as a minstrel likewise grants him authority – he is the rightful heir of a national tradition which is, by its very nature, political. What this political power entails, however, is uncertain. Katie Trumpener argues that the oral was used throughout the Romantic period to strengthen cultural nationalism, and Scott, with his focus on

11. Ibid.

12. Gravil, Richard, *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation 1787–1842*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 20.

awakening the harp of the north,[13] seems to support this.[14] Simpson, on the other hand, argues that the oral in Scott, particularly minstrelsy, is used in the service of Unionism.[15] There are, therefore, contradictions in the way Scott uses the oral tradition: styling his editorial persona as a critical authority in *Minstrelsy* is part of a wider, cultural sanitisation of the power of the oral but he still recognises that he is building his literary career on it, and he creates a literary persona who has authority but does not use it clearly or unproblematically.

Fielding considers the class-based context of this sanitisation of the oral, claiming that 'Anxiety about the behaviour of a "peasant" culture led to a splitting of the image of the oral into a romanticised and idealised form and a demotion of the status of popular orality to a concept to be called "illiteracy"' that could be ignored.'[16] In this case, the power of the oral, as discussed by Guha and others, is stripped – by relegating the people's oral culture to a non-culture, it could be rendered powerless. Whereas real oral culture of the long eighteenth century often challenged those in power, the oral inscribed in what is now canonical Romanticism is often sanitised: the origin of oral tales and songs as corporate and from the lower classes is also scrubbed. Caroline Jackson-Houlston outlines three methods that were employed by writers to do this:

> Authors working in a high culture context were reluctant to admit the existence of a creative impulse among the unlettered and ill-educated, and typically operated a number of devices to avoid such a recognition. One of these was straight denial: there was no such culture. Another was the denigration of the value of this culture, especially of street songs derived from the music-hall. A third is the recuperation of the popular art of the past by ascribing it to a mythologised minstrel figure and by absorbing it into the *literary* culture of the present through such collections as Percy's *Reliques*, which by the Victorian period was a literary classic.[17]

As part of this third approach, contemporary storytellers and singers were often relegated into unthinking transmitters, passing on the genius of an unknown

13. See: Online exhibition by the University of Aberdeen which explores Scott's focus on awakening the harp of the north: https://exhibitions.abdn.ac.uk/university-collections/exhibits/show/walter-scott-and-song.

14. Trumpener, Katie, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

15. Simpson, Erik. 'Orality and Improvisation,' in *The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism*. Ed David Duff. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 373–387.

16. Fielding, Penny. *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 23.

17. Jackson-Houlston, C.M., *Ballads, Songs and Snatches: The Appropriation of Folk Song and Popular Culture in British Nineteenth-Century Prose*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999). pp. 4–5.

ancestral bard without their own agency. The power of the oral performer, as explained by Guha and Nabavi, could be dismissed in favour of writers, who were often represented as the true inheritors of these stories and songs.

Throughout Scott's poetical and prose works, characters associated with orality are often 'othered' or dismissed, which destabilises their power. Scott's first major poem, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), has a frame narrative in which an impoverished minstrel performs the song which is the main part of the poem. Scott appears to consciously deploy the sort of language he uses in the introduction to 'Auld Maitland', calling the minstrel 'infirm', 'old', and the 'last' of the Border minstrels.[18] Additionally, the critical editorial persona he employs in the *Minstrelsy* is redeployed in the poem's introduction, in which he justifies his poetical choices by claiming that:

> As the description of scenery and manners was more the object of the Author than a combined and regular narrative, the plan of the Ancient Metrical Romance was adopted, which allows greater latitude in this respect than would be consistent with the dignity of a regular Poem. […] The machinery also, adopted from popular belief, would have seemed puerile in a Poem which did not partake of the rudeness of the old Ballad, or Metrical Romance.[19]

The words 'dignity' to refer to work that was originally conceived as written, and 'puerile' to refer to elements taken from oral tradition (particularly supernatural tales) suggests that the editorial persona and the implied reader share a critical, educated stance that is outwith and above orality. Despite this, however, the reader cannot remain in this position: if the poem is to be read and enjoyed, the reader has to suspend disbelief enough to accept the presence of folk beliefs; elements of the poem, such as the folkloric Gilpin Horner, for example, are not explained away in the poem itself.

In Scott's wider work, there is a similar tension between writing and orality that has been explored by some key scholars, many of whom have considered the role of oral performers in Scott's poetry and prose. Penny Fielding, for example, argues that:

> The oral is an uncertain territory in the Waverley Novels. It is the source of unofficial power and an important repository of personal and historical memory, yet it either remains on the margin of, or is sacrificed to, a more dominant authority. Characters associated with orality move in and

18. Scott, Walter, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. Available at: https://www.theotherpages.org/poems/minstrel.html#introduction.

19. Ibid.

> out of novels, exercising powers often outside the law yet usually ending up dead, or exiled from a social order that cannot contain them. The oral, as the territory of the irrational and the illegitimate, is frequently associated with the dangerously female. Oral women question the assumption that the oral is natural; they are either 'unnatural' (Meg and Madge and described as unusually tall and with masculine features), or too natural (Effie is an illegitimate mother). Such women threaten the social law and the laws of family relationships: Effie is suspected of infanticide, Madge Wildfire is implicated in infanticide, and Norna suspects herself of involuntary parricide.[20]

As Fielding has shown, characters associated with orality are dangerous in Scott's work, but she goes on to argue that the dangerous oral is usually subsumed into the service of the protagonist and becomes narrative dead ends – the characters die or disappear, meaning that their orality no longer has a disruptive power. This returns us to Jackson-Houlston's understanding of the Romantic urge to sanitise the oral by making it belong to the past.[21] For different reasons, the women discussed by Fielding are all vulnerable in society and thus are the voices that potentially could be raised in protest. If fictional life were to adhere to real life, the women's powerless status and oral interjection would be a threat to power as Guha has shown. However, their vulnerability is overlooked by their (sometimes unintended) help to the more socially stable characters and their ultimate demise: their voice of protest is silenced. It may, therefore, appear that when powerless characters' orality is depicted in Scott's written work, its disruptive authority dissipates.

However, a closer inspection reveals that key characters in Scott's work deliberately present themselves as without authority, while simultaneously using their orality to assert power. *Waverley*'s (1814) Flora Mac-Ivor is the most well-known example of this. After Waverley asks for an explanation of a song that implicates him in the Jacobite uprising, Flora leads him to a romantic waterfall to sing a translation. Flora uses the appearance of simplicity to suggest that her orality has no political stance. However, this simplicity is artificial, having been carefully curated by Flora. This can be seen in the description of the location that she takes Waverley to:

> Mossy banks of turf were broken and interrupted by huge fragments of rock, and decorated with trees and shrubs, some of which had been planted under the direction of Flora, but so cautiously, that they added to the grace, without diminishing the romantic wildness of the scene.[22]

20. Fielding, *Writing and Orality*, pp. 27–28.
21. See Jackson-Houlston above.
22. Scott, Walter, *Waverley*, ed. P.D. Garside (1814; Edinburgh, 2007), p. 113–114.

Flora's curation of the space adds 'grace' to the 'wildness', thus drawing out the 'romantic' potential of the location. This scene has been popular with readers and artists, with illustrations depicting its 'romantic wildness' as Flora designed it: *Flora in the Glen of Glennaquoich*, 1832,[23] *Flora*, 1832,[24] and *Flora MacIvor at the Waterfall in Waverley*, 1893,[25] for example. *Waverley*'s readers, therefore, have been as entranced by Flora's creation as Waverley, suggesting that even they may overlook the power struggle in the scene.

Flora, aiming to persuade Waverley to join the Jacobite cause, wants to distract him from the politics of the song (which includes Waverley as one of the Jacobite supporters) while still prompting him to give his support. To do this, she does not reply immediately to Waverley's request to translate the song, but rather leads him to her artificially created 'natural' spot, claiming that 'To speak in the poetical language of my own country, the seat of the Celtic Muse is in the mist of the secret and solitary hill, and her voice in the murmur of the mountain stream. He who woos her must love the barren rock more than the fertile valley, and the solitude of the desert better than the festivity of the hall.'[26] Although she is using orality (through the combination of Mac-Murrough's song and her own) for political ends, she redirects Waverley's perception so that he focuses on the aesthetics of the experience of listening rather than the meaning of the song. By the time she sings her partial translation of the song, which she explains includes 'a practical admonition to the fair-haired son of the stranger'[27] who 'is affectionately conjured to remember that his ancestors were distinguished by their loyalty, as well as by their courage',[28] Waverley is 'like a knight of romance'[29] and unable to speak in response to Flora's charms. Despite her claims that she merely offers an 'imperfect translation',[30] Flora has curated Waverley's experience of intense 'romantic delight' in order to persuade him to join their cause. She therefore exploits the idea that orality is apolitical and simple to deceive Waverley. She hides her power under her self-presentation as aesthetically charming but politically disinterested admirer of the Celtic muse. She uses the seemingly simple occupation and setting of a bard to position herself as powerless, but she is, in reality, a political figure and her cause is political.

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23. 'Flora in the Glen of Glennaquoich,' engraved by Charles Heath after Charles Robert Leslie. From *The Waverley Album* (London, 1832). Available at: http://illustratingscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/advquery.html.

24. 'Flora,' engraved by Francis Engleheart after Louisa Sharpe. From *The Keepsake for 1833* (London, 1832). Available at: http://illustratingscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/itemshow.php?id=613.

25. 'Flora MacIvor at the waterfall in Waverley' etching by R.W. Macbeth in the 1893 edition. Available at: http://www.standpointmag.co.uk/node/2825/full.

26. Scott, *Waverley*, p. 114.

27. Scott, *Waverley*, p. 116.

28. Ibid.

29. Scott, *Waverley*, p. 112.

30. Scott, *Waverley*, p. 114.

Another character who uses the perception that orality is simple to deceive others appears earlier in Scott's oeuvre. *Marmion*'s (1808) Lady Heron is a singer who, like Flora, uses the perception of orality as simplistic while simultaneously using it for her own ends. Like Flora at the waterfall, Lady Heron's song, 'Lochinvar', has been frequently extracted from its context,[31] suggesting that its context (in this case, its singer) is unimportant. Additionally, 'Lochinvar' appears as a simple and adventurous story, in which Lochinvar, the young eponymous hero, kidnaps his willing beloved from her wedding. The jaunty refrain and praise for Lochinvar permeates the story: 'So daring in love, and so dauntless in war,/ Have ye e'er heard of gallant like young Lochinvar?'[32] He is juxtaposed with the 'craven'[33] bridegroom, and as Ellen's desire for him is evident, it is easy for the reader or listener to approve of Lochinvar's actions.

However, just as Flora's performance at the waterfall becomes complex and political when the wider context is understood, so too does 'Lochinvar' become problematic when its singer is considered. Although Lady Heron presents her song as simple, she is characterised by artifice. Her archness and pleasure at court is clearly juxtaposed to the representation of the neglected Queen Margaret. Of Lady Heron Scott writes: 'O'er James's heart, the courtiers say,/ Sir Hugh the Heron's wife held sway.'[34] For Lady Heron, and for the equally captivating Queen of France, James 'madly planned/ The ruin of himself and land'[35] whereas:

> Nor England's fair, nor France's Queen
> Were worth one pearl-drop, bright and sheen,
> From Margaret's eye that fell,–
> His own Queen Margaret, who, in Lithgow's bower,
> All lonely sat, and wept the weary hour.'[36]

The differences between the two ladies are obvious and is further highlighted by the seriousness of the historical context of the poem. Within the context of the lead-up to the disastrous battle of Flodden Field, the reader is led to believe that James's interest in Lady Heron is foolishness at best, or traitorous at worst. Neither is Lady Heron an innocent subject of James's gaze: she is persistently described as using her wiles to gain power over men.

31. The poem is commonly anthologised, including, for example, in *Voices of Scotland: An Anthology of Scottish Poetry for Levels 2 and 3* (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2019).
32. Scott, Walter, *Marmion*, ed. Ainsley McIntosh (1808; Edinburgh, 2018), p. 144.
33. Scott, *Marmion*, p. 143.
34. *Scott, Marmion*, p. 141.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.

Lady Heron's song is a self-conscious performance. From the moment she stands, she is aware of the persona she wishes to present, and the effect she is likely to have on her audience. At first, she pretends to dislike the attention:

> She could not, would not, durst not play!
> At length, upon the harp, with glee,
> Mingled with arch simplicity,
> A soft, yet lively, air she rung,
> While thus the wily lady sung:[37]

Lady Heron engages with discourses of female performance and oral tradition. She pretends that she is unwilling to perform, both because of perceptions of female modesty, and to represent herself as a natural, simple, transmitter of oral tradition. However, her words are belied by the jaunty repetition of 'could not, would not, durst not,' followed by the exclamation mark, which allows the reader to hear the playfulness in Lady Heron's apparently self-deprecating words. Likewise, her self-conscious engagement with 'innocent' orality as expressed through the words 'simplicity' and 'soft' are undermined by her 'glee' at performing, and the adjectives 'arch' and 'wily' used to describe her.

The description of Lady Heron after the ballad similarly depicts her as the opposite of the passionate ingénue she presents herself as:

> The witching dame to Marmion threw
> A glance, where seemed to reign
> The pride that claims applauses due,
> And of her royal conquest, too,
> A real or feigned disdain:
> Familiar was the look, and told
> Marmion and she were friends of old.
> The king observed their meeting eyes
> With something like displeased surprise;
> For monarchs ill can rivals brook,
> Even in a word, or smile, or look.[38]

The simplicity that Lady Heron pretends to assume is overthrown by both the description of her as a 'witching dame' and the actions which she employs. Regardless of whether Lady Heron's motives are political or personal, she deliberately shows the king her preference of Marmion over him, which

37. Scott, *Marmion*, p. 142.
38. Scott, *Marmion*, p. 144.

directly leads Henry to dismiss Marmion – the road to war begins. Lady Heron is neither ignorant nor simple; she uses her orality to play people for her own destructive purposes. With such a teller, the tale of 'Lochinvar' assumes a hue of instability. Lochinvar's free spirit cannot be unproblematic when it reflects his dangerous singer.

At the end of Scott's career, he creates another oral performer who deliberately plays the part of an unthinking transmitter of the oral tradition in order to mask his political agenda. *Count Robert of Paris*'s (1831) Agelastes deliberately plays the part of the sanitised, safe, powerless old storyteller in order to deceive others and garner political power. In a reversal of expectations, it is the storyteller who is wily and powerful, and the listeners – in this case, Count Robert and his wife, Brenhilda – who view the world through simplistic lenses. Not only content with appearing as a storyteller, Agelastes declaims the 'veracity' of his outlandish story by referring to different story conventions:

> Thus the curious stories which I have assembled, are beyond the researches of other men, and not to be laid before those whose deeds of valour are to be bounded by the ordinary probabilities of every-day nature. No romancer of your romantic country, ever devised such extraordinary adventures out of his own imagination, and to feed the idle wonder of those who sat listening around, as those which I know, not of idle invention, but of real positive existence, with the means of achieving and accomplishing the conditions of each adventure.[39]

Agelastes plays on the idea present in the *Lay of the Last Minstrel* and Scott's introduction to 'Auld Maitland', of the old storyteller being the last in his line, truer than inauthentic creators, and the sole bearer of oral history. In Agelastes's portrayal of a storyteller, the tradition is carried only by one person – himself. When this fictional storyteller dies, he suggests, the tradition literally dies with him as his stories are rarely told. Likewise, he contrasts his stories with those created out of romance from human imagination. He therefore establishes himself as an opponent of the artificiality of romance. However, much of the humour of the scene comes from the fact that the story he tells is ludicrously outlandish, with dragons, magic and a sleeping princess. He draws attention to the contrast between simple oral tradition and the insincerity of other literary art forms as a way to hide the obvious insincerity of the outlandish tale that he weaves and the danger that the story hides.

In a reversal of the popular portrayal of the naïve storyteller, Agelastes is the wily, educated one whilst his listeners are the simple, gullible, and passionate

39. Scott, Walter, *Count Robert of Paris*, ed. P.D. J.H. Alexander (1831; Edinburgh, 2006), p. 116.

ones. Agelastes, a member of Alexius Comnenus' court, is said to have 'the same cunning as the elder Brutus, who disguised his talents under the semblance of an idle jester,'[40] disguises himself as a storytelling and sits by the roadside until he is approached by Count Robert and his wife, Brenhilda. After meeting him, Count Robert declares that 'we have met with one of those excellent men whom the knights of yore were wont to find sitting by springs, by crosses, and by altars, ready to direct the wandering knight where fame was to be found.'[41] Throughout Agelastes' story about the Princess of Zulichium, who was enchanted by a spurned magician into a mystical sleep, and then was turned into a dragon when kissed by a Frankish knight, neither Count Robert nor Brenhilda express any doubt of the veracity of what they are hearing. Instead, the story is interrupted by Brenhilda's displeasure of the detailed description of the beautiful, sleeping, fifteen-year-old princess. The folly of their belief is further highlighted two chapters later when Brenhilda declares that 'I have hitherto thought the stories of black men as idle as those which minstrels tell of fairies and ghosts,'[42] seemingly ignorant of her own status as a credulous listener. Although Robert and Brenhilda believe that they are superior to the simple people who believe stories of fairies and ghosts, they cannot distinguish between fact and fiction; a failing which Agelastes uses to his advantage.

Despite expressing no doubt about Agelastes's story, the listeners interrupt it. Torn between anxiety over the prospect of her husband seeking for and kissing the Princess Zulichium, dedication to completing a vow Robert had previously made, and concern for the enchanted princess, Brenhilda first seeks to divert her husband from the potential quest, then, after a declaration of love and admiration from him, succumbs to a 'burst of affection'.[43] As a result, her husband refuses the quest. Brenhilda then offers to go instead of him. Agelastes, however, wishes to divert Count Robert, not his wife, and so abandons the idea of seducing them on a quest with a story and instead invites them to spend the evening with him. Even though his story has failed to achieve his aims, his position as a storyteller is enough to persuade Robert and Brenhilda to attend him. Robert says: '"The company of a minstrel befits the highest birth, honours the highest rank, and adds to the greatest achievements; and the invitation does us too much credit to be rejected."'[44] Therefore, the two follow Agelastes and eventually are imprisoned by him.

While Flora, Lady Heron and Agelastes pretend to be simple transmitters of orality in order to hide their agendas, Willie in *Redgauntlet* (1824), encourages

40. Scott, *Count Robert of Paris*, p. 78.
41. Scott, *Count Robert of Paris*, p. 117.
42. Scott, *Count Robert*, p. 129.
43. Scott, *Count Robert*, p. 122.
44. Scott, *Count Robert*, p. 124.

his listener to see beyond his appearance to recognise the power of the story he has to tell. In many respects, Willie embodies the powerlessness of the oral. As an itinerant, blind, fiddle-player and storyteller, he has no political authority. He also reflects the old man whom Scott declares Margaret Laidlaw learnt the ballad of 'Auld Maitland' from. Darsie describes him as, 'loosened from the ordinary bonds of civil society'[45] and that:

> there was no mistaking… [his]…profession […]. The man's long loose-bodied great-coat, […] the fiddle-case, with its straps, which lay beside him, and a small knapsack which might contain his few necessaries; a clear grey eye; a grizzled beard long unshaved; features which, in contending with many a storm, had not lost a wild and careless expression of glee.[46]

Willie has few material belongings, does not have the ability to keep himself neatly shaven, and is subject to the vagaries of the weather. This description suggests powerlessness and innocence: he has retained his 'wild and careless expression of glee', suggesting both immaturity and a closeness to the wild side of nature that is often associated with the female characters Fielding lists.[47] Like these female characters, Willie is associated with the past, as he was previously a member of Redgauntlet's camp, and his words bring about narrative closure and thus a promised future for the protagonist. His role in the novel, therefore, seems to be supplementary and beneficial. Instead of resisting hegemonic political authority with ever-changing narratives and destabilising words, Willie appears to uphold power.

But there is a challenge in Willie's storytelling that aligns it to the real-life power of orality noted by the postcolonial theorists previously discussed. The authority that Willie is challenging, however, is not primarily political but rather narratological. Whereas Darsie and, to some extent, the reader, dismiss Willie as a helpful transmitter of the oral tradition, Willie himself draws attention to the fact that what he shares are *stories*, and what he is a complete person with the ability to distort what he says and use it to manipulate others. When Darsie insists, after only having met Wandering Willie for a short time, that he only travels with, 'honest folks like yourself, Willie',[48] Willie quickly replies:

> Honest folk like me! – How do ye ken whether I am honest, or what I am? – I may be the Devil himsell for what ye ken; for he has the power to

45. Scott, *Redgauntlet*, p. 200.
46. Scott, *Redgauntlet* p. 79.
47. See above.
48. Scott, Walter, *Redgauntlet*, ed. G.A.M. Wood with David Hewitt (1824; Edinburgh, 1997), p. 86.

> come disguised like an angel of light; and besides, he is a prime fiddler – He played a sonata to Corelli ye ken.[49]

Darsie, and potentially the reader, have read Willie as a simple, powerless storyteller, just as Scott imagines the old man who shared 'Auld Maitland' with Margaret Laidlaw. Willie, however, rejects this. Not only does he remind naïve Darsie not to trust everyone he meets, but he also stakes his claim as an unknown to the reader, reminding them not to pigeonhole him into their perception of what an oral tradition-bearer should be.

Willie reinforces this throughout his conversation with Darsie. The younger man asks for a story – even acknowledging he prefers a story of superstition – not fully understanding Willie has already begun introducing the tale. The storyteller continues:

> 'It is very true' said the blind man, 'that when I am tired of scraping thairm or singing ballants, I whiles make a tale serve the turn amang the country bodies; and I have some fearsome anes, that make the auld carlines shake on the settle, and the bits o' bairns skirl on their minnies out frae their beds. But this that I am gaun to tell you was a thing that befell in our ain house in my father's time […] I tell it to you, that it may be a lesson to you, that are but a young, thoughtless chap, wha ye draw up wi' on a lonely road; for muckle was the dool and care that came o't to my guidsire.'[50]

Willie is very clear here; he has a story to tell Darsie that is directly relevant to his life. He even draws attention to the fact that there is a 'lesson' for Darsie. If Darsie were to understand this lesson, he would have some power to challenge his powerful uncle; this is a true opportunity for the oral to resist political power. Willie challenges the Romantic sanitisation of the oral and himself as an innocent transmitter of it – this is a claim to power.

Darsie, however, misses the power and autonomy in Willie's words in the first instance. He sees and hears nothing but the simplicity of a folk tale in the narrative. He views it only as an entertaining performance and writes to Alan:

> He commenced his tale accordingly, in a distinctive narrative tone of voice, which he raised and depressed with considerable skill; at times sinking almost into a whisper, and turning his clear but sightless eyeballs upon my face, as if it had been possible for him to witness the impression which his narrative made upon my features.[51]

49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.

Darsie is delighted by the story, but he dismisses it merely as entertainment. Instead of recognising the power of the story and storyteller, he overlooks the importance of the story and relegates the authority of the storyteller. It is not only Darsie, however, that undervalues the political power in Willie's words. Scott obfuscates it in the dialogue of Willie: his longwinded speech, quoted above, as well as his minimisation of his usual listeners as 'bits o' bairns', and 'auld carlines', for example, implying an almost folkloric and definitely powerless audience, suggest that he is someone who is charming to listen to but not an authoritative figure in the text. It is only when the reader takes time to carefully consider his words that Willie's latent power becomes apparent. The storyteller, therefore, is described as apparently powerless yet is granted hidden authority.

These four performers expose the misconception of the oral tradition-bearer as simple, sanitised and apolitical. As Guha discovered in relation to the oral tradition in reality, the oral in Scott's work has the power to destabilise authority. But even here, there is not a dichotomy; the four storytellers looked at in this article are well aware of their power and use it to forward their own ends. Out of the four, Wandering Willie is the closest to the image of the storyteller manifested in Percy's and Scott's paratextual notes to their ballad collections – not only is he a genuine tradition-bearer, but he also looks the part, leading to him being overlooked. However, he draws attention to his own power, warning Darsie to listen closely, weigh up what he hears, and not to trust anyone, especially a storyteller. Flora, Lady Heron and Agelastes have less claim to the title of storyteller: they are political figures who use their orality in specific moments for specific purposes. Yet, their stories are taken as simplistic and apolitical by their credible listeners both within and outwith the texts – Waverley who forgets his purpose for asking for the song, and the illustrators who depict the romance of the scene; Lady Heron's listeners who do not challenge her, and the readers of *Marmion* who clipped and anthologised 'Lochinvar'; and Count Robert and Brenhilda who let themselves be led into danger by trusting a storyteller. However, Scott does not abandon the trope of a storyteller who does not know the power of what they say, or who are exploited by their listeners, as Fielding has shown in relation to Madge, Meg, Norna and Effie. The complexity in which Scott portrays storytellers, therefore, does not merely indicate that the oral has the ability to disrupt hegemonic power, but rather that the presence of the power of the oral, in the hands of both those who are aware of their power and those who are not, suggests that spoken authority itself is subject to challenge.

This is part of Scott's wider concern with authorial authority, and his polyphonic approach to narrative. David Hewitt looks at this in relation to *The Tale of Old Mortality* (1816), when the novel itself is supposed to be the oral narrative of a travelling, deceased storyteller:

> However, there are also considerable difficulties in viewing the text in this way. The relationship described is actually part of the fiction. The tale-teller, Peter Pattieson, is fictitious. Dramatising the narrator in *The Tale of Old Mortality* has a significant methodological and ideological purpose: it allows Scott to discuss sources and to explain his historical perspective. But given Scott's love of role-playing, given the secrecy with which the authorship of the Waverley novels was handled, given the Scott motto 'clausus tutus ero', one is forced to conclude that the fictitious author is intended to conceal the real one, and to protect him from the contact of real relationships. Nor is Pattieson's matter oral in origin either. Although he tells us that he acted like a ballad-collector, and went around gathering stories from the descendants of those who participated in the events of the Covenanting period, the real sources are overwhelming literary, as will be seen in the explanatory notes to the Edinburgh Edition of *The Tale of Old Mortality*. The audience which has been discussed is also part of the fiction. The reference to the 'modern menial' and other signs of shared experience could be seen as a way of predicating an audience rather than as a response to one; and so it can be argued that the rhetoric of the fiction does not reflect a real social relationship of addresser and addressee but is a way of simulating a fictive relationship.[52]

By naming the novel after the fictious storyteller, who only appears for a few pages, Scott is drawing attention to his importance, perhaps aligning the Author of Waverley with the storytelling Old Mortality as the author of the tale in the same way in which Scott figures himself as a minstrel in his poetry. However, as Hewitt has shown above, this reading is immediately problematised by the text itself, thus denying Old Mortality, Peter Pattieson *and* The Author of Waverley as definitive, creative voices in the text. Whereas Nabavi and Guha argue that the oral gives historically oppressed people the ability to subvert hegemonic discourse through the ever-shifting nature of the oral, no-one is given ultimate power in Scott's written formulation. The oppressed in *The Tale of Old Mortality* would be Old Morality himself, but his voice is allowed no more or less dominance than the Author of Waverley, himself an increasing powerful figure in the real world.

By investigating the storytellers and singers in Scott's work, it becomes clear that although the oral is closely connected with power, while simultaneously being presented as naïve and powerless, it is not a simple formulation of truth-speaking-to-power. Rather, the presence of powerful, politically active

52. Hewitt, David, 'The Phonocentric Scott' in *Scott in Carnival*, Eds. J.H. Alexander and David Hewitt, (Aberdeen: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1993), pp. 581–593, p. 586.

oral tradition-bearers causes a fracturing of power in which no-one has total authority. This is part of Scott's overall use of paratextual and intertextual voices. Jan Gordon argues in relation to the voices of gossip in Scott's work that 'The sublime evacuation in Scott's novels is carried by an economically functional orality produced by a series of subaltern gossips. Representing an alternative narrative devoted to adding value rather than the fruitless recuperation of an original Word of patrimony, these people committed to a supplementing model of orality,'[53] and Mary Cullinan points out the 'multiplicity of truth' is caused by multiple narrators (including Wandering Willie in *Redgauntlet*) and discusses how 'we remain constantly aware of the subjective nature of the narrative' through the 'palimpsest of narrators'.[54] Alison Lumsden brings these points together in her discussion of *The Antiquary* (1816) in which she states that 'What is significant, however, is not only that the novel contains within it a polyphony of voices (reminiscent of the ways in which the poetry splinters into multiple strands and genres), but also that Scott resists reasserting any definite sense of hierarchy upon these competing utterances within the text.'[55]

This article has looked at how four of Scott's storytellers and singers use the oral tradition for their own ends. While research on the oral tradition in the real world has shown that it can be used as a tool against hegemony, it is used slightly differently within Scott's work. In the examples discussed, the perception of oral performers as unthinking, apolitical transmitters of narrative is exploited for personal and political gain. However, this gain is not unproblematic, making the oral performance yet another claim to narrative authority within a polyphonic narrative. Looking at orality within Scott as a destabilising narrative layer, therefore, illuminates how Scott resists any straight-forward reading of his works even when his editorial personae argue otherwise.

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Pictures

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