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## Translation and Transplantation: Sir Alexander Gray's Danish Ballads

Sir Alexander Gray (1882-1968) was a Dundonian who went on via Dundee High School and the Universities of Edinburgh, Göttingen and the Sorbonne to become first a civil servant and then for thirty-five years Professor of Political Economy at the Universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh in turn. He was also a poet and a translator from German and Danish into Scots. His two volumes of Danish ballads are *Four and Forty: A Selection of Danish Ballads Presented in Scots* (Edinburgh, The University Press, 1954) and *Historical Ballads of Denmark* (Edinburgh, The University Press, 1958).

Both volumes are equipped with introductions, that to *Historical Ballads* sticking to the nature of history in the ballad and having little of relevance to say in the present context. But in his introduction to *Four and Forty*, with a good deal of humour and an equal measure of self-deprecation, he justifies his translations into Scots: 'I have long been convinced that the Folk-poetry and the ballads of the Germanic and Scandinavian peoples are untranslatable into standard English without the sacrifice of all the essential flavour which makes them what they are, and which alone lures the translator on to his perilous task. It may not be so with regard to the popular literature of the Romance languages: I am not sufficiently in tune with the French and Italian languages to express any opinion...But when it comes to the ballads of the tougher north, I am sure that the medium into which they must be transferred, if they are not to be devalued in some mysterious way, must be a dialect' (pp. xi-xiii).

Here we can, of course, see a late but clear reflex of those Victorian beliefs in the 'manly' vigour of the languages of the north, one which Gray underlines in a footnote (p.xii) in which he discusses various versions of Sir Halewyn: 'whereas the Dutch, the Danish and the German versions are stark and

barbaric...the French version seems to be made to be sung by little dancing schoolgirls, for whom Death is still a nursery rhyme'. And it is a double reflex in that, implicitly, only a dialect of the north (i.e. Scots) can provide a suitable medium for this material: we are left to infer that a southern English version would go as 'trippingly' (Gray's word) as the French.

Gray then considers earlier translators of the Danish ballads. He discusses Robert Buchanan's *Ballad Stories of the Affection* (1866), which he feels would have been better if Buchanan had followed his admitted intuition and gone for Scots rather than English, and Robert Jamieson's *Popular Ballads and Songs* (1806), which are, however, 'too excessively Scots, or too excessively Scots in the wrong direction. He is far more archaic, and therefore more difficult to read, than there is any need to be' (p.xiv).

Scots, then, is to be Gray's chosen medium: 'But what, one may ask, is this "Scots", this "Doric", this "Vernacular", this "Lallans", this "guid auld Scottis tongue", or whatever one may care to call it? And here, I need hardly add, I tremble on the brink of a controversy which recurrently strains the correspondence columns of *The Scotsman* and *The Glasgow Herald* to bursting point' (p.xvi). Forswearing any desire to be a controversialist, Gray devotes his next ten pages to demonstrating that Scots never has been a language, never will be a language and, given the problems writers from small language communities have in finding an audience, Scottish writers would only be disadvantaged were it ever to become one. Gray is quite emphatic, then, that his target language is a dialect: fortunately, perhaps, that conviction is of no great relevance in the matter of the translation of Danish ballads into Scots. As to what kind of Scots Gray uses, J. Derrick McClure has shown that: 'Gray's poetic idiolect is the straightforward, unadorned Scots of a writer thoroughly at home in his dialect and grounded in the Scots poetic tradition, but intent on exploiting the natural genius of the tongue as actually used rather than extending it in artificial or experimental directions'. Furthermore, on phonological grounds, McClure suggests that there is quite enough evidence to localise the origin of his dialect in Angus.<sup>1</sup>

In his introduction Gray also discusses more specific matters. In the case of the almost omnipresent refrain of Danish ballads, he will for the most part retain it. A little more complex is Gray's attitude to conventional formulae. He notes that the first couplet in each quatrain of four-line ballads frequently consists of only one semantic segment together with a conventional formula; this irritates him – particularly when it is repeated throughout the ballad. But if the formula is omitted the result is 'to telescope the first two lines into one, and the translator is left with a gap to be filled' (p. xxix). He also remarks on the frequency of 'conventional verses and stock phrases which belong to no one but are common property' (p. xxx): we accept these as right in our own ballads, but will the reader tolerate them in translations? Implicitly, it seems that Sir Alexander hopes to avoid both padding and stock phrases while 'plead[ing] for tolerance' when they occur. In this area, central as it is to the ballad as genre, the introduction shows some lack of theoretical clarity, as indeed it does in the matter of Scots.

Gray's introduction, then, does not state except in the most general way why he chose Scots as the medium for his ballad translations. It is not difficult to justify the choice on his behalf, whether we view it from a linguistic, literary, or general cultural-historical perspective. The linguistic fit between Danish and English, both being Germanic languages in which the inflexional system has largely disappeared, is already close. The fit between Danish and Scots is a neater one still: according to Templeton<sup>2</sup>, 'Scots goes back ultimately to Old Northumbrian' – that is, the northern dialect of Old English spoken between the Humber and the Forth, and this northern dialect was much influenced by Scandinavian settlement. Aitken goes so far as to refer to Scandinavianized Northern English as 'Anglo-Danish'<sup>3</sup> and writes: 'Early Scots shared much of its word-stock with contemporary Northern Middle English. This included virtually all its word-borrowings from Scandinavian, since these had originally reached Scotland as part of the Northern English speech of the Anglo-Danish immigrants...'<sup>4</sup>

As to literary fit, the existence of a considerable corpus of

work of a generically and thematically similar (indeed, sometimes directly related) kind in both source and target languages, gives the translator an enormous advantage in theory and in practice. In an elegant discussion of Douglas Young's translations into Scots from Gaelic, Italian and French, J Derrick McClure has pointed out that 'a fundamental fact is that during the process an implicit claim is being made for the target language: the status of being a fit vehicle for a literary text which will be – not equivalent, for such a concept is not even meaningful – but comparable, in factual, intellectual and emotional content, to the original poem...and a translator working in a less comprehensively developed language, such as Scots, runs the risk of making the defects of his medium painfully obvious.'<sup>5</sup> Balladry having flourished vigorously on both sides of the North Sea, this is not a danger faced by the ballad translator, who may draw in Scots on a rich stock of suitable vocabulary and constructions at the same time as having access to the hoard of appropriate imagery and formulaic phrasing provided by the native ballad tradition.

In what follows we have chosen to study in detail four of Gray's texts in both their source and target versions rather than to range piecemeal over all sixty ballads in the two volumes. The piecemeal approach would doubtless have provided us with a lengthy catalogue of felicities in Gray's work and a rather shorter one of infelicities, but it would have failed to elicit a full picture of the match between source and target in the case of any given text, and it would not have produced a conspectus of Gray's chosen strategies. We have chosen the texts with a view to representing different types of ballad, and we shall quote the source text, Gray's translation and, in square brackets, a word for word translation of the source.<sup>6</sup>

We should perhaps also nail our own colours to the mast by outlining our theoretical stance since it is one that leads us to be inclined to question Gray's approach. The questioning and the criticism it leads to is, however, within the context of admiration for the high quality of Gray's work. The quality of Gray's ballads is such that, were it not for an occasional

alien name, readers would be unaware that they are enjoying translations: these ballads read well, both silently and aloud, and they give every appearance of being singable. And, in a literal sense, they are accurate renderings. They are thoroughly convincing *as ballads*. It is when we ask the awkward questions *What kind of ballad?* and *Are they the same kind of ballad in Scots as they were in Danish?* that some problems arise. A clear example is offered by Gray's decision to re-locate many of the ballads in Scotland. In 'Agnete and the Merman', for instance, the source text opens with Agnete walking on 'Højelands Bro' [Højeland Bridge] and refers later to 'de engelske Klokkers Klang' [the sound of the bells at Engeland]. Gray's version has Agnete walking 'along the dunes' and later she hears 'the kirk-bells o' Forvie'. The new locus, then, is the Sands of Forvie on the coast of Aberdeenshire and, if the ballad has to be relocated, it would be difficult to find a more suitable home in view both of the strength of the genre in the North-East and of the particular traditions attached to the sand-inundated parish of Forvie, where the remains of the church may still be found among the dunes. In the introduction to *Four and Forty* Gray writes of how his original aim had been 'transplantation rather than translation' but that he found that this had its limitations and 'accordingly, I have increasingly tended to leave the heroes and heroines of these ballads the undisturbed enjoyment of their original and authentic names, as likewise I have refrained from geographical upheaval...But I should add that on this point I am far from being a complete convert' (pp. xiv - xv). The issue of principle, however, concerns the purpose of literary translation: is that purpose primarily to enrich the literature of the target language or is it to make the literature of the source language accessible to those who do not speak that language? While recognising that both can be perfectly proper aims in different circumstances – and only rarely is it necessary for them to exclude each other – the present writers incline towards the latter view as a general principle unless there is good reason to deviate from it. And there seems no good reason in this case: Scots already has a outstanding ballad tradition which needs

no reinforcement by 'transplantation'; Danish names are not so outlandish as to jar excessively on the Scots ear; perhaps most importantly, is there not a certain condescension inherent in the thought that Scots readers are so hameart that they would prefer the cultural and generic differences and distance (not very great anyway) to be ironed out?<sup>7</sup>

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### *'Harpens Kraft' and 'The Power of the Harp'*

In respect of both its subject matter and its formal features, the ballad of 'Harpens Kraft' [The power of the harp] possesses characteristics which could be seen as almost archetypal of the subgenre of the Danish ballad known as *tryllevisen*, the supernatural ballad. This is a form of literature whose appeal arguably rests in its challenging combination of simplicity of expression and sophistication of meaning. Essentially about a gender relation, 'Harpens Kraft' discusses the complications of entering into a sustainable love relationship, giving in the process as much attention to the female gender as to the male. During the development of what could, with phrases borrowed from the Danish scholar and poet Villy Sørensen<sup>8</sup>, be termed its theme of engagement or of crossing, the ballad constructs a stylised symbolical space which combines nature and 'supernature'. It depicts how a borderline in its landscape – a stream ironically named 'Blide' [the Gentle One; stanza 7 et al.] in which a troll lives – must be crossed via 'Blide-Bro' [Gentle Bridge; s. 12] by the unnamed female protagonist on her way to marrying a cultured and considerate male called Villemand (s. 1 et al.). Also this name may be ironic, possibly pointing to wildness, which is not represented in the text by its male hero but by the troll and the stream, or to 'going wild', losing one's way, which does not happen to Villemand but to his bride. Thus, the connotations of the proper names used in this ballad do not point straightforwardly, but rather by means of contrast or difference, to the qualities of the name-

bearer, while at the same time throwing light on other areas of the text. By adding the information that two sisters of the bride 'sank down' (s. 8) into the same stream on previous wedding journeys, the ballad on the one hand emphasises that the problem it discusses is a pattern of repetition inherent in the pre-wedding situation – a precarious point of transition from the 'first' family into the second – rather than an individual's particular predicament. On the other hand it offers an additional psychological explanation – the traumas of the past – as to why entering marriage is particularly complicated for the female protagonist.

In order to protect his 'beautiful bride' (s. 1) from the demonic forces of nature, Villemænd spectacularly issues her with a guard of 212 horsemen to accompany her on the journey across the border. But such male power demonstration proves to be to no avail: just as her sisters before her, the bride sinks into the rapid stream with none of the many riders able to help her. Only when Villemænd has his golden harp brought and plays it both gently and vehemently by the riverside, is (super-)nature conquered: the troll is driven up from the bottom of Blide not only with Villemænd's unharmed maiden in his mouth but also with both her beautiful sisters. Thus, the hostages of the past are released, the pattern of repetition is broken and Villemænd can celebrate the wedding with his bride. In addition to its genre-typical features, 'Harpens Kraft' is of special interest in that it addresses the theme of artistic creativity in such a foregrounded manner, and thereby in a sense also discusses itself.

When translating a complex literary text such as 'Harpens Kraft', which could be described – thus echoing its main theme – as a piece of 'crossover' fiction combining naturalism and symbolism, psychology and myth, light entertainment and life philosophy, the translator is asked to perform a difficult balancing act – to walk, as it were, on a linguistic tightrope. It is very likely, perhaps inevitable, that he and his product will – without, we hope, falling – lean in either the normalising, naturalising direction or instead push the symbolism too far. In either case he runs the risk of limiting the openness, applicability and ambiguity of the source text.

There can be little doubt that Sir Alexander Gray's tendency, while skilfully rendering the Danish magic ballads into Scots, is to push in the normalising direction.

In translating 'Harpens Kraft', choice of setting and naming is of obvious importance. Although it could not be argued that the source text is set in an authenticised 'Danish' or 'Nordic' space, Gray decides to relocate the ballad to Scotland substituting an authentic stream-name for the distinctly 'dis-authentic' Blide:

But I greet because o' the dowie Dean,  
That I maun cross this day ere e'en. (s. 7)

Interestingly, in his introduction to the translated ballad, Gray displays some hesitation as to whether 'the Dean is a somewhat insufficient stream to allow room for the kelpie's manoeuvres', but argues against this that the same stream is used as the location in a haunting and fatalistic rhyme of long ago, which he quotes:

The dowie Dean  
Rins its lane;  
And ilka seven year,  
It taks ane. (p. 8)

– thus justifying his re-use of the location in a text with similar features. This discussion demonstrates that, although the textual effect of the choice arguably is different, Gray's translation, just as its source text, pays particular attention to the connotations of the chosen setting. In contrast, as far as the other central naming decision facing the translator is concerned – finding a name for the male protagonist – it is more difficult to justify Gray's strategy. Although the two names sound alike, it is hardly a good 'fit' to replace, as Gray does, the arresting, ambiguous *Villemand* with the everyday *William*. Compared to the opening of the source text, in which attention is drawn to the male name through unusualness, foregrounding and stressed alliteration, in the target text the introduction of *William* (although vaguely alliterated with



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'wi'') goes considerably more unnoticed somewhere in the middle of the first line:

Villemand og hans væne Brud  
– Strengen er af Guld –  
de legte Guldtavl i hendes Bur.

[Villemand and his beautiful bride  
– the string is of gold –  
they played gold board in her bower.]

In her bower sat William wi' his May;  
(*The strings are o' gowd.*)  
They played at the dice on their wedding day.

It is also noteworthy that, whereas in Gray's text the opening line corresponds to a complete, harmonious sentence, the source text fragments its opening syntax by letting it 'run over' into a new line, a delaying effect which is made stronger by the interposing of the seemingly disconnected refrain line. Again, the result is the thematization and isolation of the male and the female agent right at the beginning of the source text. Finally, to draw the comparison of the openings to a close, it could also be pointed out that Gray adds a particularised time indication, 'on their wedding day', to the opening stanza and 'tidies up' its rhyming scheme by substituting perfect rhyme ('May', 'day') for imperfect ('Brud', 'Bur').

The differences between source and target text discussed thus far are not so much, it could be argued, isolated occurrences as indications of Gray's translation strategy as a whole. This argument can be presented in more detail if we first briefly summarise some of the salient features of the literary language of the Danish ballad. This language is a spartan, economical voice which shuns elaboration and narratorial involvement. It is a language not particularly interested in variation of expressions, relying, rather, on repetition – of words, rhymes, lines, formulas – as one of its prime poetic devices. It is a condensed language which uses gaps to great effect, freely shifting scene or speaker without connecting passages. Similarly, it is a language that thrives

on tensions – tension between the action- or plot-orientation of the core text and the more emotive tone of the refrain, tension between formulaic and non-formulaic language use, tension, even, between the tenses as the ballad voice utilizes jumps from the past tense into the present to great effect. Finally, as yet another explanation of its strangely poetical quality, it is a language which more than occasionally shows a liberal attitude to several aspects of standard grammatical practice: it may position, as often in poetry, syntactic elements out of normal word order, particularly placing attributes after rather than before nouns ('mine Søstre to' ['my sisters two'; s. 8], 'Guldharpn min' ['the goldharp mine'; s. 18], 'Ganger graa' ['steed grey'; s. 30]); it may use a separate definite article in front of a noun (as in Scots or English and most other related languages) where standard Scandinavian would have enclitic definite article, that is as a noun ending; and, not least significantly, it overuses the indefinite form of nouns ('Da hun kom der midt paa Bro' [when she came there on the middle of bridge; s. 13]); 'Jomfru rakte op sin hvide Hand' [maiden stretched up her white hand; s. 16]). These deviations often function, it would seem, as a means of manipulating rhyme and rhythm in the text; but at the same time they together contribute, at the micro level of language, to adding a distinct element of poetic 'strangeness' to a ballad voice which in other respects is fairly matter-of-fact.

Before progressing further, it should be stressed that not all of these linguistic features could or should be translated into the target language. Translating is, after all, not always simply about establishing equivalence, as languages are not transparent systems but have different formal organisations and (therefore) different organisations of reality. How could Gray, to quote the most radical case, possibly be faithful to a pattern in the source text of not always adhering to an enclitic definite article which is non-existent in Scots? Also, it is quite likely that directly transferring bare nouns or even sudden shifts between tenses into the Scots version of the text might create *too* much strangeness in the target language. Nevertheless, it could be suggested as an ideal aim that the translator should attempt to create equivalence in the sense of

reproducing the same general level of 'strangeness' found in the source text by using the formal means open to him in the target language.

In the main, Gray remains faithful to the artful language of Danish balladry outlined above. But when he deviates from it, his favoured direction is towards elaboration, harmonisation and specification, moving to some extent the target text away from the skeletal and the strange. Some examples might illustrate this pattern. Firstly, Gray's use of adjectives is more generous – faceting, adorning, even judging – than what can be found in the source text: 'hvide Hand' [white hand; s. 16] becomes 'snow-white hand'; 'Land' [land; s. 16] becomes 'dry land'; 'Egetræ' [oaktree; s. 22] becomes 'the gnarled aik'; 'Harpen' [the harp; s.24] becomes 'the trummlin string'; and 'Trolde(n)' [the troll('s); s. 24] becomes 'the evil thing'. Secondly, as a related point, the target text uses considerably more adjective-based adverbs than the source text, a word category which is arguably well suited for adding nuances to the description of events in a text or for conveying the narrator's interpretation of occurrences, neither of which would be aims high on the agenda of a fairly strict narrative economy as the one suggested here: the target text contains 'sweetly' (second refrain line), 'stoutly' (s. 10), 'richt sharp and loud' (s. 18), 'sae soft, sae cunningly' (s. 20), 'angrily' (s. 21), 'Blithely' (s. 29), to which only four corresponding words can be found in the source text and some of these seem moreover of a less marked nature – 'liflig' [sweetly; second refrain line], 'saa liste' [so cleverly; s. 20], 'saa saare' [so much; s. 21], 'gerne' [gladly; s. 29]. Thirdly, in the three instances when the source text in its narrated passages switches into dramatic present, the target text ignores this in favour of a uniform use of the past tense. The first instance is the more telling of the three in that the shift of tense here so obviously contributes to the production of textual meaning. It happens at the moment of transition and heightened suspense when the maiden sets off on her fateful journey towards Blide Bridge:

Han lod lægge under hendes Ganger de røde Guldsko,  
og saa rider hun til Blide-Bro. (s. 12)

[he let put under her steed the red goldshoes,  
and then she rides to Blide Bridge.]

Wi' gowden shoon her horse he shod;  
And to the Brig o' Dean they rode.

The target text here emphasises the continuity of the situation and the companionship (they rode) of man and woman, whereas the source text highlights the isolation and exposed situation of the female (she rides). Fourthly, the target text displays on one occasion an inclination to fill out a gap in the plot development of the source text by means of a one-line summary of the intervening action. Where in the Danish ballad there is a sudden, almost cinematic, cut from Villemand ordering, in direct speech, his servant boy to fetch the harp and his action of handling it, the translation spells out that the harp has been brought to him in the meantime:

'Du hente mig ind Guldharpn min!' (last line of s. 18)

['You fetch me the goldharp mine!']

Villemand tog Harpen i Hænde,  
han gaar for Strømmen at stande. (s. 19)

[Villemand took the harp in hand,  
he goes by the stream to stand.]

'Gae, bring to me my harp o' gowd.'

And when the harp had been brocht to him,  
He stude close doon by the water's brim.

One could argue that the a core aim, when translating a basically very scenic or dramatic genre such as the ballad, should be to respect such cuts between scenes; and, to continue the comparison to screen and stage, just as 'summary' is a narrative mode somewhat alien to filmic or dramatic story telling, so do explanatory, connecting passages like the one added by Gray in this example not really ring true to ballad style. (We shall return to this in discussing 'Agnete and the

Merman'.) As a fifth and final observation it should be mentioned that 'The Power of the Harp', like most of Gray's other ballad translations, realises his stated ambition of minimising the use of formulaic expressions; for example, the repeated stock phrases of 'Vand under Ø' [water below island] in stanza 28 and 29 of the source text are rendered with variation as 'waters here' and 'watery deep' respectively.

Taken in isolation none of the examples of non-equivalence listed in this context are necessarily of any great significance; indeed some of them may smack of linguistic nit-picking. It could also be argued that Gray does not only remove value from the ballad text but adds value – elegance, variation, completeness – too. The discussion may likewise have obscured the fact that, when it comes to plot development and conveying the drama and high entertainment value of the ballad genre, Gray's renderings are superb. Nevertheless, taken together the examples quoted seem to suggest that Gray's own ideal of a ballad text – an ideal of which his translations could be seen to carry reflexes – is somewhat less skeletal and uneven than the source texts demand. The real irony is, however, that his stylistic 'improvements' of the texts are not just refinements but also remove meaning and sophistication.

*'Agnete og Havmanden' and 'Agnete and the Merman'*

Gray's translation follows the original stanza by stanza – indeed, line by line for the most part – and he is accurate both in general and in detail without being craven. His solutions are never less than acceptable and, at best, they have a splendid vigour, as in stanza 4:

Han stopped hendes Øre, han stopped hendes Mund,  
saa førte han hende til Havsens Bund.

[He stopped up her ear, he stopped up her mouth,  
then he led her to the sea's bottom.]

Her lugs he has stappit; her mou' he has bound;  
And guided her doon to the sea's saut ground.

Gray's version of stanza 18 shows the same sort of quality, this time in a situation where the Danish source text uses a formulaic 'dear daughter' phrase. Unlike the foregoing example, a purist might argue in this case that Gray, by using 'tint your snude', is guilty of improving on the original (which, of course, he is) but the more pragmatic reader will applaud him because his change/addition is wholly within the meaning and spirit of the original:

'Og, hør du, Agnete, kær Datter min,  
hvad gav han dig for Æren din?'

['And hear you, Agnete, dear daughter mine,  
what gave he you for honour thine?']

'Listen, Agnete; you've tint your snude;  
What gae he you for your maidenhude?'

The excellence of these solutions is best appreciated by comparing them with the equally accurate but lifeless renderings offered by another translator:

Her ears he closed, her mouth he bound,  
And bore her down through the sea to ground.

'Harken, dear daughter, and fear no blame,  
What did he give for thy maiden fame?'<sup>9</sup>

Where Gray deviates, he does so mainly and understandably for purposes of metre and rhyme. In stanza 21, for instance, since the first line of Gray's couplet covers the first line and a half of the Danish, the semantically redundant 'dowie' fills out the metre:

Og han gav mig en Harpe av Guld,  
at jeg skulde spille paa, naar jeg var sorrigfuld.

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[And he gave me a harp of gold,  
that I should play on when I was sorrowful.]

And a golden harp to harp upon,  
when my hert was dowie and wae-begone

In stanza 11 his addition of 'hod your face' both provides him with an easy rhyme and fills out the metre (though it is difficult to see any justification whether semantic, aesthetic or metrical for the 'in prayin'' in the first line of Gray's rendering):

Naar Præsten nævner den høje,  
da maa du dig ikke nedbøje.

[When the priest names the High One  
then you must not bow down.]

When the priest names, in prayin', the name o' grace,  
You maunna lout low, and hod your face.

The same double function is served by 'next the wa' in stanza 27:

O tænk paa de store, og tænk paa de smaa,  
og tænk paa den lille, som i Vuggen laa.

[O think of the big ones, and think of the small ones,  
and think of the little one, who in the cradle lay.]

O, think on the big anes, and think on the sma'  
And the bairn in the cradle that sleeps next the wa'.

A central feature of the way ballads tell their stories is their treatment of dialogue. Bengt R. Jonsson's description of the Swedish ballad is also valid for Danish ballads: 'The technique...is better described as dramatic than as epic in the real sense of the word.'<sup>10</sup> M. J. C. Hodgart makes the apt suggestion that ballad narrative may be compared to that of a strip cartoon.<sup>11</sup> Thus dialogue in the ballad, as in the drama or strip cartoon, is not normally accompanied by such narratorial

tags as 'he said', 'she whispered' and so on. The Danish source text 'Agnete og Havmanden' contains no narratorial tags whatsoever. Gray, on the other hand, has introduced three of them. In stanza 3 the Danish has:

'O ja saamænd, det vil jeg saa'

[ 'O yes indeed, that want I so much' ]

whereas Gray offers:

'Deed, ay!' quo' she, 'that will I dae'.

In stanza 7 the Danish has the characteristic abrupt shift to dialogue :

Agnete hun ganger for den Havmand at staa:

'Og maa jeg mig udi Kirken gaa?'

[Agnete she goes before the merman to stand:

'And may I into the church go?']

whereas Gray offers:

She rase frae her liltin'. To the merman she spak:

'The kirk-bells are ringin'; fain wad I gae back.'

In stanza 8 the Danish merman responds directly to Agnete, ie. there is no marker that the speaker has changed between stanzas 7 and 8:

'O ja saamænd, det maa du saa,

naar du vill komme igen til Børnene smaa.'

[ 'O yes indeed, that may you so,

if you will come again to the children small.' ]

whereas Gray offers:

'You're welcome,' quo' he; 'but you'll no bide awa?

You boot to come back, and tak care o' us a'.'



With the appearance of such tags, the ballad begins to slip along the scale in the direction of the 'literary' narrative poem and we, as readers or listeners, begin to feel part of a narrative rather than a dramatic production.

Alliteration, assonance and, to a lesser extent, internal rhyme are, of course, standard tools in the technical kit of the ballad poet whether Danish or Scots and 'Agnete og Havmanden' makes frequent use of all three, as, for example, in stanza 9:

'Men naar du kommer paa Kirkegaard,  
da maa du ikke slaa ud dit favre gule Haar.'

[But when you come to churchyard,  
then you must not let down your beautiful golden hair.]

If we take all three devices together we can find no fewer than fifty occurrences in the twenty-eight stanzas of the Danish version. Gray's translation, however, adds another fifteen: not, perhaps, much in itself, but taken together with the other changes under discussion, it marks a further shift in the direction of literary retouching.

The metrical and rhyming scheme of the Danish 'Agnete og Havmanden' is composed of a rhyming couplet followed by a refrain followed by a repetition of the second line of the couplet. Each line of the couplet has four beats (stressed syllables) and a total of 10-12 syllables. Thus stanza 26:

'Lad længes, lad længes, saa saare som de vil,  
slet aldrig kommer jeg mere dertil,  
– haa, haa, haa –  
slet aldrig kommer jeg mere dertil.'

[Let them long, let them long, as sorely as they want,  
never ever I come again thither.]

All the elements of this structural pattern, however, are treated with considerable licence in the Danish: six of the twenty-eight stanzas have imperfect rhymes (stanza 1, for example, rhymes 'bro' with 'op' and stanza 25 'tren' with

'omkring'; a total of fourteen lines have either three beats or five beats rather than the regular four; line length measured in syllables actually ranges from seven to thirteen per line and fifteen of the couplets are composed of lines that differ by two or more syllables – frequently more than two. The metre of the Danish source text is actually best seen as strong-stress (or old native) metre – that is, a four beat line 'in which there is no fixed number of unaccented syllables to the foot'.<sup>12</sup> As Brooks and Warren point out, it is sometimes possible to scan strong-stress metre in terms of iambs and anapaests but it involves 'a good deal of forcing'; this quickly becomes apparent when applied to 'Agnete og Havmanden'. If we then examine Gray's text we find that he has consistently regularised: all of Gray's couplets have full rhyme; all of his lines have four beats; line length ranges from eight to twelve syllables and only five couplets have lines that differ by two or more syllables. More significantly, the metre of the Scots rendering may be described quite conventionally as tetrameter couplets composed of either iambs or anapaests: over the ballad as a whole, the number of iambs (104) and anapaests (107) is effectively equal though individual couplets tend to be either iambic or anapaestic. The effect of this regularity, especially when taken together with the jolly effect induced by the frequency of anapaests, is to move the ballad along at an unvarying trot and, in spite of its subject matter, to give it a fairly light-hearted tone. The Danish text, on the other hand, is much more sedate, harsher in tone, and with more varied pace. One might suggest that, for all its good qualities, Gray's version is a fulfilment of his own statement that all ballads are destined to end up 'in the nursery, or...round the camp-fire' (p. xii).

### *'Torbens Datter' and 'Sir Walter's Daughter'*

The Danish 'Torbens Datter og hendes Faderbane' [Torben's daughter and her father's slayer] is categorised as a 'riddervise' (ballad of chivalry) though we may feel it gives short shrift to chivalry. 'Torbens Datter' reduces narrative to

its bare bones: in thirty lines plus refrain it tells of the vengeance killing of Torben, the killer's visit to his farm where he is welcomed by Torben's daughter, his revealing of his deed and his carrying off of the girl. Depersonalisation is taken to its limits in this ballad: Torben is named, but not his killer and not his daughter; the events are not specifically localised; the cause of the feud is unmentioned; the formulaic phrases are commonplace – unmarked drawings on the standard storehouse such as 'favr og fin' [fair and fine], 'saa væn en Maar' [so fair a maid], 'Ganger graa' [steed grey] or 'Kaaben blaa' [cloak blue]. The power of 'Torbens Datter', and it is a very powerful ballad, actually resides in its impersonality. Once the action begins nothing detracts from the essence of the drama as it is enacted with sombre and inevitable choreography. One segment alone breaches, and thus foregrounds, the impersonality of the rest and that is the lyrical (here, melancholy lyrical) tone of the introductory stanza so common among Danish ballads:

Vi vare saa mange Søkends smaa,  
 – under Lide –  
 saa aarlig faldt os Faderen fraa.  
 Der Dagen han dages, og Duggen den driver saa vide.

[We were so many children small,  
 – under the lea –  
 so early did we lose our father.  
 Where the day it dawns, and the dew it drifts so wide.]

Gray's 'Sir Walter' (he has changed Torben's name) softens the starkness and introduces elements of the personal in a variety of ways. Firstly, he gives the ballad a location by telling us that the killer's party 'rade to the North, through the woods o' Buccleuch': the Danish has located the event 'by the northern forest'. Secondly, he has filled out the characters. The Danish Torben is simply addressed with the stereotyped 'Her gaar du, Hr. Torben, favr og fin' [Here you walk, Sir Torben, fair and fine] whereas Sir Walter is rounded out to 'there you gae canty, like a douce man o' sense'. Torben's daughter welcomes the killers and fills their goblets with a

formulaic 'Lyst og Spil' [merriment and sport] but of Sir Walter's daughter we hear: 'Sae winsome she smiled, as she welcomed them a'.' Thirdly, there is a moderation of the impersonality by the voicing of a number of emotive phrases in Gray's version. Note the effect of the additions of 'dear lass' and 'bonnie' when the killer speaks to the daughter, for instance:

'Havde jeg vidst, du havde været saa god,  
aldrig skulde jeg set din Faders Hjerteblood.'

[Had I known that you were so kind-natured,  
never I would have seen your father's heart-blood.]

'O, had I but kent you, sae bonnie and guid,  
Dear lass, I had ne'er shed your father's bluid.' (s. 10)

Also the addition of 'wi' thae hands' and 'puir' as well as the doubling of 'sair' in the following couplet:

'Og har I slaget min Fader til Død,  
da har I gjort mig saa stor en Nød.'

[And if you have killed my father,  
then you have put me in such great distress.]

'And hae you, wi' thae hands, garred my puir father dee?  
O, sair, sair's the skaith you hae brocht upon me!' (s. 11)

Similar breaches of impersonality result from the addition of descriptive adjectives to several formulaic phrases: 'Hjerteblood' [heart-blood] becomes 'reid hert's bluid'; 'Ganger graa' [steed grey] becomes 'fleet grey horse'. Finally, one must point to what may be a misreading in the last stanza but, if it is a misreading, it is one that alerts us to the tenor of Gray's interpretation:

Saa red han over de sorte Heder,  
aldrig saa hun sin Fader mere.

[So he rode over the black heaths,  
never she saw her father again.]

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Awa ower the heathery road they fare;  
And her father she'll never see, never see mair. (s.14)

That the killer and the daughter leave together is beyond doubt but the substitution of the plural pronoun 'they' for the singular 'he' of the Danish implies a degree of togetherness not expressed by the source text.

### *'Dronning Dagmars Død' and 'The Death of Queen Dagmar'*

If we have been correct in arguing that one of the thrusts of Gray's translations of the Danish ballads is towards upgrading the authentic and the natural, it might be logically inferred that the subgenre of balladry known as the historical ballad would suit Gray's literary and translating temperament well. Although fiction that takes historical events as its subject matter is in a sense just as 'constructed' as any other form of fiction, and although even the historical ballad may contain the occasional magic component, the Danish historical ballads are nevertheless, as would be expected, clearly more authenticised and concerned with actuality than their supernatural and, to a lesser degree, their chivalrous counterparts: their places are realistically localised, their plots parallel to some extent known historical events and their characters mirror actual historical figures such as kings and queens. That there exists a rapport between this ballad form and Gray's general endeavours as a ballad translator seems validated by his fine rendering of 'Dronning Dagmars Død' [Queen Dagmar's death] in *Historical Ballads of Denmark*.

Deservedly, 'Dronning Dagmars Død' – based upon the demise of the Danish queen in 1212 – is one of the best known and most popular of the Danish historical ballads. It is a moving exploration of pain, illness and death, but also of goodness, resurrection and eventual entry into Heaven. It is about female companionship and female expertise in the sense that it describes how the fatally ill queen summons to her

sickbed in Ribe 'all' the country's wise ladies in an attempt to use their know-how to release her of a pain 'harder than iron' (s. 5). Before progressing, we should spell out that this linkage between 'all the ladies' and the attribute of wise is based upon an interpretation – albeit, it would seem, an obvious one – or a joint reading of the opening two stanzas of the source text:

alle de Fruer, i Danmark er,  
dem lader hun til sig hente. (s. 1)

[all the ladies in Denmark are,  
them she [the queen] lets to her fetch.]

'I henter mig fire, I henter mig fem,  
I henter mig af de vise!  
I henter mig liden Kirsten,  
Hr. Karls Søster af Rise!' (s. 2)

['You fetch me four, you fetch me five,  
You fetch me of the wise ones!  
You fetch me little Kirsten,  
Sir Karl's sister of Rise!']

It is hard in this text extract not to infer from their female surroundings that also the wise ones are women. Gray's translation, however, insists interestingly on making them masculine:

She has bidden the women o' Denmark come  
To bear her company. (s. 1)

'O bring me four, O bring me five  
Wise men o' lear and skill...' (s. 2)

Thus masculinity is prematurely inserted into the target text, which arguably weakens the significant gender distribution of behavioural characteristics found in a source text dominated by female action and, as it were, male re-action. Not that the remediable actions of the wise women help much, but then nothing can cure the queen. Since it, in Dagmar's euphemistic formulation, 'cannot become any better' (s. 7), her unnamed

husband, the king, is eventually called in from elsewhere in the country – so only at this later point is masculinity let into the source text.

Regularly, as it may have emerged from the preceding pages, the ballads contain a travel component, but rarely is the travel motif used to greater effect than in 'Dronning Dagmars Død'. The ballad is about Dagmar's travel out of this world and into the next, containing, even, an element of commuting between the two; but it is also more literally about the king's desperate traversing of Jutland in an attempt to arrive at Ribe before death and talk to his beloved wife one final time. Of course, the spartan ballad voice would not easily state straightforwardly that he loves her; instead, in order to convey a similar message, 'Dronning Dagmars Død' provides one among several effective realisations of the genre's common technique of creating what could be termed objective correlates to states of mind or heart:

Der han red af Skanderborg,  
da fulgte ham hundred Svende;  
der han kom til Ribe,  
da var han mand alene. (s. 13)

[When he [the king] rode out of Skanderborg,  
then hundred men accompanied him;  
when he came to Ribe,  
then he was man alone.]

or, in Gray's powerful version:

As he rade oot o' Skanderborg,  
He rade wi' a hunder men;  
But long ere he got to Ribe wa's,  
He was ridin' a' alane.

We see how the authentic, 'non-strange' place names used in this type of source text lead Gray to retain these in the target text. Thereby, ironically, he produces a somewhat more alien or exotic sounding setting than is the case with many of his re-located renderings of the stranger space of the supernatural

ballads.

In a crucial coincidence Dagmar dies, however, at the very moment when the king rides up the streets of Ribe. Therefore he, the man alone, has to appeal to the gathered group of women to pray a prayer for him in order to enable him to speak with his wife. Dagmar then rises from her bier with blood-red eyes and does all the talking. She makes three requests to her husband, which in the source text are tied together through the word 'Bøn' [request] being repeated in three consecutive stanzas (18, 19 and 20), whereas the target text with well-know ambition of variation uses 'request', 'asking' and 'boon' respectively. All of the queen's statements could significantly be said to be concerned with regulating the lives of males: firstly, all outlawed men should be let in peace and all prisoners released 'of iron' (s. 18) (a parallel to her own release from the pain that was earlier likened to iron); secondly, the king should not marry Bengred after her – 'For she is a cankered bud' (s. 19), as the target text pointedly states; finally, the king should let Knud, 'my youngest son' (s. 20), become king of Denmark. – Having thus firmly said her say it is then time for Dagmar to travel on:

I maun fare furth; it is decreed  
That I bide nae langer here.  
The blessed angels wait for me,  
And the bells o' heaven ring clear. (s. 22)

\*

Writing of Sir Alexander Gray's translations of German poetry Derrick McClure concludes: 'Many poetic translations, even excellent ones, fail to (or are not intended to) establish themselves within the poetic tradition associated with the target language. This is emphatically not true of Gray's work.'<sup>13</sup> This judgment also holds true for Gray's versions of the Danish ballads: what he has succeeded in doing in both *Four and Forty* and in *Historical Ballads of Denmark* is to



create viable and authentic Scots ballads out of his source texts – that is, he has produced poems that can stand up ‘within the poetic tradition associated with the target language’. But, in our comparisons of source and target versions, we have noted how cumulatively far he moved away from the source text in order to achieve this. In summary: he has personalised the impersonal; he has localised the general; he has relocated the local; he has fleshed out the skeletal; he has naturalised the supernatural; he has regularised the irregular. We have suggested earlier that we do not, in principle, favour the transplantation implied by these changes (however much we might applaud the results in practice). A more general thought, however, also arises from our comparisons: that the emotional registers of Danish and Scottish ballads might be rather more distinct than is commonly supposed.