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## "We Are Five-and-Forty": Meter and National Identity in Sir Walter Scott

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# “We are Five-and-Forty”: Meter and National Identity in Sir Walter Scott

WALTER SCOTT INITIATED A VIGOROUS DEFENSE OF SCOTTISH NATIONAL identity after the British Parliament responded to the 1825 financial panic with an 1826 currency reform: throughout Great Britain, small banknotes would henceforth be replaced by specie.<sup>1</sup> Scottish opponents of the reform claimed that small banknotes were crucial to economic prosperity, and while Scott himself also spoke of these notes as “nearly indispensable to the carrying on of business of almost any kind in Scotland,” his contribution to the debate involved not so much a discussion of currency theory as the creation of a persona, Malachi Malagrowther, the speaker in a series of letters to the editor of the Edinburgh *Weekly Journal*.<sup>2</sup> Occupying the position of antiquarian cultural nationalist (Scott’s *Journal* describes him as “an uncompromising right forward Scot of the Old School”<sup>3</sup>), Scott’s Malagrowther condemns the currency reform as much for its blatant “national insult” (735) as for its flawed monetary policy. But as his *Journal* entries show, the upsurge in national sentiment caused by the letters was something Scott greeted with considerable ambivalence: while he “rejoic[ed]” to see “a scene of insurrection or . . . general expression of national feeling” (97), he also, as a supporter of the British Union, hoped to stop short of genuine rebellion. “It is difficult to steer betwixt the natural impulse of one’s National feelings setting in one direction and the prudent regard to the interests of the empire and its internal peace and quiet recommending less vehement expression. I will endeavour to keep sight of both” (98–99).

1. J. G. Checkland, *Scottish Banking: A History, 1695–1973* (Glasgow: Collins, 1975) 436.

2. Walter Scott, *Letters from Malachi Malagrowther, Esq. on the Proposed Change of Currency, The Miscellaneous Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: R. Cadell, 1847) 742. This is one of many titles given to the set of three letters that appeared in the *Edinburgh Weekly Journal* on February 21, February 28, and March 7 of 1826. I will refer to them collectively as *Letters of Malachi Malagrowther*; subsequent references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

3. Walter Scott, *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. W. E. K. Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 99. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

To “steer betwixt” nation and empire while keeping sight of “both” is the challenge Scott must negotiate in his *Letters of Malachi Malagrowther*, and my concern here is less Scott’s admittedly substantial role in defeating the currency reform than the larger question of how pursuing this end induces him to formulate the “both” of nation and empire in a new—and particularly literary—way. In the pages that follow I will demonstrate that Scott’s *Letters of Malachi Malagrowther* and his contemporary fiction ground national identity in a national meter, and meter is national, according to Scott, insofar as it functions as a “summons” to Scottish national identity: it assembles the Scottish people as a people and thereby demonstrates Scotland’s ongoing integrity as a nation. In reconstructing the logic of Scott’s metrical summons my aim is to emphasize not its suitability as a general account of poetics but its functionality as a vehicle for Scott’s very particular politics—his defense of Scottish national autonomy within Britain.

### I. National Impress

As he argues against the currency reform, Scott’s Malachi Malagrowther asserts that “Ministers see no reason why any law adopted on this subject [i.e. banknote restrictions] should not be imperative over all his Majesty’s dominions, including Scotland, *for uniformity’s sake*” (730). This pursuit of “uniformity” as an end in itself (728) betrays the ministers’ larger ambition to “assimilate” (726) Scotland within Britain’s one “general system” (730), a goal that threatens “to annul and dissolve all the distinctions and peculiarities” (748–49) that make Scotland Scotland. “For God’s sake, sir,” Malagrowther counters,

let us remain as Nature made us, Englishmen, Irishmen, and Scotchmen, with something like the impress of our several countries upon each! We would not become better subjects, or more valuable members of the common empire, if we all resembled each other like so many smooth shillings. . . . The degree of national diversity between different countries is but an instance of that general variety which Nature seems to have adopted as a principle through all her works, as anxious, apparently to avoid, as modern statesmen to enforce, any thing like an approach to absolute “uniformity.” (749)

Here Malagrowther invokes currency less as medium than as metaphor: just as an “impress” gives silver bullion its identity as a shilling, so “Nature” gives imperial subjects a national impress, imparting to Britons their respective national “variety” as “Englishmen, Irishmen, and Scotchmen.” The impress that marks Scotsmen as Scotsmen, Malagrowther suggests, is the long-standing practice of issuing small banknotes, so the plan to end that practice brings Scottish national identity that much closer to smooth impe-

rial “uniformity.” Such a change won’t affect the *value* of British subjects (any more than the smoothness of a shilling affects its value as silver bullion), but it undermines the *identity* of Scotland, placing at risk “the well-being, nay, the very being, of our ancient kingdom” (737).

Protecting the national “variety” of Scotland, then, requires protecting its national impress, and to do so Malagrowther ultimately turns to a “verse from an old song” (739) that serves as a “motto” for the second letter:

When the pipes begin to play  
*Tutti taittie* to the drum,  
 Out claymore, and down wi’ gun,  
 And to the rogues again.

(739n)<sup>4</sup>

Describing himself as “desirous, by every effort in my power, to awaken [my countrymen] to a sense of their national danger” (739), Malagrowther sees this song verse as one means to that end, for it is “the summons which my countrymen have been best accustomed to obey” (739). As a “summons” addressed to “my countrymen,” the motto is intended to awaken the Scottish people to vigilant protection of their national impress. But even as it seems to protect the national impress of Scots, it seems also to endanger neighboring Englishmen, the “rogues” under attack. Aware of this potential reading of the motto, Malagrowther hopes to allay any concerns: “The motto of my epistle may sound a little warlike. . . . But it is not a hostile signal towards you [i.e. England] . . . To my countrymen I speak in the language of many recollections, certain they are not likely to be excited beyond the bounds of temperate and constitutional remonstrance” (739). Despite these assurances, the song verse generated such alarm among English readers that a later edition relegated it to a footnote, “some cautious friends,” the note explains, “thinking it liable to misinterpretation” (739n).

To interpret the song as “hostile” and “warlike” seems almost inevitable given the military circumstance it depicts. But such a literal reading of the song envisions victory for only one side, so it fails to “keep sight of both” nation and empire. If this amounts to a *mis*interpretation, then what manner of interpretation would permit the motto to function as Malagrowther imagines, as a gesture that both protects Scotland’s national impress and avoids hostility toward England? One possibility is to read the story the song tells not as a literal call for violence but as an allegory for the currency

4. This song verse can be traced to two prominent collections published in Scott’s lifetime. The first is James Johnson’s *The Scots Musical Museum: 1787–1803*, vol. 1 (Amadeus P, 1991) 178; the second is James Hogg’s *The Jacobite Relics of Scotland* (1819) (New York: AMS Press, 1974) 110–11. Thanks to Tony Inglis and Caroline M. Jackson-Houlston for help in identifying these sources.

reform. In such an interpretation the Highlanders' preference for claymores over guns ("Out claymore, and down wi' gun") might correspond to contemporary Scotsmen's preference for old banking methods over English reforms: out small notes and down with coins. This allegorical interpretation moves on the terrain of economics, where the aim is not a "warlike" revolt but a continuity of effective monetary policy, and this continuity of banknotes—Scotland's national impress—protects Scottish identity while avoiding "warlike" hostility toward England.

Such a reading may avoid misinterpreting the song as "warlike," but it nevertheless doesn't seem to be the reading Malagrowther has in mind. Far from imagining that Scotsmen will have to interpret the motto as an allegory of their historical present, Malagrowther is confident that they will respond to it immediately and directly:

The motto of my epistle may sound a little warlike; but, in using it, I have only employed the summons which my countrymen have been best accustomed to obey. . . . The drums beat to *arms* and the trumpets sound *Heraus*, as well when the soldiers are called out for a peaceful as for a military object. And, which is more to the purpose, the last time the celebrated Fiery Cross was circulated in the Highlands . . . the clansmen were called forth not to fight an enemy, but to stop the progress of a dreadful conflagration. (739)

Scotsmen are "called forth" by the summons first and foremost to be a people, and only then to designate and carry out their common "object," whether it be "peaceful" or "military." By separating these various objects (i.e. charging with claymores, fighting a fire, paying with banknotes) from the summons that calls forth a group who might perform them, Malagrowther isn't so much drawing an *analogy* among a sequence of distinct "objects" as asserting an *identity* among those who perform them: what directly identifies Scotsmen of 1745 with those of 1826 is their common response to the summons, regardless of what the assembled group is subsequently asked to do (and indeed whether they actually do it). So instead of urging Scotsmen to draw lessons from historical analogies—a history, after all, whose lessons would be available to Scots and non-Scots alike—Malagrowther urges them to identify directly with that past, and such direct identification is possible only if analogous but distinct aims (i.e. fighting with claymores or paying with banknotes) are subsumed under a common Scottish identity shared across time. The motto, by this account, is neither a literal incitement to violence nor an allegorical lesson from history; rather, it is a "summons" by which the Scottish people—whether of 1745 or 1826—can be "called forth."

Treating the motto as a summons distinguishes it not only from its thematic account of "warlike" claymores but also from another thematic ele-

ment of the song, the bagpipe signal. In the song, the sound of the bagpipes, or "*Tutti taittie*," is designated as the signal to charge. As with signals generally, this sound is stipulated as a cue for action. But since this cue can be stipulated to a group only after that group has been assembled, the summoning of that group must occur at an earlier moment. It is this earlier summons that matters to Malagrowther—his concern is not that an assembled group might be taught to interpret the bagpipe as a signal to charge but that such a group—a Scottish people—could be assembled in the first place. Thus for the purposes of the summons, the bagpipe and the action it cues are just as incidental as the claymore. Indeed, as a summons, the song is reducible to none of its thematic elements: since, as we have seen, it doesn't require an "enemy," even the "rogues" (i.e. the English) are irrelevant to its function as a summons. The summoning the motto accomplishes is quite distinct from the story the motto tells.

Once these thematic elements are set aside, the remaining feature of the motto that plausibly accounts for its summoning function is its formal status as a song, a metered set of lines. But if it is this form, and not the motto's content, that accounts for its function as a summons, then how does form alone accomplish this? That is, how can mere sound effects, as distinct from the meanings they convey, have this effect of summoning forth Scots as a people?

One way of answering this questions is by reference to the motto's second line, which features the phrase "*Tutti taittie*." Now from one perspective, this phrase is simultaneously a sound effect and a semantic sign—indeed, by embodying what it represents (the sound of the bagpipe), it is an onomatopoeic sign.<sup>5</sup> As with all instances of onomatopoeia, the medium is not merely transparent but also opaque, so it asserts itself in a manner that accentuates the meaning being conveyed—here, even as it *represents* the sound of the bagpipe, "*Tutti taittie*" also *embodies* that sound. Only the phrase "*Tutti taittie*" functions in this way; while all the lines of the motto share the metrical regularity of this phrase, only here are those metrical effects brought to the fore to work in partnership with the semantic content. But as we have seen, in imagining the motto as a summons Malagrowther views its form as *distinct from* its content, not in *partnership with* its content: while the words are representing warlike conflict, the form is summoning Scots as Scots. Setting content aside in this way has two consequences for the discussion of "*Tutti taittie*." First, in losing its partnership with thematic content, "*Tutti taittie*" loses the context that had identified what sound its sounds embody: if the phrase "*Tutti taittie*" is no longer *representing* the sound of the bagpipe, there is no longer any reason to think of its sounds as

5. The entry for "tutti-tait(e)" in the *Scottish National Dictionary* describes it as "An exclamation to represent the sound of a trumpet." Although Scott replaces trumpets with pipes, he preserves the onomatopoeia.

*embodying* the sound of the bagpipe.<sup>6</sup> Instead of being bagpipe sounds, it would seem to be nothing more than metered syllables. Second, without a thematic partner, these few syllables look no different from the metrical form in the remainder of the line and, indeed, the rest of the motto. From this perspective, the assertion of sound effects that had seemed to occur only locally—only within the onomatopoeic phrase “*Tutti taittie*”—reveals itself to be a pervasive feature of the motto. It is this pervasive metrical form—as distinct from the semantic content of “claymore,” “rogues,” and even “*Tutti taittie*”—that Malagrowthier wishes to assert as the basis for his summons.

But if “*Tutti taittie*” and the rest of the motto’s meter are not the sound of bagpipes, what are they the sound of such that they can assemble Scots as a people? Malagrowthier’s implicit answer comes by way of analogy to onomatopoeia: just as the sounds of “*Tutti taittie*” could embody the sound of the bagpipe, so the sounds of the motto as a whole are more than mere metrical effects—they embody Scottishness. Implicit here, this notion is explicit in Scott’s later account of popular poetry in Scotland. There he observes that “the language of Scotland, most commonly spoken, began to be that of their neighbors, the English,” but “the music continued to be Celtic in its general measure,” so if “the Scottish people . . . adopted . . . the Saxon language” (542), they nevertheless remained true to the “aboriginal race—a race passionately addicted to music . . . preserving . . . to this day a style and character of music peculiar to their own country” (541).<sup>7</sup> The peculiarity of Scottish musical measure is embodied in the metrical features of the motto (itself a song verse), so just as Scottish music can remain distinct from English words, so too the motto’s Scottish meter can remain distinct from its English language content. While the words may mean in English, the meter embodies Scottishness. This suggests a new way of thinking about “*Tutti taittie*”: instead of bagpipe sounds working in partnership with the semantic meaning, it is an eruption of Scottish meter amidst English words. While this is most conspicuous in “*Tutti taittie*” (where sound effects are foregrounded), the motto as a whole is pervaded by these Scottish sounds. Two nationalities exist side-by-side, sorted according to form and theme.

But if this analysis helps clarify what is at stake for Malagrowthier as he isolates the motto’s form from its thematic content, our earlier question re-

6. On the necessity of thematic context (or “semantic field”) to identify the sound embodied by onomatopoeia, see the entry for “Onomatopoeia” in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993) 861a.

7. Walter Scott, “Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry, and on the Various Collections of Ballads of Britain, Particularly Those of Scotland” (1830), *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1856); see also 538.



mains unanswered: once separated from the meanings they convey, how do these Scottish sounds summon Scots? As we saw, the English “misinterpretation” stems from reading the song’s warlike words and ignoring the effect of its sound, a national sound that, according to Malagrowther, is recognizably Scottish. Stripped of thematic content and reduced to a peculiarly Scottish metrical form, the song doesn’t have a semantic meaning so much as a national identity—it isn’t read so much as recognized. Recognizing the Scottishness of the motto’s meter concerns a point prior to consent, when those “called forth” haven’t yet been told what they will be asked to do and thus haven’t been given a chance to comply or refuse. Instead of inviting listeners to make a choice, the summons induces them to assemble, and it does so by triggering shared experience of shared memories: “To my countrymen I speak in the language of many recollections” (739). Those who are summoned both perceive the song and experience their recollections of it, the perception immediately triggering the recollection. Since this experience of the summons involves not choosing but remembering, it circumvents deliberation.<sup>8</sup> This is why the summons is something “which my countrymen have been best accustomed to *obey*” (739; my emphasis), and while the very notion of obedience would seem to imply the possibility of disobedience, Malagrowther rewrites a failure to obey as a failure to be: “If there is . . . a mean-spirited Scotsman, who prefers the orders of the [English] minister to the unanimous voice of his country . . . let England keep him to herself . . . he cannot be a Scottish man in spirit . . . he is not of us” (737). Those who experience the summons as a summons—who, upon hearing it, also recollect it—confirm the presence within them of those memories, of that Scottish spirit. Just as viewing the motto as a summons brings to the fore its national meter, subordinating its meaningful words to its Scottish sounds, so summoned Scotsmen bring to the fore their national recollections, subordinating their status as deliberating imperial subjects to their underlying national memory and, thus, national identity.

This analysis of the motto and its summoning force demonstrates the shift that has occurred in Malagrowther’s approach to representing the persistence of national “variety” against pressures toward imperial “uniformity”: abandoning coins as his figure for the nation’s relation to empire, he no longer needs to protect a “national impress” from being worn smooth. Focusing instead on poems, he can now conduct literary analyses that reveal, lurking alongside uniform imperial words, the ongoing presence of a peculiar national meter, and he can expect that Scots (those who share memories of “the language of many recollections”) will experience this

8. For related observations about the effects of poetic meter see Adela Pinch, “Female Chatter: Meter, Masochism, and the *Lyrical Ballads*,” *ELH* 55 (1988): 846.



meter as a summons. Embodied in metrical form and recollected by all Scots, such a national impress is in no danger of falling prey to imperial uniformity. Malagrowther's notion that Scotland's national "variety" could be embodied in metrical variety runs counter to the influential metrical principles set out in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), which had called for uniformity of both words and prosody.<sup>9</sup> But as critics have often noted, the close of the eighteenth century saw a general retreat from Johnson's metrical principles as many poets, including Scott himself, cultivated a greater variety in their prosody.<sup>10</sup> Doing so led to a tension between the uniformity demanded of word usage, on the one hand, and the variety embraced in metrical practice, on the other. In his *Letters of Malachi Malagrowther*, I am arguing, Scott is not only aware of this tension within poetry, but he also invests that tension with the political conflicts of imperial dominion: for Scott, the tension between uniform words and varying prosody comes to serve as a figure for the tension between the uniformity of the empire and the variety of its constituent nations, so English words are not just uniform but also imperial while meter—for instance, the meter of the motto—not only figures variety, but the variety it figures is, Scott claims, distinctly national—in this case, Scottish.<sup>11</sup>

9. See A. Dwight Culler, "Edward Bysshe and the Poet's Handbook," *PMLA* 63.3 (September 1948): 881; and Paul Fussell, *Theory of Prosody in Eighteenth-Century England* (Archon, 1966) 25.

10. Johnson's emphasis on syllable counts faced increasing challenges from advocates of accentual prosody, an approach to verse that drew upon the ballad revival as well as German writings (both of which Scott knew well) to culminate in Coleridge's *Christabel* (1797, 1800, 1816) and Scott's own *Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805). For accounts of this shift from syllabic metrics to accentual verse, see Culler, "Edward Bysshe and the Poet's Handbook" 878–85; Fussell, *Theory of Prosody in Eighteenth-Century England* 101 ff.; T. S. Omond, *English Metrists* (New York: Phaeton P, 1968) 108–9, 114–16; and Brennan O'Donnell, *The Passion of Meter: A Study of Wordsworth's Metrical Art* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 1995) 28–32, 253, n. 8. For Scott's own comments on his deviations from Johnson's metrical standard, see his "Introduction to Edition 1830 [of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*]," *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* 14; and "Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad," *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* 560–63. Even as he embraced metrical variety, Scott advocated standard English words, a view apparent in the "Dedicatory Epistle" of *Ivanhoe*, where he insists that remote historical topics "should be, as it were, translated into the manners, as well as the language, of the age we live in" (*Ivanhoe*, ed. A. N. Wilson [New York: Penguin, 1984] 526).

11. For Scott's statements regarding national metrical forms, see his "Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry," *Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* 538, 542–43; and his "Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad" 567–68. The account of "tension" that I am advancing here differs somewhat from most prosodic criticism: most locate it entirely *within* the domain of prosody, between variable and uniform patterns of sound (i.e. a varying rhythm or diction within a uniform metrical structure). On this version of tension, see Fussell, esp. 152–53; Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (New York: Longman, 1982) 9, 17–18, 306–14; O'Donnell, *The Passion of Meter* 31, 67; and Allen Grossman, *The Sighted Singer* (Balti-

More than just a figure for national variety, however, we have seen that meter—as the language of many recollections—is also the agency for asserting this national variety, so by perpetuating national identity in tandem with the institutions of empire, the metrical summons advances Scott's goal to “keep sight of both.”

## 2. Appropriating the Meter of Wordsworth and Coleridge

Malagrowther asserts the tense coexistence of imperial words and national meter by way of a more familiar poetic reference, in this case invoking “the sweet little rustic girl in a poem which it is almost a sin to parody” (736), the girl in Wordsworth's “We Are Seven” (1798). Wordsworth is an apt choice for exploring the relation between word and meter since his poetry frequently exploits possible tensions between words and “superadded” meter.<sup>12</sup> This particular poem does so to an unusual degree, for even though its typical line is made up of seven iambic feet (four followed by three in the split-up septanarius), the poem's first line is missing two feet (“A simple child, —— / That lightly draws its breath”<sup>13</sup>), so scanning it raises the question whether it consists of five or seven metrical feet. This formal choice between five and seven feet corresponds, of course, to the thematic debate between the poem's two main figures, the rustic girl and the traveler: counting according to the metrical form (in spite of the missing words) is consistent with the rustic girl, who counts seven siblings even though two have died; counting only the ostensible words is consistent with the traveler, who insists, “If two are in the church-yard laid, / Then ye are only five” (84).<sup>14</sup>

Malagrowther adapts his debate about fives and sevens to his own agenda: Scottish national autonomy has, like the rustic girl's siblings, re-

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more: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992) 290–98, 373–74. Scott's *Letters of Malachi Malagrowther*, I am suggesting, relocates this tension from *within* prosody (i.e. between each line's uniform and varying sound patterns) to *between* meter and words, thus permitting these to be assigned, respectively, to nation and empire.

12. For Wordsworth's use of the word “superadded” to describe the relation of meter to words, see his “Preface” (1802) to the *Lyrical Ballads* in *The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 602, 609. For an account of Wordsworth's general tendency to exploit tensions between words and superadded meter, see O'Donnell, *The Passion of Meter* 27–28.

13. See *The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth* 83. All subsequent references to Wordsworth will come from this collection and will be cited parenthetically in the text. The missing words are “dear brother Jem,” which were suggested to Wordsworth by Coleridge but were later removed; see 690, n. 84.

14. For an alternative account of this exchange, one that sees it less in terms of political conflict than conceptual agreement, see Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 164–69.

ceded into the remote past, and the tendency of a “preemptory Minister” to act as if Scotland had “altogether los[t] consideration” (735) matches the traveler’s impulse to give diminished consideration to the rustic girl’s family—to count five instead of seven siblings. But if Scottish representatives would only treat their national past the way the rustic girl treats her deceased siblings and the way scansion treats the meter of the poem’s first line, as a felt presence despite physical absence, then they could continue to assert their autonomous nationhood:

our representatives must stand firm. I would advise that, to all such intimations as are usually circulated, bearing, “That your presence is earnestly requested on such an evening of the debate, as such or such a public measure is coming on,” the concise answer should be returned, “*We are five-and-forty;*” and that no Scottish members do on such occasions attend. (737)

Instead of obeying an imperial summons, the forty-five Scottish Ministers should obey this national one. The refrain “*We are five-and-forty*” replaces the rustic girl’s “*We are seven,*” but the point remains the same: one must insist that an aspect of the remote past, Scottish national autonomy, still has bearing in the present. In this case, as with the rustic girl, meter marks the absence of, and thereby enables the persistence of, a superseded point of history, a point when words filled out a metered line, when siblings were still living, when the nation enjoyed independence. In appropriating the rustic girl’s voice, Malagrowther urges that her persistent attachment to deceased siblings serve as a model for Scotsmen’s persistent attachment to national autonomy, and like Wordsworth, he makes this point by subordinating traveler to rustic girl and words to metrical form. Although this appropriation of “*We Are Seven*” deviates considerably from the account of meter set out in Wordsworth’s own writings,<sup>15</sup> it nevertheless lends itself well to Malagrowther’s project of using the formal features of poems to imagine how the Scottish people might sustain their autonomy within Britain.

Having appropriated Wordsworth’s familiar poem to his metrical summons, Scott goes on to impose his account of national meter on one of Coleridge’s best known poems, *Christabel*. This poem’s metrical innovations inspired Scott to write his own best-selling verse romances,<sup>16</sup> and in

15. Space limitations prohibit developing this point beyond the observation that Wordsworth’s “Preface” (1802) to *Lyrical Ballads* describes meter as capable of binding together not a particular nation but “the vast empire of human society” (606).

16. As Scott observes, “the striking fragment called *Christabel*, by Mr. Coleridge, which, from singularly irregular structure of the stanzas, and the liberty which it allowed the author, to adapt the sound to the sense, seemed to be exactly suited to such an extravaganza as I

1826 *Christabel* was on Scott's mind again, for it supplies an epigraph to *The Highland Widow*, one of several stories collected in *Chronicles of the Canongate* (1827):

It wound<sup>o</sup> as near as near could † be,      °moaned, † can  
But what it is she cannot tell;  
On the other side it seemed to be,  
Of the huge broad-breasted old oak-tree.<sup>17</sup>

In Coleridge's poem these lines introduce the uncanny Geraldine, and Scott folds them into his own prose when he introduces his own "not canny" (98) character, Elspat MacTavish, who is discovered "by the side of the great broad-breasted oak, in the direction opposed to that in which we had hitherto seen [the oak tree]" (99). Appropriating Geraldine for his own story gives Scott a model who not only has a magical power to coerce obedience, or "forced unconscious sympathy (line 609)—"In the touch of [Geraldine's] bosom there worketh a spell, / Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!" (lines 267–68)—but who also, in Scott's view, functions as a figure for metrical form.<sup>18</sup> Thus not only does Elspat have "an unusual acquaintance with the songs of ancient bards" (125), but the "style of her rhetoric was poetical" (138), and she

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meditated. . . . it is to Mr. Coleridge that I am bound to make the acknowledgment due from the pupil to his master"; see Scott's "Introduction to Edition 1830 [of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*]," *Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* 13.

17. Sir Walter Scott, *The Highland Widow*, in *Chronicles of the Canongate*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Henry T. Coates & Co., 1900) 91. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text. The collection did not appear until 1827 because Scott's financial problems led to legal wrangling over who owned it, Scott or his creditors. The composition of the work occurred much earlier, and *The Highland Widow* itself was composed in late May and early June of 1826, less than four months after Scott's first involvement with the currency crisis; see *Journal* 150.

18. "Christabel," *The Oxford Authors: Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 66, 74. Whether or not Coleridge intended Geraldine as a figure for meter's power, Scott, I am suggesting, read her in this way. Coleridge's own views on meter have occasioned extensive critical discussion. While his mature metrical theory (as set out in *Biographia Literaria* [1817]) tends to subordinate metrical effects to a poem's overall unity (see O'Donnell, *The Passion of Meter* 49), his early poetry has led many recent critics to observe in his metrical practice what I am suggesting Scott saw there—an autonomous and powerful force responsible for very specific effects. See Karen Swann, "'Christabel': The Wandering Mother and the Enigma of Form," *SiR* 23 (Winter 1984): 552; Jerome Christensen, "Ecce Homo: Biographical Acknowledgment, the End of the French Revolution, and the Romantic Reinvention of English Verse," *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism* (West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1991) 71–79; and Rachel Crawford, "Thieves of Language: Coleridge, Wordsworth, Scott, and the Contexts of 'Alice du Clos,'" *European Romantic Review* 7.1 (1996): 2, 8.

employs “the words of a Gaelic poet” as her own speech (143). Furthermore, she is seen “speaking to herself in a language which will endure no translation” (139), a description Scott elsewhere associates with poetic form.<sup>19</sup>

If Scott takes Geraldine as his prompt for casting Elspat as an embodiment of meter, he also deviates from Coleridge’s example in ways that endow Elspat with distinctly national features as well. While Geraldine’s magic had involved serpentine evil, Scott removes Elspat’s magic from the Christian context, aligning it instead with indigenous Druidical sacrifice (159–60). Moreover, if Geraldine’s role in *Christabel* is to exploit a rift between Sir Leoline and Lord Roland, Elspat exploits a gap between Scotland and the empire: she is “seated by the stem of the oak, with her head drooping, her hands clasped, and a dark-colored mantle drawn over her head, exactly as Judah is represented in the Syrian medals as seated under her palm-tree” (99). This is a reference, John Barrell notes, to “a Roman coin which . . . depicts Judea—the Roman province—in the form of a veiled woman, sitting under a palm-tree, weeping.”<sup>20</sup> Malagrowther had warned that imperial encroachments threatened to reduce Scotland to “provincial” status (725), and Elspat, “the Woman of the Tree” (100), allegorically figures this once-autonomous entity—the Scottish nation. Thus while Coleridge had asserted that “the meter of *Christabel* is . . . founded on a new principle,”<sup>21</sup> Scott’s allegory of meter associates it with the much older principle of Scottish national independence. Bringing together the metrical power of Coleridge’s Geraldine with the national independence of Scotland, Elspat MacTavish is thus poised to operate as a metrical summons to national identity.

Elspat’s exertion of this summoning force provides the main action of *The Highland Widow*. The object of her summons is her son, Hamish, who, just an infant at the time of his father’s death in the 1745 uprising, has now joined the British army to fight for imperial conquest “against the French in America” (118). His mother, still loyal to her husband’s anti-British stance, violently objects to Hamish’s enlistment (120–21), and the story’s climactic scene underscores these tensions with the spatial orientation of the characters: Elspat stands within her hut, just behind Hamish, who

19. Scott made this point in 1827 in an unrecollected letter to the Reverend Charles McCombie; the letter is reprinted as “Sir Walter Scott on the Scottish Metrical Psalms,” *Life and Work* (Feb. 1884) 17–19.

20. John Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991) 33. The substitution of an oak for a palm redirects the reference from Judea to the Jacobite cause; on the role of oak trees in Jacobite iconography, see Paul Kléber Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People, 1688–1788* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989) 71–72.

21. *The Oxford Authors: Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 66. For Coleridge’s metrical experimentation, see his notebooks for the years of his stay in Germany: *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 3 vols., ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York: Pantheon, 1957).

stands on the “threshold” (149) with a gun leveled at his approaching military companions. Although clad in Highland tartans, these companions have been effectively assimilated within the British imperial structure, for they “marched regularly and in files, according to the rules of military discipline” (146), something that authentic Highlanders were generally described as unwilling or unable to do.<sup>22</sup> Poised, then, between the metrical-national figure of Elspat MacTavish and the uniform and assimilating force of the British empire, Hamish’s position reproduces the tension between nation and empire that, as we saw above, Scott located between the meter and words of Malagrowther’s motto and Wordsworth’s “We are Seven.”

But if these poems had served to cast this tension as static, Scott’s narrative version is necessarily dynamic, proceeding on to the catastrophe: Elspat demands that Hamish “Step back within the hut, my son, and shoot” (146) while the British soldiers command him to “lay down your arms and surrender” (147). Hamish refuses to make a choice (145), and into this vacuum of deliberation steps Elspat, who draws him firmly to the side of nation by inducing forced unconscious sympathy—by demanding, that is, obedience to her summons to national identity: “[Officer Cameron] rushed forward, extending his arm as if to push aside the young man’s levelled firelock. Elspat exclaimed, ‘Now, spare not your father’s blood to defend your father’s hearth!’ Hamish fired his piece, and Cameron dropped dead” (147). Just as the meter of Malagrowther’s motto had asserted Scottishness alongside English words, so here the metrical Elspat asserts Scottish autonomy against English imperial sway. The story underscores Elspat’s agency in this encounter by noting “how little [Hamish’s] heart was accessory to the crime which his hand unhappily committed” (153); “no one doubted that in one way or other she had been the cause of the catastrophe; and Hamish Bean was considered . . . rather as the instrument than as the accomplice of his mother” (151).

By labeling Elspat as the “cause of the catastrophe” the story underscores her function as a summons: with Elspat as the actual agent, Hamish becomes a mere “instrument” of her power. Given this account of agency, these two characters are best understood not as separate selves but as distinct aspects of a complex subjectivity, or “double consciousness.”<sup>23</sup> This combined status is most apparent when the story places both characters

22. The Story mentions the Highland regiments sponsored by the Earl of Chatham; they wore tartan plaid but fought “for the defence of the colonies” (132). Yet as Scott’s narrator observes, “By nature and habit, every Highlander was accustomed to the use of arms, but at the same time totally unaccustomed to, and impatient of, the restraints imposed by discipline upon regular troops” (132). Scott makes this same point much earlier in his review of the “Culloden Papers” in *Quarterly Review* 14.28 (January, 1816): 283–333.

23. On the importance of this concept to Scottish writers of the period, see Susan Manning, “‘This Philosophical Melancholy’: Style and Self in Boswell and Hume,” *New Light on Boswell*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991): 126–40.

within the same hut, their proximity figuring the kind of subjectivity toward which Scott's Malagowther had directed his summons: the youth and inexperience of Hamish represent a modern imperial subject, one who, never having known Scotland as an autonomous nation, might well decide to serve the empire; but the national past contributed by Elspat represents the national impress of someone who is accustomed to obey the language of many recollections. Viewed in this light, Scott's story becomes a context for imagining a subject who can keep sight of both the nation and the empire. Experiencing national history as if it were their own recollections, Scots retain a constitutive link to the national past even though they have been British subjects all their lives, and Scotland thereby retains its national integrity even after its absorption within the uniform empire.

In imagining such a subjectivity Scott has built directly from his prior account of poems: just as Malagowther's metrical summons had paired imperial words with national meter, so too Scott's hut pairs Hamish's will to embrace imperial uniformity with Elspat's recollections of a national past. Just as the meter wells up within the poem to assert Scottishness (as we have seen, "*Tutti taittie*" is more conspicuous for its Scottish sound than its English meaning), so too Elspat wells up from within the hut to assert Scottish national identity in her son. Like the motto stripped of its thematic content and reduced to its metrical form, Hamish is stripped of his independent will and reduced to his mother's recollections. Such a composite self—a self who experiences the nation's history as his own memories—demonstrates Scott's reliance on poetry as the basis for his emerging vision of what it means to have Scottish national identity.

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