

## Meg Dods - Before the Curtain

Barbara Bell and John Ramage

Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh

The intention of this paper is to explore the relationship between two manuscript versions of the same nineteenth-century theatre piece in order to establish both the probable order of their writing, and to illuminate some of the piece's inner workings and its relationship to a contemporary theatrical form, the pantomime. The piece in question is the 'Address' written by Sir Walter Scott for Charles Mackay to play in character as Meg Dods, the formidable landlady in *St. Ronan's Well*. The paper is the result of a collaboration between a theatre historian/dramaturg and an actor, John Ramage, at once a scriptwriter of traditional pantomimes and one of the leading Scottish Dames of his generation.



**Illustration 1:** John Ramage in *Mother Goose*, written by John Ramage, Ian Grieve and Michael Winter (first performed at Perth Theatre, 12 November 1997).  
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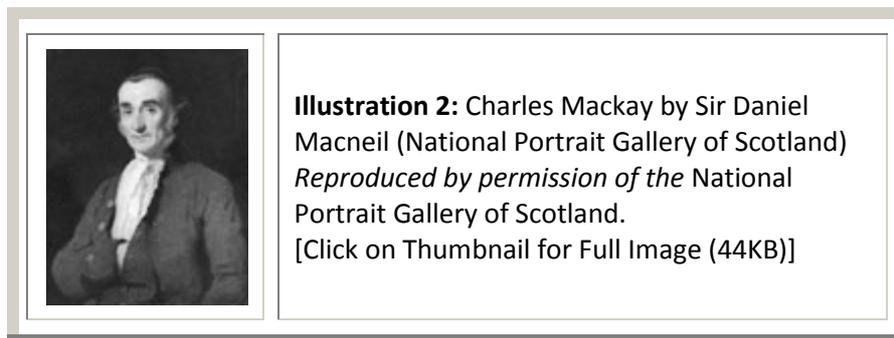
As a form, pantomime has an ancient history and infinite variations, but the Dame figure of the modern panto, who emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, has, by now, some unvarying characteristics which mark out her character and role in the piece. They are also characteristics shared by Widow Twankey, Mother Goose and Meg Dods. She is a woman 'of a certain age', a woman with a past in which men may have figured, but she is currently alone - nevertheless, there is a vitality about her. She is a capable woman of modest origins, coping in reduced circumstances, warm-hearted, garrulous, able to speak to her betters, always speaking her mind, but sometimes in difficulty with her vocabulary. When she tries to speak formally she may mangle her words and the real force and vitality of her language shows in her use of the vernacular. She is sentimental, looking wistfully back to a more comfortable past and always at odds with the present. She knows everyone, particularly the audience and their situation. David Mayer's study of 'The Sexuality of Pantomime'<sup>1</sup> deals in depth with the psychological origins of this role, which he defines as 'based on...men's deep ambivalence toward women'.<sup>2</sup> John Ramage, drawing on years of interaction with panto audiences, characterises it as a deep-rooted need in the audience to understand women in a way that cannot sully the untouchable image that we all carry with us - of Mother/Madonna/virgin/sister - precisely because the woman is played by a man and so any outrageous behaviour can be enjoyed or dismissed at will as a typical male distortion.

What the authors have been endeavouring to do is to re-animate an early nineteenth-century performance text, collecting together material evidence in the form of different versions of the text, background information on the performance context, eyewitness accounts and visual images. By combining this data with the skills of an actor located in a performance tradition reaching back into the last century, we hope to demonstrate the depth and richness of theatre writing which can only sound faintly from the page. This is what theatre archaeologists might call 'second-order performance'.<sup>3</sup> This paper, combining a central text, slide stills and audio-visual presentation, stands in some relationship to the work of the archaeologist who takes an understanding of how a modern

lizard moves to generate the moving image of a prehistoric creature extant only in fossilised form - with the important caveat that since that skeletal Scott text never possessed a wholly independent existence on the stage, today we are simply following another actor's example by creating a 'new' animal.

On 5 June 1824 W. H. Murray, then actor-manager of the Edinburgh Theatre Royal located in Shakespeare Square, took a benefit night. These nights, happening once a season, represented for many performers the difference between solvency and hardship, but for a manager their success or failure also represented an expression of the audience's approval of his/her management over the preceding weeks.

It was a commonplace for some novelty to be put forward as a draw for a benefit and Murray proposed to crown his night with the first performance at that theatre of a play from *St. Ronan's Well*, the most recent novel by the author, adaptations of whose works formed the core of the Scottish National Drama and the 'sheet-anchor' of the Theatre Royal's treasury.<sup>4</sup> The novel had come out in mid-December and had been adapted by James Robinson Planché for representation at the Adelphi Theatre, London on 19 January 1824. Now, Murray proposed to use an adaptation of *St. Ronan's Well*<sup>5</sup> as the first half of his benefit evening's entertainment. Not only did the proposed adaptation represent the latest in a largely successful series of pieces with a ready audience awaiting its appearance, but there was a good part in it for Murray as Sir Peregrine Touchwood, quite in his 'line of business' and for which he subsequently received glowing reviews.<sup>6</sup> However, there was one major deficiency to the proposal, in that there was no obvious part in the novel/play for the Theatre Royal's major asset in the National Drama - Charles Mackay.



The 'real Mackay' was by this time both known by his role in *Rob Roy* simply as 'The Bailie' and in addition was such a looked-for contributor to the National Drama that, when Murray came to adapt *The Abbot*<sup>7</sup> for the Edinburgh Theatre Royal the following year, 1825, he would create a new character, Sandy Macfarlane, to show off Mackay's particular talents. However, as things stood, Mackay had no part. The principal Scots comic character in the novel, Meg Dods, had been played at the Adelphi by a Mrs. Daly; now it was decided to have Mackay play the formidable landlady. Mackay regularly played one of the Witches in *Macbeth*, but Meg was a role which clearly demanded something beyond the grotesque. Here was a coup for the Manager - a new play with a good part for himself and an intriguing piece of casting for one of the company's stars to draw in *that* actor's particular fans.

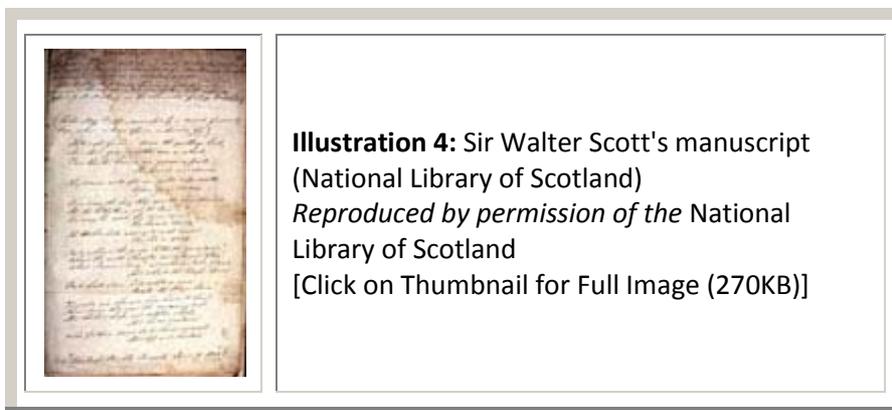
If such an experiment was to be made then Murray would make the most of it by also turning over to 'Meg' that regular slot on a manager's benefit bill, the address, in which Murray, or often his sister, Mrs. Henry Siddons, addressed the audience with thanks for their support over the past season and an appeal for their continued patronage of the theatre. Who better to write the address than the creator of Meg Dods, a friend to the theatre and a fan of Mackay's work, who understood very well the precarious financial position of most actors? So Scott was approached, entered into

the spirit of the occasion with relish, and Murray made sure that the public was acquainted with the full measure of the treat being offered to them.



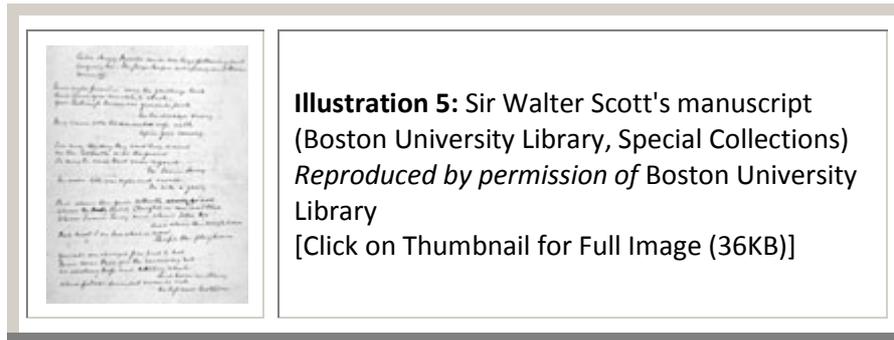
Meg Dodds,<sup>8</sup> of St. Ronan's Aulton, by Mr. MACKAY  
Who, for this night only, has kindly consented to attempt the character  
At the End of the Play, Mr. MACKAY will, in the character of Meg Dodds, deliver  
**AN ADDRESS**  
Written expressly for this Occasion.

There are two surviving versions of this address, both in Scott's hand. The better-known manuscript is held by the National Library of Scotland (in further text: NLS text) and appears to have been sent to Constable, in October 1824, along with another theatre piece which Scott says he 'recovered...with great difficulty'.<sup>9</sup> Scott may not have recovered the *St. Ronan's Well* manuscript at all: at least the NLS text is a copy of the version which appeared in *The Edinburgh Weekly Journal* four days after the performance. Scott includes quotations from that review at the top of the manuscript.



The handwriting is comparatively clear and flowing and there are few crossings out.

The second manuscript is held by Boston University Library (in further text: the Boston text), also in Scott's hand.

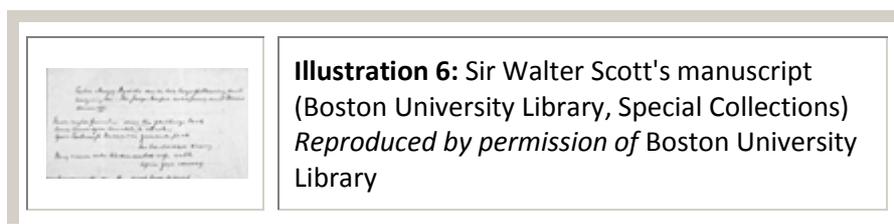


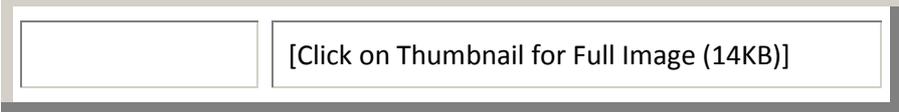
This time the handwriting appears hurried, and there are a number of instances where the author has changed his mind about a word begun. At first sight the differences between the texts do not appear to be large. Overall there are around ten differences between them in terms of a word changed or punctuation in one which is omitted from the other; however, despite the publication of the NLS text so shortly after the performance, the Boston text is the one which the authors have chosen to work with, for reasons which will, hopefully, become clear.

One measure of good theatre writing is that it successfully addresses a particular performance context, another that it has depth, offering multiple layers of meaning to challenge performers and surprise audiences. This text (see [appendix](#)) has both qualities and in examining its workings John Ramage drew on his experience of the performance dynamic surrounding another 'set piece' - the Dame's opening turn.

The address came at the end of what was, from all the accounts of that evening, a powerful rendition of the plot of the novel. The audience of the Theatre Royal was known for its abhorrence of contrived happy endings to the Scott adaptations and Mrs. Siddons was adjudged to be particularly moving as Clara. The 'Address', coming immediately afterwards, had to be carefully structured in order to profit from that heightened and volatile emotion. The whole benefit system was contentious, indeed Murray had something of a reputation for meanness,<sup>10</sup> and a blunt appeal for money could have intruded painfully into the atmosphere, producing resentment at the too brutal breaking of the spell cast by the play, so Scott opened the action with a technique employed by every Dame on her first entrance, a sight gag before the first word is spoken. Indeed there is a convention in pantomime that the Dame must have the biggest entrance. This performs several functions. It pulls the audience back from their concentration on the serious elements of the plot which have come before and refocuses them on the business in hand. It gives them permission to laugh again and, most importantly, it establishes the conspiracy of mutual, unspoken understanding that is going to be at the basis of their relationship with the Dame which says, 'You know I'm a man and I know that you know, we will never speak of it, but we're going to play with this situation and you will come with me.'

Meg appears onstage pursued by lads who are tormenting her and this is the first and major area of divergence between the NLS and Boston texts. The Boston manuscript locates the action apparently on the stage,





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instructing that Meg enters 'one or two boys following and harrying her' whereupon 'the stage-keeper interposes and drives them off'. The rest of the piece is clearly addressed to the audience in the theatre who have just seen the play. By contrast the NLS text, like the printed versions, says that Meg appears, 'encircled by a crowd of unruly boys, whom a town's-officer is driving off'. The apparent transference of the action outside the theatre in the NLS/*Journal* text is slightly perplexing, particularly since Meg will go on to bemoan the absence of municipal authority to control the Edinburgh youth. However, the Boston text works clearly, providing Meg with a potential for physical comedy and a sight-gag hinted at in the second line of the first stanza 'And lend yon muckle a whack - ' By placing amongst the 'boys' one who is obviously too big to be a boy, it becomes possible to create that shared audience/character conspiracy. The audience laugh at the absurdity of *yon muckle* and laugh with Meg at her characteristically vigorous solution to the problem, which both recalls her comic role within the play they have just seen<sup>11</sup> and creates a new shared experience for audience and character. The NLS text has the word *ane* after *muckle* which clearly scans better for reading. The Boston text has *ane* inserted above the line in blue pencil and a different hand. Mackay and Murray have both been tentatively discounted<sup>12</sup> as the writer so that it is impossible to say when the word may have been added. The actor felt, given that *muckle* can be employed as a noun, that the original Boston inked line gave him, as a performer, no difficulties with scansion and more scope for gesture.

Meg follows this line up with an immediate shift of focus of blame to the audience 'Your Embrugh bairns...' to confound their laughter, which equates with Dame's focusing on the audience and their situation. The Dame collapses narrative conventions of time and place to talk directly to the audience and her theme is frequently the past, her relationship to which she must establish, before she can go on to first bemoan modern times and then to manipulate the audience in the present.

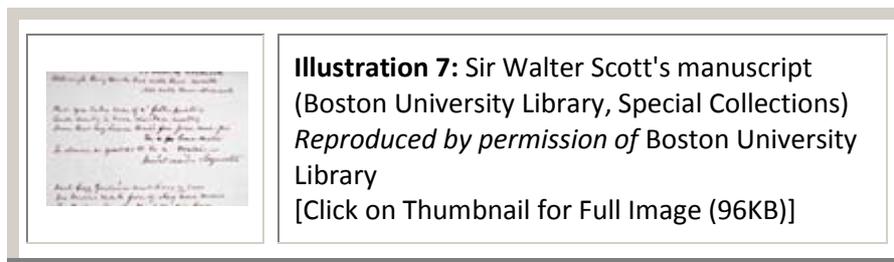
David Mayer explains this characteristic in terms of the development of pantomime fantasy as a 'response to the Industrial Revolution'<sup>13</sup> and 'a mechanism for dealing with real and immediate and acute anxieties in disguised form'.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, Meg, through the next seven stanzas bemoans the changes that have come over Edinburgh, allowing Scott, who had apparently planned a volume on the subject with Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, to go through a selection of those changes, carefully chosen to register with the Theatre Royal's audience. In stanza 3, the climax of Meg's litany of complaint is a dig at the author himself, as the lamented 'Weigh-house', the old Butter Tron, had been demolished in the course of preparations for the King's visit in 1822. Meg, no respecter of persons, then turns her attention back to the audience in stanza 4, criticising their clothes and extravagant modern ways.

The beginning of stanza 5 illustrates the multi-layered wordplay throughout the piece. When Meg says that she is 'in the public line' Scott combines in one neat phrase, her profession, her recent history as a character upon the stage and the audience's knowledge of the actor playing her.

The list of *howfs* in Stanza 6 is a carefully chosen group, encompassing Meg's professional expertise, Scott's own working life and the audience's personal experience. Fortune's, located in Old Stamp Office Close, 221 High St., was the most famous tavern of its day, a favourite with Edinburgh clubs. James Hunter's tavern was The Star and Garter, Writer's Court, which, under a previous landlord, Cleriheugh, had appeared as Counsellor Pleydell's *howf* in *Guy Mannering* and Bayle's, obeying the comic rule of threes, was the closest to home - French's tavern, 1 Shakespeare Square, which must have been familiar to all but the youngest in the theatre that night.

This list of lost haunts sets Meg off on her familiar diatribe against *hottles* and a deal of the fun of the address comes from its departure from audience expectations of the genre. This was not the usual benefit address, which, although frequently humorous, contained a list of the season's triumphs and some emollient words about the merits of the company and manager. By creating a piece of performance which was character-led, Scott was playing with audience expectations, allowing Meg to go off on her humorous tangents, delaying the uncomfortable 'business' of the piece. Meg is plainly enjoying a dialogue with the audience, as all Dames love to gossip, simply unaware that they are not answering back. When she finally does get around to the purpose of her address to them, her compliment about the plays, that they are 'old-fashioned things, in truth' is a very back-handed one and if, as seems to be indicated by the internal evidence of the text, Murray was visible to the audience, his frustration at this uncalled for turn of events would have added to the fun.

Yet the next stanza, 11, contains a graceful compliment to Murray, as the support of his widowed sister and, obliquely, as providing work for all the poor players (there is also a glance towards his work alongside Scott for the Edinburgh Theatrical Fund), but Scott cannot resist undercutting this litany of worthy deeds with comparison to a ventriloquist - and here the Boston manuscript contains almost its only punctuation,



the musical repeat marks, noticeably missing from the NLS/*Journal* texts, which John Ramage has followed as a specific performance indicator of how the line should be delivered. The line also scans rather differently in the Boston text. The other versions would appear to use elisions to manipulate the scansion, whereas the Boston text, carries on a pattern established by Meg earlier on in the piece, and one which is common to *Scottish Dames*, of using a careful 'English' pronunciation for emphasis. By following the Boston text, John Ramage also found it easier to scan the line, ending on a strong beat 'ventri' to lead himself into the delivery of the joke.

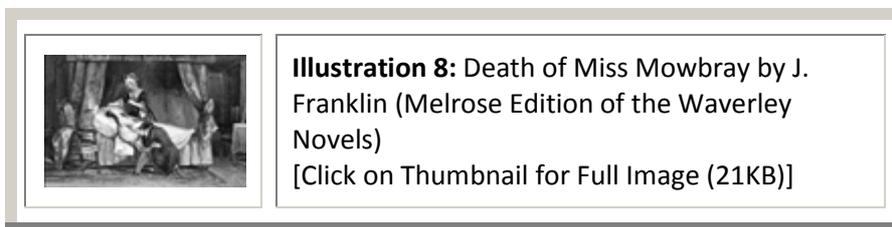
The final stanza is a particularly neat full-circle twist to the tale which encompasses the audience and their knowledge of the play they have just seen, the character before them, the actor playing that character and that actor's other roles. This knowledge of an actor's other roles is a component of the audience's reading of theatrical texts which is nearly unique to the drama and John Ramage maintains that it is impossible to play Dame successfully with an audience who do not know you.

After an examination of the texts and their context, one conclusion of which was that the NLS/*Journal* version was adjusted for the reader from an earlier performance text, probably the Boston manuscript,<sup>15</sup> the question of performance style came into play. We took as a guide descriptions of Mackay's performance from three critics, in *The Scotsman*, *The Edinburgh Weekly Journal* and *The Edinburgh Dramatic Review* and Scott himself, in a letter to Daniel Terry, another actor. All the commentators note the restraint in Mackay's performance. Scott said that he 'kept his gestures and action more within the verge of female decorum than I thought possible'<sup>16</sup> and *The Edinburgh Dramatic Review* praised his 'cool and composed irony'.<sup>17</sup> *The Edinburgh Weekly Journal* was expansive.

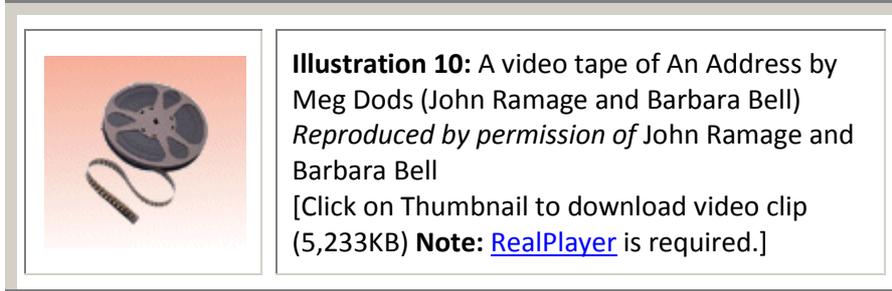
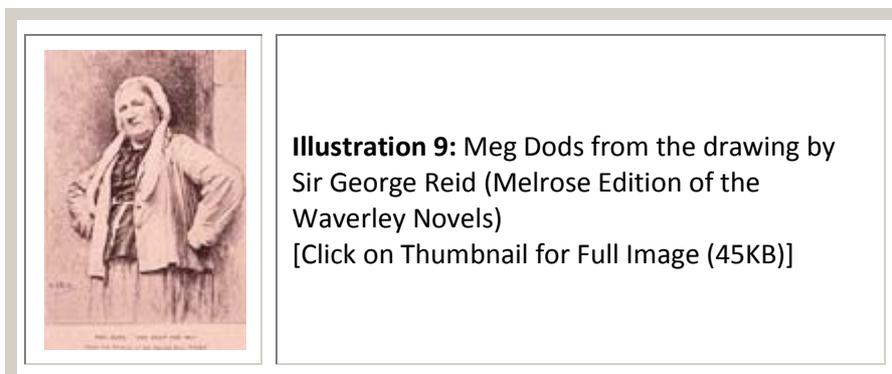
Mr. Mackay, also, was extremely successful in the representation of *Meg Dodds*. This, certainly, we did not expect; for this worthy landlady of the olden time is not only richly comic, but quite natural and true; and we hardly thought it possible that any performer of the masculine gender could have got through it without extravagance and burlesque. But Mr. Mackay's steady good sense kept him safe. He dressed the character with the most careful propriety, and acted it without conveying any impression of a ludicrous sort beyond that which properly attached to the part. <sup>18</sup>

John Ramage's own Dame is a sprightly lady, described by critics as 'dapper-but-dangerous', and since Meg, and Mackay's rendition of her, clearly shied away from a too heightened style, John Ramage went to the novel for Meg's character and the result is a performance style which is remarkably naturalistic.

The costume was selected by looking at illustrations from the Melrose Edition



and the make-up was suggested by Sir George Reid's celebrated portrait.



The reception given to the address, as opposed to the play, was mixed. *The Edinburgh Weekly Journal* called it a 'humorous address...spoken with infinite effect'.<sup>19</sup> Lockhart describes it as a 'broad piece of drollery'.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, *The Edinburgh Dramatic Review* launched into a scathing attack on the style and content of a piece it called 'vulgar and contemptible'.<sup>21</sup> However, it clearly worked well

before an audience<sup>22</sup> because it was repeated several times and revived, along with the play, in November 1824 when the bills declared that

At the End of the Play, Mr. MACKAY will deliver  
THE ADDRESS IN THE CHARACTER OF MEG DODDS,  
which was last season attended with so much applause

The revival was an affront to the *Dramatic Review* critic who roundly declared that,

it is such wretched and brainless stuff that we wonder *Mr. Murray* permits its  
recitation...there is not a parish in Scotland, in which we could not pick up some  
hedge-poet who could produce a much better thing.<sup>23</sup>

When a correspondent to the *Dramatic Review* ventured to mention the rumour that Scott was the 'hedge-poet' in question, he was told that this was 'utterly unfounded'.<sup>24</sup>

Plays from *St. Ronan's Well* never achieved lasting popularity, but Meg trod stages across Scotland for nearly twenty years, through an 'Interlude' from the play which Mackay developed and which became one of his specialities as a Guest Artist up until the late 1840s. It is this 'Interlude' which, from all the evidence,<sup>25</sup> provides the earthiness of the true panto Dame, lacking from the Address, and as David Mayer describes the Dame's emergence mid-century as a more sympathetic character, taking a maternal interest in the progress of the hero, it should be remembered that Mackay's Meg Dods was a very recent memory.

Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh.

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### Appendix.

#### [ST. RONAN'S WELL EPILOGUE- TRANSCRIPTION OF THE MANUSCRIPT IN BOSTON UNIVERSITY](#)

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### Footnotes.

<sup>1</sup> David Mayer, 'The Sexuality of Pantomime' in *Theatre Quarterly*, IV, 13 (February-April 1974), pp. 55-64.

<sup>2</sup> David Mayer, 'The Sexuality of Pantomime' in *Theatre Quarterly*, IV, 13 (February-April 1974), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> For a scholarly analysis of the relationship between theatre and archaeology, see Michael Pearson (comments by Julian Thomas) 'Theatre/Archeology' in *TDR*, 38, 4 (T144) (Winter 1994), pp. 133-161.

<sup>4</sup> Plays from *Rob Roy* were so successful that they were known in the business as the 'managerial sheet-anchor' and the saying arose 'When in doubt - play Rob Roy'.

<sup>5</sup> Scholars are undecided about the authorship of this version. See entry U1 in Richard Ford, *Dramatisations of Scott's Novels a Catalogue* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1979), p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> See in particular *The Edinburgh Dramatic Review*, I (23 November 1824), pp. 21-23.

<sup>7</sup> W. H. Murray, 'Mary, Queen of Scots'. See entry A2 in Richard Ford, p. 1, and Barbara Bell, *Nineteenth-Century Stage Adaptations of the Works of Sir Walter Scott on the Scottish Stage (1810-1900)* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Glasgow University, 1991), pp. 277-278.

<sup>8</sup> The spelling of Meg's surname seems to vary. In the novel it has one 'd', in the manuscript addresses, two.

<sup>9</sup> These two manuscripts, along with the note to Constable, show matching folds and stain damage, indicating that they have at some time been bundled together. This staining is absent from other MS bound into the same library volume.

<sup>10</sup> Murray was the target of press attacks for the salaries paid at the Theatre Royal, see, for example, *The Edinburgh Dramatic Review*, 7 June 1823. Following this Benefit, he was roundly condemned for supposedly misleading the public, the critic pointing out that 'The Management pay not a farthing of rent for the theatre; - it is their own property; and they are yearly paying the price of it by instalments of L.2000'. This was a nice distinction which Murray, frequently plagued by thin houses, might not have wholly appreciated.

<sup>11</sup> One of the highlights of Meg's role, and the basis of the 'Interlude' which Mackay subsequently toured, was a scene in which she routs an importunate young man from her parlour by the vigorous use of a broom.

<sup>12</sup> Correspondence with Kim Sulik of Boston University Library and examination of Mackay's handwriting from examples held in The Edinburgh Room, Edinburgh Central Library, would initially appear to eliminate Scott or Mackay as writing in this word.

<sup>13</sup> David Mayer, 'The Sexuality of Pantomime' in *Theatre Quarterly*, IV, 13 (February-April 1974), p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> David Mayer, 'The Sexuality of Pantomime' in *Theatre Quarterly*, IV, 13 (February-April 1974), p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> There are a number of instances where the printed text appears adjusted to compensate for the absence of the live actor's physical action and gesture.

<sup>16</sup> John Gibson Lockhart, *Life of Scott*, Vol. 1 (London: Melrose Edition, 1848), pp. 193-4.

<sup>17</sup> *The Edinburgh Dramatic Review*, IX, 105 (7 June 1824), pp. 110-112.

<sup>18</sup> *The Edinburgh Weekly Journal*, XXVII, 1382 (9 June 1824), p. 181.

<sup>19</sup> *The Edinburgh Weekly Journal*, XXVII, 1382 (9 June 1824), p. 181.

<sup>20</sup> John Gibson Lockhart, *Life of Scott*, Vol. 1 (London: Melrose Edition, 1848), p. 193.

<sup>21</sup> The critic in *The Edinburgh Dramatic Review* was an opponent of the benefit system, an implacable critic of Murray's financial dealings, however much he liked Murray's acting, and a staunch defender of the standards which he felt should apply in Scotland's National Theatre and which did not extend to this type of populism.

<sup>22</sup> This article was originally researched and delivered as a paper for the Fourth Quadrennial Scott Conference in Eugene, Oregon (July 1999). When the tape was played to an assembly of noted Scott scholars and enthusiasts, some were similarly disbelieving that this was by Scott. Its vitality and teasing humour they saw as being more characteristic of the work of Burns.

<sup>23</sup> *The Edinburgh Dramatic Review* (23 November 1824)

<sup>24</sup> *The Edinburgh Dramatic Review* (23 November 1824)

<sup>25</sup> There is evidence from reviews of the complete play and from bills featuring the later 'Interlude' that her relationships with men, past and present, were played for comic effect.