

Scott says, "At length the story appeared so uncouth that I was fain to put it into the mouth of my old minstrel, lest the nature of it should be misunderstood, and I should be suspected of setting up a new school of poetry, instead of a feeble attempt to imitate the old. In the process of the romance, the page, intended to be a principal person in the work, contrived (from the baseness of his natural propensities, I suppose) to slink down-stairs into the kitchen, and now he must e'en abide there."*

And I venture to say that no reader of the poem ever has distinctly understood what the goblin page did or did not do, what it was that was "lost" throughout the poem and "found" at the conclusion, what was the object of his personating the young heir of the house of Scott, and whether or not that object was answered—what use, if any, the magic book of Michael Scott was to the Lady of Branksome, or whether it was only harm to her; and I doubt moreover, whether any one ever cared an iota what answer, or whether any answer, might be given to any of these questions. All this, as Scott himself clearly perceived, was left confused and not simply vague. The goblin imp had been more certainly an imp of mischief to him than even to his boyish ancestor. But if Lady Dalkeith suggested the poorest part of the poem, she certainly inspired its best part. Scott says, as we have seen, that he brought in the aged harper to save himself from the imputation of "setting up a new school of poetry" instead of humbly imitating an old school. But I think that the chivalrous wish to do honour to Lady Dalkeith, both as a personal friend and as the wife of his "chief," as he always called the head of the house of Scott, had more to do with the introduction of the aged harper

than the wish to guard himself against the imputation of attempting a new poetic style. He clearly intended the duchess of "The Lay" to represent the countess for whom he wrote it, and the aged harper, with his reverence and gratitude and self-distrust, was only the disguise in which he felt that he could best pour out his loyalty, and the romantic devotion with which both Lord and Lady Dalkeith, but especially the latter, had inspired him. It was certainly this beautiful framework which assured the immediate success and permanent charm of the poem; and the immediate success was for that day something marvellous. The magnificent quarto edition of 750 copies was soon exhausted, and an octavo edition of 1,500 copies was sold out within the year. In the following year, two editions, containing together 4,250 copies were disposed of, and before twenty-five years had elapsed, that is before 1830, 44,000 copies of the poem had been bought by the public in this country, taking account of the legitimate trade alone. Scott gained in all by "The Lay" £769, an unprecedented sum in those times for an author to obtain from any poem. Little more than half a century before, Johnson received but fifteen guineas for his stately poem on "The Vanity of Human Wishes," and but ten guineas for his "London." I do not say that Scott's poem had not much more in it of true poetic fire, though Scott himself, I believe, preferred these poems of Johnson's to anything that he himself ever wrote. But the disproportion in the reward was certainly enormous, and yet what Scott gained by his "Lay" was of course much less than he gained by any of his subsequent poems of equal, or anything like equal length. Thus, for "Marmion," he received 1,000 guineas, long before the poem was published, and for *one-half* of the copy-right of "The Lord of the Isles"

* Lockhart's "Life of Scott," ii. 217.