

## **Voices from Kilbarchan: Two versions of “The Cruel Mother” from South-West Scotland, 1825**

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### **Introduction**

It was not until the early decades of the nineteenth century that a concern for preserving variants of the same ballad was really taken seriously by collectors. Prior to this ballad editors had been content with documenting single illustrations of ballad types in their collections; that is, they gave only one version (and often a “conflated” or “amended” one at that), such as for instance Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* from 1765 and Walter Scott’s *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* from 1802. But with “the antiquarian’s quest for authenticity” (McAulay 2013:5) came the growing appreciation of the living ballad tradition and an interest in the singers themselves and their individual interpretations of the traditional material. From this point on attention was also given to different variations of the same ballad story, including documentation (however slight) of the ballads in their natural environment.

William Motherwell (1797-1835) was one of the earliest ballad collectors to pursue this line of collecting, and he was very conscious of what this new approach would mean for a better understanding of the nature of an oral tradition. And as has been demonstrated elsewhere, Motherwell’s approach to ballad collecting had an immense impact on later collectors and editors (see also, Andersen 1994 and Brown 1997).

In what follows I shall first give an outline of the earliest extensively documented singing community in the Anglo-Scottish ballad tradition, and then present a detailed analysis of two versions of the same ballad story (“The Cruel Mother”) taken down on the same day in 1825 from two singers from the same Scottish village. The fact that Motherwell’s material includes alternative performances of the same ballad story from the same area allows us to get one of the earliest glimpses into ballads as a living oral tradition. We may assess at close hand the degree of variability and multiformity that is characteristic of texts in oral tradition (Foley 1998:5), and thus gain an appreciation of the ballads as a living cultural phenomenon.

### **Motherwell and his Ballads**

The two versions of “The Cruel Mother” in question were recorded in the village of Kilbarchan, Renfrewshire, which was the most fertile hunting ground for William Motherwell,

who paid about ten visits to that area spread over eight months in 1825 and 1826 (see also Brown 1996 and McCarthy 1987). There is no indisputable proof that Motherwell, in fact, undertook all the collecting trips himself; in the preface to his *Minstrelsy, Ancient and Modern* (1827) Motherwell acknowledges the assistance of “my friend Dr. Andrew Crawford of Lochwinnoch, Mr. Robert Allan of Kilbarchan, and Mr. Peter Buchan of Peterhead, as having rendered me most essential help in procuring copies of ballads not hitherto printed, and different sets of others already edited” (civ). This acknowledgement is the only reference to Robert Allan, poet of Kilbarchan, and we can only speculate as to his exact role in the fieldwork. We know that it was Andrew Crawford who—on Motherwell’s behalf—collected most of the ballads taken down from Mrs. Storie of Lochwinnoch (Lyle 1975:xvii-xxiv). Motherwell’s entry in the *Notebook*: “To expenses in sundry trips to Kilbarchan in quest of old ditties” might refer to his visiting only Robert Allan; but the notes preserved in the *Notebook* concerning August 24, 1825, demonstrate that Motherwell did some active fieldwork in Kilbarchan.<sup>1</sup>

In all William Motherwell collected 48 complete ballad texts from this village, which constitutes a unique corpus of popular oral tradition.<sup>2</sup> Motherwell’s contribution to ballad scholarship in general is well-documented by McCarthy (1987 and 1990) and Brown (2001), among others, but in order to place the two texts in their proper, immediate context I shall give a detailed account of how he came to acquire his ballads from Kilbarchan.

Motherwell was the first ballad editor to pay consistent heed to local and contemporary traditions. He sought systematically to discover both personal and regional repertoires, and consequently he was generally at pains to attribute the collected material to named singers of specific villages and towns, even though he sometimes seemed reluctant to reproduce the names in his own published edition. It is characteristic of Motherwell’s interest in the ballad tradition that he entitled his collection *Minstrelsy, Ancient and Modern*. Both aspects of the tradition were to be considered: ballads are old *and* new, and consequently the contemporary singing tradition was to be treated with the utmost care and accuracy (1827:iv):

The almost total absence of written monuments to support the claims of Scotland to an inheritance of Ancient National Minstrelsy enforces the stern necessity of not wantonly tampering with the fleeting and precarious memorials tradition has bequeathed to those latter times. Hence it has become of the first importance to collect these Songs with scrupulous and unshrinking fidelity . . . It will not do to indulge in idle speculations as to what they once may have been, and to recast them in what we may fancy were their original moulds.

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<sup>1</sup> A letter of June 6, 1825, from Motherwell to the Edinburgh antiquarian David Laing, offers additional evidence of Motherwell as a fieldworker, demonstrating that he did sometimes himself check the versions that he had had others take down on his behalf: “As you are fond of first Editions I send you the copy of it taken by the illiterate scribe whom I employed to write it down from his old relation. I called on the woman afterwards and got her to sing it over—the Corrections are interlined by me.” (Edinburgh University Library MS La. IV.6). Motherwell is here referring to Widow McCormick’s version of “Child Morris” (compare 1827:282).

<sup>2</sup> Also refer to William McCarthy, who maintains that “there is no comparably intense set of data in the whole field of classical English and Scottish popular ballads” (1978:21).

In his introduction Motherwell provides one of the earliest accounts of singers and their attitudes towards their ballads, and it is worth quoting extensively from this account here for its unique insight into how an oral tradition lived and survived in a small community, and how it would be influenced by its geographical context (1827:xxvii):<sup>3</sup>

It is well known by all who have personally undergone the pleasant drudgery of gathering our traditional song, that the old people who recite these legends, attach to them the most unqualified and implicit belief. To this circumstance may be ascribed the feeling and pathos with which they are occasionally chaunted; the audible sorrow that comes of deep and honest sympathy with the fates and fortunes of our fellow kind. In the spirit too, with which such communications are made, in the same spirit must they be received and listened to. . . . Reciters, moreover, frequently assign special localities, to the ancient ballads, which they gladly indicate to the inquisitive, and to these they appeal as a triumphant refutation of every objection which learned scepticism may urge to the accuracy of the facts, thus traditionally preserved. . . . For, a ballad, when it has become a favourite of the people in any particular district, is soon fitted with localities, drawn from the immediate neighbourhood.

### The Community Context

In Kilbarchan parish Motherwell recorded ballads from five named singers: Agnes Lyle, Mrs. Thomson, Agnes Laird, Mrs. King, and Janet Holmes.<sup>4</sup> But, apart from the names and the occasional note of date of performance, Motherwell offers no information about the circumstances of the recordings. It appears that the singers in question can be linked to the weaving industry—which flourished in this particular part of Scotland at the time. Motherwell notes that Agnes Lyle’s father was a customary weaver of neighboring Locherlip (*Manuscript* 331), and that Edward King (son of Mrs. King) was a weaver (*Manuscript* 9). Most of the sparse information about the singers is repeated in various works containing Kilbarchan material, but otherwise the local records are silent with regard to the lives of these singers.<sup>5</sup> Thus, information about their social and cultural environment will have to be gleaned from other sources.

Because the textile industries had developed widely in the region, it is extremely likely that the singers concerned were, in some way, involved in either weaving or cotton spinning. Industrialization in the area began in the middle of the eighteenth century, and that development in the village of Kilbarchan is summarized by Robert Mackenzie in his parochial history (1902:175):

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<sup>3</sup> Motherwell also gives an account of a performance in *chantefable* style; see *Manuscript* xiv-xv.

<sup>4</sup> We know of one other singer in Kilbarchan, but no songs have survived from her, and no name is given. Motherwell merely observes “A friend of Agnes Lyle’s in Kilbarchan has some verses of Lizzie Wan and part of what I suspect is the ballad of Richard Storie. Got the last.” (*Notebook* 56).

<sup>5</sup> See Child 1965; Mackenzie 1902:282-83; Lyle 1931:39. I am grateful to Emily Lyle for answering my queries concerning Motherwell’s *Notebook* and *Manuscript*, and for presenting me with a copy of her father’s edition of ballads.

In 1695 there were in the parish only thirty or forty weavers including apprentices, and these were probably all *customer* weavers. In 1739 John Barbour built a factory, probably in the Stack Yard, and began to make thick linen. In 1742 Allan Speirs began the manufacture of a higher class of goods—lawns, cambries, etc.—for which he found a market chiefly in Dublin. In 1782 this industry was still on the increase, Alexander Speirs, John and Humphrey Barbour in company, John How, John Barbour, jun., and John Houston employing amongst them three hundred and sixty looms. Semple calculates that each weaver could in 1782 make £65 per annum, and Rev. Robert Douglas says that at the end of the century a good workman could earn as much as 10s. a day. In 1791 there were 383 looms in the village and 34 in the county district.

The cotton industry thrived as well. Mackenzie notes that in 1793 the Old Red Mill, which had 2,120 spindles, employed 70 people; and in 1794 another mill was built that was planned to have nearly 25,000 spindles and to employ around 1,800 people (1902:176). But these prospects were never fulfilled.<sup>6</sup> At the turn of the century hard times had set in the textile industries, in Scotland as well as in Northern England, owing to the introduction of power looms in the villages both the customary weavers (who took orders from individual customers in the villages) and the weavers in handloom factories were in rapid decline (Elbourne 1980:5-8; Slaven 1975:104). The weaver poet Will Thom notes that in the Aberdeen area where he was working, a skillful factory weaver would earn 40 shillings per week, in a four-day week, at the end of the eighteenth century, whereas in the period when he was himself employed at the spinning mill, from 1814 to 1831, the wages had dropped to 6 shillings per week (Thom 1844:9-10).

The first decades of the nineteenth century were disastrous to the previously profitable weaving trade, and this economic crisis for the weavers coincided with the general political and social upheaval of the Chartist movement. Some radical Scottish groups, many of them recruited from among the weavers (Ellis and Mac a'Ghobhainn 1970:22), were working for a revolution against English supremacy, but nothing much came of it. In 1819 the movement amounted to no more than a few incidents and strikes, whereas in April 1820, the Chartists read aloud a proclamation of "independence," with 150,000 people in the streets of Glasgow; but the rebels were severely punished by the English: many Radical Scots (among them many weavers) were convicted, by English law, and three people were executed (Ellis and Mac a'Ghobhainn 1970:238).

In this context it is interesting to note that William Motherwell—in his capacity of sheriff-clerk deputy—was physically involved in the upheaval. In September, 1819, Motherwell had been "assaulted and knocked unconscious" by angry radicals (Ellis and Mac a'Ghobhainn 1970:120), and on April 3, 1820—the day after the Glasgow proclamation—he raided a house "with soldiers and police . . . looking for pikes and guns" (Ellis and Mac a'Ghobhainn

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<sup>6</sup> In the chapter on Kilbarchan in the *New Statistical Account of Scotland* the Rev. Robert Douglas notes that the four cotton mills occupied 500 workers, and that there were about 800 hand looms in the village (1845:373, 376-77). Wages had dropped: at the Linwood Company Mill eighty workers earned between 16 and 30 shillings per week; 200 workers earned between 6 and 13 shillings per week, and 120 workers earned between 3 and 6 shillings per week.

1970:158).<sup>7</sup> Chartism was also present in Kilbarchan, but according to the Rev. Mackenzie, who was writing some 80 years later, it was evidently not enthusiastically supported. He quotes one Arthur Snoddon, who observes that a Paisley contingent of agitators had to return to Paisley, as they found the Kilbarchan inhabitants soundly asleep, in spite of an agreement to participate: “I was of the opinion that the Kilbarchan people had begun to see the folly of the whole matter, and, being a shrewd set of villagers, had cut the connection” (Mackenzie 1902:280).

Besides being politically articulate, weavers cultivated an active interest in songs and poetry. Thom mentions that the songs of James Hogg, also known as the Ettrick Shepherd, and Tannahil, a weaver of Paisley, were particular favorites. In his somewhat inflated style Thom observes (1844:15, 14):

Song was the dew drops that gathered during the long dark night of despondency . . . Let me again  
proclaim the debt we owe to those Song Spirits, as they walked in melody from loom to loom,  
ministering to the low-hearted.

We can only speculate as to whether the singers of Kilbarchan used their ballads in the same manner as the Paisley singers. There is no external evidence documenting their political stand, so what we might learn about their world views will have to be inferred from the ballads themselves.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Two Ballads of “The Cruel Mother”**

The ballads that were collected in the village of Kilbarchan survive in two sources: one known as Motherwell’s *Notebook* (which seems to have served as his *vade mecum* on field trips), the other as his *Manuscript* (which contains fair copies of all the ballads and songs that were taken down from recitation, plus occasional texts that were sent to him).<sup>9</sup>

As far as our evidence goes, all but one of the ballads from the Kilbarchan area were taken down in the year 1825.<sup>10</sup> Being a collection of fair copies of ballads and songs, the *Manuscript* itself is not chronologically ordered, and it seems that Motherwell changed his

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<sup>7</sup> It is indeed paradoxical that Motherwell, with his Tory leanings in the conflict should later become so much involved with the weaving community, which was closely related to the Chartist movement. For a balanced account of Motherwell’s political views, see Brown 2001:16-17 and 34-56.

<sup>8</sup> McCarthy offers the following observation on Agnes Lyle: “whether or not Agnes Lyle was sympathetic to the political ideals and aspirations of the weaving fraternity, she could not have been ignorant of them or indifferent to them” (1978:12). We simply don’t know.

<sup>9</sup> The original of Motherwell’s *Notebook* is held in Pollok House, Glasgow. A copy has been made by James Murdoch in The Houghton Library, Harvard University (MS 25242.16). The original of Motherwell’s *Manuscript* is held in the Glasgow University Library (MS Murray 501). The *Manuscript* as a whole is a miscellaneous collection of songs from contemporary tradition (oral and written). The bulk of material, however, can be categorized as “traditional ballads” in terms of narrative technique. For more details on the two sources, see McCarthy 1987; and Brown 2001:85-88.

<sup>10</sup> For a full account of the Kilbarchan repertoire, see Appendix I.

method of compilation in the course of collecting. In the early pages of the *Manuscript* he apparently wanted to make a selection of versions of the same ballad story, whereas later—obviously under the influence of a letter from Sir Walter Scott (who also encouraged him to note names of singers and dates of performance)—Motherwell became more interested in documenting repertoires of individual singers.<sup>11</sup>

Surveying the recorded Kilbarchan corpus we find that eight ballads have been known by two or more singers,<sup>12</sup> and in the following section I shall look at one of the two ballads that are shared by Agnes Lyle and Agnes Laird their two versions of “The Cruel Mother” (Child 20E and 20H).

The texts are printed below in the shape in which they appear in Motherwell’s *Manuscript*, stanza numbering added (*Manuscript* 390-91 and 402-03, respectively):

“The Cruel Mother.”

This comes from the recitation of Agnes Lyle  
Kilbarchan, 24 August 1825.

The following ballad is also from Agnes  
Laird Kilbarchan. 24. Aug., 1825. She heard  
it with two different choruses. These are both  
given in the first Stanza. The ballad is a  
different copy of the ballad given before  
under the title of “The Cruel Mother.”

1. There was a lady she lived in Lurk York  
Sing hey alone and alonie O  
She fell in love with her father’s clerk  
  
Down by yon greenwood sidie O.  
  
Down by the green wood sidie O.

2. She loved him seven years and a day  
Till her big belly did her betray.

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3. She leaned her back unto a tree  
And there began her sad misery.

4. She set her foot unto a thorn  
And there she got her two babes born.

1. There was a lady brisk and Smart  
All in a lone and a lonie O  
(Three and three and three by three)  
variation  
And she goes with child to her father’s  
clark

/Ah me some forty three/ variation

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2. Big, big oh she went away  
And then she set her foot to a tree.

3. Big she set her foot to a stone  
Till her three bonnie babes were borne.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of Scott’s impact on Motherwell’s view on editing, see Hustvedt 1930:76-77; McCarthy 1987; Andersen 1994:31-33; Brown 2001:82-83.

<sup>12</sup> For a comparative analysis of the two Kilbarchan versions of “The Twa Sisters” sung by Agnes Lyle and Mrs. King, see Andersen 1997:125-37.

5. She took out her wee penknife  
She twin'd them both of their sweet life.

6. She took the sattins was on her head  
She rolled them in both when they were dead.

7. She howkit a grave forenent the sun  
And there she buried her twa babes in.

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8. As she was walking thro' her father's ha'  
She spied twa boys playing at the ba.

4. She took the ribbons off her head  
She tied the little babes hand + feet.

5. She howkit a hole before the sun  
She's laid these three bonnie babes in.

6. She covered them over with marble stone  
For Dukes and lords to walk upon.

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7. She lookied over her father's Castle wa'  
She saw three bonnie boys playing at the  
ba.

8. The first o' them was clad in red  
To shew the innocence of their blood.

9. The neist o' them was clad in green  
To shew that death they had been in.

10. The next was naked to the skin  
To shew they were murder'd when they  
were born.

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9. O pretty boys if ye were mine  
I would dress ye both in the silks so fine.

11. O bonnie babes an ye were mine  
I wud dress you in the satins so fine.

10. O mother dear when we were thine  
Thou ne'er dressed us in silks so fine.

12. O mother dear when we were thine  
Thou did not use us half so kind.

11. For thou was a lady thou lived in Lurk  
And thou fell in love with thy fathers clerk

12. Thou lived [sic] him seven years and a day  
Till thy big belly did thee betray.

13. Thou leaned thy back unto a tree  
And there began thy sad misery

14. Thou set thy foot unto a thorn

- And there thou got thy two babes born.  
 15. Thou took out thy wee penknife  
 And twin'd us both of our sweet life.
16. Thou took the Sattins was on your head  
 Thou rolled us both in when we were dead.
17. Thou howkit a grave forenent the sun  
 And there thou buried thy twa babes in.
13. O bonnie babes an ye be mine  
 Whare hae ye been a' this time.
14. We were at our father's house  
 Preparing a place for thee and us.
15. Whaten a place ha'e ye prepar'd for me  
 Heaven for us, but hells for thee!
18. But now we're both in heavens hie  
 There is pardon for us but none for thee.
16. O mother dear but heaven's high  
 That is the place thou'll ne'er come nigh.
19. My pretty boys beg pardon for me—Sing hey  
 There is pardon for us but none for thee!  
 Down by the green wood sidie O.
17. O mother dear but hell is deep  
 'Twill cause thee bitterlie to weep.

August 24, 1825 was the day when Motherwell transcribed the Kilbarchan ballads—nine in all. This was also the only day—as far as we know—that two versions of the same ballad—the two texts above—were recorded.<sup>13</sup>

The immediate repertoire context of Agnes Lyle's version is fairly heterogeneous; the group of ballads recorded on that day was a miscellaneous lot: a fragment of a broadside ballad, a supernatural "kempy" ballad ("The Wee Wee Man"), two ballads with tragic outcomes ("The Cruel Mother," in which two infants are cruelly murdered, and "The Turkish Galley," in which a seaman's loyalty is cruelly betrayed), and two ballads with a happy resolution ("Johnie Scot," who wins his true love after a violent fight, and "Young Hyn Horn," who gains his true love after years of absence). Compared to this thematic variety, Agnes Laird's version of "The Cruel Mother" is in much better tune with the other ballads she sang that day: "There was a knight in Jessamay" is the story of a cruel stepmother who in the most atrocious manner disposes of her

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<sup>13</sup> Agnes Lyle's text is found in both *Notebook* and *Manuscript*. The discrepancies between the two texts are very slight indeed (see APPENDIX II). In the *Notebook* Motherwell copied the first stanza of Agnes Laird's text. This memorandum was taken down on August 18 under the heading: "Agnes Laird of Kilbarchan has the following ballads" (27).



husband’s daughter, and “Willie o’ Winsbury” tells of a king who is so infuriated with his daughter’s pregnancy that he threatens to have her lover hanged.

There is no surviving evidence that Agnes Lyle and Agnes Laird knew each other, nor is there evidence that they were brought together on this occasion to sing to Motherwell. Motherwell probably visited them in their separate homes, and since he collected from them on the same day, they must have lived fairly close to each other; in all likelihood they would have known of each other as singing ladies, and they would have been conscious of the fact that ballads appear in different shapes. It can be assumed that the differences between the texts reflect an effort on the singers’ part to keep their versions distinct. Singers will typically attempt to produce the ballads as they originally learned them, gradually adjusting the texts to make them their own.<sup>14</sup>

Agnes Laird quite evidently knew at least two versions of the ballad. She draws Motherwell’s attention to alternative “choruses” (st. 1), but this is presumably not to say that she would sometimes use these alternatives lines as a refrain in connection with this particular version. The opening stanza of “The Cruel Mother” was taken down by Motherwell on August 18, as well, and it gives the same refrain as in the text above.<sup>15</sup>

The subsequent analysis I offer is based on a structural-formulaic approach (see, for example, Andersen 1985), which seeks to demonstrate how traditional narrative structures and traditional formulaic diction may be employed to produce two distinct versions and interpretations of the same ballad story.<sup>16</sup> The analysis will divide the narrative into four scenes: introduction, birth and burial, discovery, and rebuke.

*Introduction: Lyle sts. 1-2; Laird st. 1*

In both versions the essential information is given promptly: a woman is pregnant. Agnes Lyle employs two stanzas, supplying the additional point that the lady had fallen in love with her father’s clerk, which serves as partial explanation (and “excuse”) for the state of affairs. Unlike Agnes Laird’s version, which merely states the fact of the pregnancy, Agnes Lyle attempts—by the briefest means—to create a proper narrative development, with the expected progression of falling in love > being in love for seven years > pregnant.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This, at least, is the case with contemporary singers today, who are acutely aware of other singers’ (different) versions of the ballads they themselves sing. Refer to observations made by the Stewarts of Blairgowrie in Scotland (private tape 1980); see also James Porter’s important study from 1976.

<sup>15</sup> This refrain is used in most versions of this ballad; the numerical nonsense refrain appears only in Child’s C-version (which is also from Motherwell’s *Minstrelsy*—of unknown origin).

<sup>16</sup> And such tools are very potent indeed, as per John Miles Foley’s general observation (1991:7): “Structural elements are not simply compositionally useful . . . ; rather they command fields of reference much larger than the single line, passage, or even text in which they occur. Traditional elements reach out of the immediate instance in which they appear to the fecund totality of the entire tradition, defined synchronically and diachronically.”

<sup>17</sup> The same tendency is true of Agnes Lyle’s rendition of “The Twa Sisters” (see Andersen 1997:127).

*From Birth to Burial: Lyle sts. 3-7; Laird sts. 2-6*

The scene opens with an account of the babies' births, and in both versions this is narrated in terms of formulaic diction that alludes to the nature of the drama to come. The formula family employed here ("SHE'S SET HER BACK UNTILL AN OAK") is used to signal "clandestine birth of illegitimate children," and consequently carries the key to the story with all its ominous overtones. In whatever shape it occurs this particular formula constitutes the dramatic core of a ballad. Both singers have the formula participate in a characteristic repetition pattern, but with slightly different perspectives: Agnes Laird creates a simple progression pattern often found in connection with this formula, from "tree" to "stone" (Laird sts. 2-3):

Big, big oh she went away  
And then she set her foot to a tree.

Big she set her foot to a stone  
Till her three bonnie babes were borne.

Agnes Lyle, in a similar pattern, elaborates slightly on the narrative events. She seems to elaborate on the emotional involvement as well (see the term "betray" from st. 2<sup>2</sup>); and the phrase "and there began her sad misery" (3<sup>2</sup>) both stresses her empathy and offers an explicit hint, on top of the signal provided by the formula itself, of the tragic nature of subsequent events (Lyle, sts. 3-4):

She leaned her back unto a tree  
And there began her sad misery.

She set her foot unto a thorn  
And there she got her two babes born.

In an abortive attempt to keep the pre-marital sexual affair secret, the lady commits her "unnatural" crime, which in both versions is narrated in a set of parallel structures: five successive lines in the same syntactic pattern (actor + action) relate, step by step, how the infants are disposed of: Lyle sts. 5<sup>1</sup>, 5<sup>2</sup>, 6<sup>1</sup>, 6<sup>2</sup>, 7<sup>1</sup>, and Laird sts. 4<sup>1</sup>, 4<sup>2</sup>, 5<sup>1</sup>, 5<sup>2</sup>, 6<sup>1</sup>. But the propositional contents differ. In Lyle's version, the mother mechanically—as if in a trance—takes the knife, "twins" the infants of their lives, takes the "sattins," rolls the babies in them, digs a grave, and buries the two babies there. The account in Laird's version is less straightforward. The babies are not stabbed to death—as they are in most versions of this ballad story—nor are they explicitly strangled with the ribbons. Their hands and feet are tied, and the next thing we hear in the ballad is that the babies are placed in the grave, which uncannily suggests that they are being buried alive. So far Agnes Laird reports the story "objectively," but at this point she appears to intervene in the narrative. Whereas Lyle's interpolations are generally concerned with establishing narrative coherence (providing motivations for events) and with stressing emotional concern for the protagonists, Agnes Laird appears to intervene on the symbolic level; the account of the

burial in st. 5 is followed by description of how the mother covers the grave (conceals her crime), placing the marble stone “for Dukes and lords to walk upon” (st. 6<sup>2</sup>). It becomes clear, then, that in order to save her position in the world, the mother gave birth clandestinely and afterwards killed the infants. The act of covering the grave with marble stone is not itself a formulaic expression (it has hardly any recurrence in traditional balladry), and hence any loaded meaning of the phrase will have to be “explicitly suggested”—for instance in the way that Agnes Laird has chosen to do it here by allowing for guesses as to who may have made the poor girl pregnant.

*The Discovery: Lyle st. 8; Laird sts. 7-10*

With the crime committed, the story moves quickly to the resolution, which consists of a very brief discovery scene and a more elaborated final scene in which the victims rebuke the mother for her monstrous act, and point to the inevitable fate that will befall her.

Agnes Laird’s initial stanza is a combination of two formulas:

She lookit over her father’s Castle wa’  
She saw three bonnie boys playing at the ba. (Laird, st. 7)

The “LOOK OVER THE CASTLE WALL” is a formula presaging dramatic confrontation—often of a fatal nature—between the person looking and the one(s) observed in the distance (Andersen 1985:138-47). In this case, however, there is no physical fight, but the verbal blows in the ensuing dialog are no less damaging: they sentence the mother to eternal damnation. The second line about the boys playing at the ball constitutes another formula with presaging function, and is typically employed to point to a disastrous love affair (Andersen 1985:119-23). This supra-narrative potential, however, is overruled by the “LOOK OVER THE CASTLE WALL” formula, which carries all the power of prediction. While “PLAYING AT THE BALL” seems not to fit in sequentially here, it does fit in well with the associative field of an illicit love affair. What we are about to witness in the ballad is the dramatic confrontation between two parties that ought to have loved each other; and their tragic fate is precisely occasioned by illicit love. Two spheres of associations curiously mix—a feature which may be safely termed context-bound since it is exceptional to have two different ballad formulas interact in this manner.<sup>18</sup> As the story moves on, however, Agnes Laird’s version becomes even more exceptional in that she employs a sequence of explicit symbolism in sts. 8-10, disclosing the significance of how the three babies are dressed (“in red,” “in green,” and “naked”). Stanzas of this openly interpretive nature are found in no other version of the ballad;<sup>19</sup> while the use of symbolism is of course part

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<sup>18</sup> The combination of “LOOK OVER THE CASTLE WALL” and “PLAYING AT THE BALL” is found in Child’s D-, H-, I-, J-, K-, L-, N-, Appendix IV- and Appendix V-versions of this ballad, and in Lizzie Higgins’s version on the record *Up and Awa wi the Laverock*. Outside the ballad of “The Cruel Mother” this particular constellation of formulas appears only in one stanza of contemporary versions of “Lady Mary Ann,” a ballad which was presumably remolded by Robert Burns on two traditional stanzas.

<sup>19</sup> Child’s N- and O-versions, and Bronson’s 20.27 all have a stanza relating how the babies were clothed, but that stanza offers no key as to how the colors are to be interpreted.

of ballad language, it is very rarely forced upon the listeners so insistently as in the present case where we have three successive stanzas devoted to the babies, and in each stanza the second line begins with the conspicuous “to show . . .”. Agnes Laird’s prime concern here appears to be the symbolic significance of the events, not the narrative itself. The story almost becomes allegorical: Innocence has been murdered to protect Worldly Reputation, which is comparable to Laird’s stanza 6<sup>2</sup>.

Agnes Lyle handles this scene in the ballad very differently. Here too the discovery is described in terms of the “PLAYING AT THE BALL” formula, but there is no “LOOK OVER THE CASTLE WALL” to precede it. Instead we see the protagonist walking through her father’s hall—which has none of the formulaic overtones—so Agnes Lyle leaves all the supra-narrative signalling work to the “PLAYING AT THE BALL” formula, which—as we saw above—is slightly off target in this particular ballad.<sup>20</sup> But then Agnes Lyle can afford to be somewhat low-key at this stage, in view of the explicit forewarning she gave in st. 3<sup>2</sup>.

*The Rebuke: Lyle sts. 9-19; Laird sts. 11-17*

In both versions the mother fails to recognize the true identities of the boys, and putting on a caring attitude, she addresses them by saying that she would have dressed them in fine clothes had they been her own babies. But she receives an immediate rebuttal from them, disclosing in one sentence the identity of the babies, and the hypocrisy of the mother. But after this the two versions part company.

Agnes Laird engages in a sequence of parallel structures, in which the dialog proceeds in balancing steps of increasing intensity towards the final condemnation. The mother’s courteous remark in st. 11 shows that she still seeks to conceive of herself as belonging to “polite” society:

O bonnie babes an ye were mine  
I wud dress you in the satins so fine

But by means of “causative repetition” she is soon brought back to the real world; and when the terrible truth dawns upon her she, panic-stricken, rephrases her own wording from st. 11<sup>1</sup> to inquire where they have been all this time. And as she is told that (Laird, st. 14):

We were at our father’s house  
Preparing a place for thee and us

she realizes that all is lost. Unable to act of her own accord (not even able to fill a stanza of her own) she now echoes the words of her babies to ask what is in store for her (Laird, st. 15<sup>1</sup>):

Whaten a place ha’e ye prepar’d for me.

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<sup>20</sup> Only one other ballad combines the “PLAYING AT THE BALL” formula with a reference to someone walking through the hall: Mary Macqueen’s version of “Gil Brenton” (Crawford 1 st. 10), and here the formula-line exploits its ‘normal’ associative potential of marking the secret love between the man “seeing” and one of the ladies “playing”: “As he was walking through yon green ha / He saw se’en ladies playan at the baw.”

And the verdict is as brief as it is merciless, pronounced within that same stanza (st. 15<sup>2</sup>):

Heaven for us, but hells for thee!

The dichotomy between these two realms is then accentuated by Agnes Laird in the two final stanzas, which in terms of emphatic repetition restate the contrasting fates of the two sets of characters (mother and children). With the explicit Heaven-Hell opposition (st. 15<sup>2</sup>), and with the line about the babies being "at our father's house" (st. 14<sup>1</sup>), the story has now been imbued with Christian overtones, and the symbolic account of "murdered innocence" (sts. 8-10) is resolved within a Christian framework: the slaying of the innocents has been brought before the Supreme Judge, and he intervenes to set things right.

As noted above, Agnes Lyle opens this scene in much the same manner (sts. 9-10; causative repetition). But then in sts. 11-17 the two boys recapitulate the entire story—verbatim—cf. sts. 1-7. The horrid deed is re-enacted before the mother, and she is openly confronted with the heinous details. This sequence seems to operate on two levels: in one sense the babies themselves speak the words, but in another the account may be replayed in the mother's mind. It is her guilty conscience coming to the fore. The story is "internalized" here, and according to William McCarthy this "perfectly symmetrical song" displays "considerable subtlety" (1990:104-05): "The ballad technique is especially effective here: a few simple adjustments transform an objective statement of fact into a damning accusation."

This narrative transformation keeps the attention firmly fixed on the lady—which seems to be Agnes Lyle's main concern—but it does not reflect a personal transformation on the mother's part. Lyle knows that the plot is revealed, but in contradistinction to Agnes Laird's version the mother is still trying to save her own reputation. She despairingly asks the babies to pardon her (st. 19<sup>1</sup>), but they most emphatically refuse to do so, as in the repetition between sts. 18<sup>2</sup> and 19<sup>2</sup>. Although there is a reference to the babies being in "heavens hie" (st. 18<sup>1</sup>), there are no strong religious overtones in Agnes Lyle's version. Her story portrays a mother in dire distress, in "sad misery" (st. 3<sup>2</sup>), and the almost overburdened repetitive structure of the ballad fixes the focus on the mother and her mental state. The structure of the ballad largely determines the outcome of the story, and the resulting "internalization" shows that Agnes Lyle is a compassionate singer. She is emotionally involved in the story she narrates, focusing on the "sad misery" of the protagonist. The ballad, in Lyle's rendition, is very much a tragedy on the personal level.

Agnes Laird's ballad, on the other hand, emphasizes the psychological development in the mother. She comes to realize the transitory—and indeed fatal—nature of worldly considerations. The transformation in this ballad concerns the mother's (and by implication everybody's) view of life. The change sets in with the formula presaging death in st. 7; is substantiated by the progressive repetition of symbolic stanzas (sts. 8-10); and is accomplished in the emphatic repetition of the last two stanzas. In Laird's version the ballad has a more pronounced didactic aspect to it: it becomes a story with an explicit moral/religious lesson to be learned—for singer and audience alike.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, there are very few duplicate texts in Motherwell's material, and there are very few textual differences between the ones we encounter. That this is so strongly suggests that singers generally would resort to the same, memorized version of a ballad at each rendition of it. This suggestion is substantiated by Lyle herself: after she has given her version of "Geordie Lukely," she mentions that her father sang a different version, and she quotes two stanzas in which her father's version differed from the one she used to sing (*Manuscript 370*). It is obvious that Agnes Lyle, being aware of both versions, kept them distinct in her memory.

Agnes Lyle can apparently be seen as an innovative singer in the sense that she sang the ballad slightly differently from the version her father sang, and as conservative in the sense that she had a clear notion of what was her *own* version of the ballad, which would not be changed. There is always a balance to be struck between innovation and preservation in the ballad tradition. The language and narrative technique constitute a stabilizing factor, and what is variable is the way in which these traditional tools are being employed.

Although the two singing ladies in question clearly narrate the same story and employ the same traditional narrative tools in doing so, we can see that these tools may be used in manners that produce very different renditions, each with their own individual focus (which, we may speculate, may in some way reflect the two singers' different tastes, personalities, and world views). What we can say for certain, however, is that the traditional narrative technique of employing of formulaic diction and repetitions is very powerful in the hands of such competent singers as Agnes Lyle and Agnes Laird, and in this way the two ballads illustrate the balance between stability and variation by which oral traditions are and have been kept alive.

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## APPENDIX I

## The Kilbarchan Repertoire

The following table presents the recorded repertoires of the six known singers in Kilbarchan, and each repertoire is arranged according to date of performance, whenever possible. The titles provided here—which may vary slightly from the *Notebook* to the *Manuscript*, and indeed within the *Manuscript* itself—are those given in the *Manuscript* on the page from which the text has been copied. The dates and titles are followed by the Child number of the ballads in question, and references to where Motherwell copied the texts. Fragments are noted in brackets.

## Ballads taken down in Kilbarchan 1825

Singer	Date	Title / First line	Child number	<u>Manuscript</u> page	<u>Notebook</u> page
Mrs. Thomson	Feb.	Lord Brangwill	5	219	
Mrs. Thomson	Feb 25	Lady Marjory	65	1	
Mrs. Thomson	Feb 25	Lambert Linkin	93	15	
Mrs. Thomson	March	Chield Morice	83	165	
Mrs. Thomson	no date	Catherine Johnson	221	75	
Mrs. Thomson	no date	King William going a hunting		101	
Mrs. Thomson	no date	Rob's Bridal		144	
Mrs. Thomson	no date	Earl Robert	87	149	
Mrs. Thomson	no date	Skipper Patrick	58	153	
Mrs. Thomson	no date	There was a May and a bonnie May	217	175	
Mrs. Thomson	no date	Susie Cleland	65	179	
Mrs. Thomson	no date	Lord Saunders	61	196	
Mrs. Thomson	no date	Johnie Scot	99	213	
Mrs. King	Feb 9	It is talked the warld all over	15/16	286	
Mrs. King	no date	Lamerlinkin	93	9	
Mrs. King	no date	There were three Sisters	10	104	
Mrs. King	no date	Hindhorn	17	106	
Mrs. King	no date	What bluid's that on thy coat lap	13	139	
Agnes Laird	1825	The Brown Bride and Lord Thomas	73	157	
Agnes Laird	June 21	Bonnie Johnie Scot	99	211	
Agnes Laird	June 21	Lord Robert & Mary Florence	87	321	
Agnes Laird	Aug 18	The Gay Goss Hawk	96	415	27
Agnes Laird	Aug 24	There was a knight in Jessamay		399	(26)
Agnes Laird	Aug 24	The Cruel Mother	20	402	(27)

Agnes Laird	Aug 24	Willie o Winsberye	100	404	(27)
Agnes Lyle	July 19	Lord Dunwaters	208	331	
Agnes Lyle	July 19	The Dowie Downs o Yarrow	214	334	
Agnes Lyle	July 19	Mary Hamilton	173	337	
Agnes Lyle	July 19	The Eastmure King and the Westmure King	89	341	
Agnes Lyle	July 19	Lord Jamie Douglas	204	345	
Agnes Lyle	July 19	Young Patrick	58	348	
Agnes Lyle	July 27	There were three sisters	14	174	
Agnes Lyle	July 27	Davie Faw	200	381	
Agnes Lyle	July 27	The Bonny Bows o' London	10	383	
Agnes Lyle	Aug 24	The Cruel Mother	20	390	33 (31)
Agnes Lyle	Aug 24	Johnie Scott	99	394	35
Agnes Lyle	Aug 24	The Wee Wee man	38	195	40
Agnes Lyle	Aug 24	Young Hyn Horn	17	413	42
Agnes Lyle	Aug 24	The Knight & Lady	112		(45)
Agnes Lyle	Aug 24	The Turkish Galley	286	392	50
Agnes Lyle	Sep 28	The Knight & Lady	112	410	
Agnes Lyle	no date	Fair Janet and Sweet Wllie	64	357	
Agnes Lyle	no date	Sweet William's gone over seas	254	361	
Agnes Lyle	no date	The Broom blooms bonnie <sup>21</sup>	15/16	365	
Agnes Lyle	no date	Geordie Lukely	209	367 (370)	
Agnes Lyle	no date	Lord Barnabas' Lady	81	371	
Agnes Lyle	no date	Four and twenty ladies fair	222	375	
Agnes Lyle	no date	Earl Richard has a hunting gone	68	377	
Janet Holmes	July 18	Fair Annie	62	351	

## Ballads taken down in 1826

Mrs. ?	Jan 3	Ritchie Storie	232	426	
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These texts constitute the known Kilbarchan repertoires. Complete duplicate texts occur only in connection with the texts that were taken down in August 1825, and the editorial differences between them are of the slightest nature, amounting to little more than inconsistencies in spelling and punctuation. Only on very few occasions is there any evidence of "multiple performances," that is, the same ballad sung by the same singer: in his Agnes Laird

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<sup>21</sup> "The Broom blooms bonnie" recorded before October 8 (see Child 1965, v: 210), as were presumably the rest of this group.



memorandum of August 18 Motherwell quotes a few stanzas of ballads (*Notebook* 26-27), and these stanzas were produced again, together with the complete texts, on August 24 (*Manuscript* 399-404). This is also the case with Agnes Lyle’s “The Cruel Mother:” the memorandum, probably of August 18, gives the opening stanza (*Notebook* 31), while on August 24 the whole ballad was taken down (*Notebook* 33 and *Manuscript* 390), and five stanzas survive from the first interrupted recording of “The Knight & Lady” on August 24, while the full version (twenty stanzas) were eventually taken down on September 28. In all these instances the variations between the duplicate stanzas are minute indeed.

Motherwell’s collecting trips in the west of Scotland took place between January 1825 and September 1825. He seems to have paid only one visit to Kilbarchan itself in 1826: On January 3, 1826 he noted a version of “Ritchie Storie” from an unidentified Mrs. ? (*Manuscript* 426). Motherwell’s first recorded visit to the village took place in February: On February 9 he heard “It’s talked the warld over” from Mrs. King (*Manuscript* 286),<sup>22</sup> and on February 25 he collected two ballads from Mrs. Thomson: “Lady Marjorie” and “Lambert Linkin” (*Manuscript* 1, 15). Motherwell probably paid a third visit in February, for another of Mrs. Thomson’s ballads (“Lord Brangwill”) is merely headnoted “Feb.” (*Manuscript* 219). Motherwell called on Mrs. Thomson again in March to record her version of “Chiel Morice” (*Manuscript* 165), while the remaining nine texts of her recorded repertoire are copied in the *Manuscript* with no indication of date of performance. Occasionally he left blank pages to be filled in later, so it is impossible to infer dates of performance from the sequence in which the items were entered.<sup>23</sup>

Most of the collecting work was done during the summer. In June Motherwell was back in Kilbarchan, this time visiting Agnes Laird, from whom he recorded the ballads of “Bonnie Johnie Scot” and “Lord Robert & Mary Florence” on June 21 (*Manuscript* 211, 321). The following month ballads were collected on three occasions: On July 18 he visited Janet Holmes (also cited as “Nancy Holmes” in Motherwell’s “List of old singing Women” in the *Notebook* [52]), who gave him her version of “Fair Annie” (*Manuscript* 356)—the only text surviving from her repertoire; the next day, July 19, Motherwell took down no less than six ballads from Agnes Lyle—which are all recorded successively in the *Manuscript*, and roughly a week later, on July 27, Agnes Lyle produced three more ballads for Motherwell.

The closest insight into the collection and performance contexts is provided in relation to Motherwell’s visit in August, for it appears that part of his field notes on that occasion have survived in the *Notebook*. On page 26—which bears the date August 18—Motherwell noted a memorandum concerning Agnes Laird, who, it says, “has the following ballads,” and then follow fragments of three ballads, all of which were to be recorded in full length at a later date. Number four (inaccurately listed by Motherwell as “number five”) is Agnes Laird’s version of “The Gay Goss Hawk,” which appears to be the only complete ballad text that was taken down on this

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<sup>22</sup> The rest of Mrs. King’s ballads are undated.

<sup>23</sup> The *Notebook*, on the other hand, seems to have served as a fieldwork notebook on two occasions in August 1825.

occasion.<sup>24</sup> Apparently on that same day Motherwell made another memorandum, which concerned the ballads from Agnes Lyle's repertoire. On pages 31-32 he lists a number of fragments "to take from Agnes Lyle," but unlike the fragments assigned to Agnes Laird, Motherwell never managed to get all of the texts of the memorandum: when he returned to Kilbarchan on August 24 he called on Agnes Lyle, and he did begin with the first item on the memorandum list, the ballad beginning "There was a lady she liv'd in Luke" (*Notebook* 33), which is a version of "The Cruel Mother." Then Motherwell took down the third item "Johnie Scott's a hunting gone" (*Notebook* 35), but after that he seems to have abandoned his list, and instead he noted the ballads in the order in which Agnes Lyle chose to sing them. For now follow texts that were not mentioned in the memorandum: "As I was walking mine alone" (erroneously ascribed to Agnes Laird in the *Manuscript* [195]) (40), "Young Hyn Horn" (42), and a fragment of "There was a knight was drunk with wine" (45), which comes to a sudden halt after the fifth stanza, either—as McCarthy (1987:308) suggests—because Agnes Lyle "was unable to finish at that time," or because Motherwell asked her to stop singing, recognizing that this particular text had very strong broadside features, which was not the kind of material that had his primary interest.<sup>25</sup> Motherwell himself offers no clues.

Finally Motherwell returned to his memorandum, and recorded as the last song that day the fourth item in the memorandum: Agnes Lyle's version of "Turkish Galley" (*Notebook* 50). The remaining titles and fragments from the memorandum were apparently never recorded; they appear in neither *Notebook* nor *Manuscript*.<sup>26</sup> Still on this day, August 24, Motherwell visited Agnes Laird to collect the ballads he had noted in his memorandum of August 18.<sup>27</sup> Strangely, however, none of them were recorded in the *Notebook*, once again for reasons unknown. In the *Manuscript* Motherwell simply recorded in successive order the three ballads of the

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<sup>24</sup> The text was later copied in the *Manuscript*, with erroneous ascription of singer and date of performance: the text is here headnoted "It is from the recitation of Agnes Lyle Kilbarchan 24. Aug<sup>t</sup> 1825" (415), obviously being confused with the ballad that Motherwell did record from Agnes Lyle on that day.

<sup>25</sup> The reason why he returned in September to collect the whole version may be that in the meantime he had discovered another version of it in Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (first published 1765), and therefore wanted a modern version—cf. his note to the text in the *Manuscript*: "there is a much improved and considerably longer version in Percy's *Reliques* Vol. II p. 371" (412). Although Motherwell generally was no purist it is perhaps significant that the texts from Lyle's memorandum which were *not* recorded appear to have close broadside affiliations—and indeed the text of "There was a knight was drunk with wine" does have a special status in Lyle's recorded repertoire.

<sup>26</sup> McCarthy (1978:39-47) seeks to identify these first lines and titles (most of them broadsides), and he discusses the relevance of these pieces to the recorded repertoire of Agnes Lyle—which seems reasonable enough—but we do not know whether these bits were more than fragments in her repertoire (although in other instances Motherwell did note that a singer would know a song imperfectly; cf. *Notebook* 1, 6, 7, 22). But whatever their status in the repertoire we can only speculate about their actual wording, so the fragments can be used merely as an illustration of the *kind* of songs Agnes Lyle would be interested in. We can hardly include them in a textual analysis—as does McCarthy, claiming that "probably all the songs have more or less fixed texts, unlike the orally recreated pieces in her repertoire. And yet all show that the singer was no slave to any printed text. Taken line by line the fragments demonstrate varying degree of reworking by a traditional singer or line of singers" (1978:47). We simply cannot tell.

<sup>27</sup> This is obviously the cause of the confusion between the two Agnes's in *Manuscript* and *Notebook*, referenced above.

memorandum—“There was a knight in Jessymay” (399), “The Cruel Mother” (402), and “Willy o Winsberye” (404)—giving August 24 as the date of performance.

Only one of Agnes Laird’s texts is recorded without exact date of performance: “The Brown Bride” (*Manuscript* 157), which is merely headnoted “1825,” while seven of Agnes Lyle’s ballads bear no date. They were apparently taken down, as a group, before October 8, 1825, when the text of “The Broom blooms bonnie”—together with “The Turkish Galley”—was sent to C. K. Sharpe, who had published his own collection of ballads, *A Ballad Book*, in 1823 (Child 1965, v:142, 210).

The documented Kilbarchan repertoire thus runs to 48 complete ballad texts, and in his *Notebook* Motherwell reveals that the costs incurred in the course of his field work were significant. In March 1827 he made an account of all expenses (*Notebook* 156-57). Motherwell meticulously notes all items, disclosing that frequently he paid his singers for their services, including an entry reading “To Agnes Lyle + c in Kilbarchan 8/6” (156). In total the various expenses amounted to no less than 20 pounds, which occasions a note of lament inserted just below the figures: “So much for a Hobby horse in riding of which there is neither fame nor thanks. WM” (*Notebook* 157).

## APPENDIX II

Agnes Lyle’s text is found in both *Notebook* and *Manuscript*. The discrepancies between the two texts are very slight indeed:

	<u>Notebook</u>	<u>Manuscript</u>
2 <sup>1</sup>	7	seven
3 <sup>2</sup>	begun	began
4 <sup>1</sup>	upon	unto
5 <sup>2</sup>	[blank]	twin’d
5 <sup>2</sup>	t her [’t’ added]	their
6 <sup>1</sup>	[blank]	sattins
8 <sup>1</sup>	thro / ha [apostrophes deleted]	thro’ / ha’
8 <sup>2</sup>	two	twa
9 <sup>2</sup>	wud	would
10 <sup>2</sup>	neer	ne’er
11 <sup>2</sup>	clk	clerk
12 <sup>1</sup>	loved	lived
12 <sup>1</sup>	7	seven
13-17	Repeat verse 3-4-5-6-7	[sts. 13-17]
18 <sup>1</sup>	were	we’re
18 <sup>1</sup>	the heavens	heavens
19 <sup>2</sup>	there is none	none
19 <sup>1+3</sup>	[no refrain]	[refrain]

In the *Notebook* Motherwell copied the first stanza of Agnes Laird's text. This memorandum was taken down on August 18 under the heading: "Agnes Laird of Kilbarchan has the following ballads" (27).

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