

ON A DISPUTED PASSAGE IN HOGG'S
"KILMENY."

It is greatly to be feared that the poetry of the Ettrick Shepherd is not so much read or sung as it used to be. Hogg, indeed, is in danger of being neglected. His full meed of fame was in the palmy days of John Wilson and *Blackwood*. Thanks to Christopher North, the whole country was kept ringing with his name. And well did he merit his reputation. Whether we consider its bulk, its variety, or its sweetness, the poetry of Hogg approves him still a man of remarkable genius. Neglected he may be—but only for a while. He is of the immortals, and will rise again. Can "Kilmeny" ever be forgotten? In a recent number of *Blackwood* a young critic, writing timidly of the robustest spirit in Scottish literature—Burns hardly excepted—is courageous enough to speak of "The Thrissil and the Rois" as a very gem of poesy, unmatched in northern poetry. It *is* a gem, and perfect of its kind; and William Dunbar's fame would be appreciably dimmer for want of it. But it is not the hooded laureate's most brilliant achievement; and it is not quite so unmatched in refinement of feeling and daintiness of workmanship as Mr Oliphant imagines. I shall put "Kilmeny" beside it—though I should not be so unjust as to place Hogg beside Dunbar—and

without deciding between the two poems, I boldly prophesy that time, which, in the words of Pope, has spared the Thistle and the Rose, will as certainly cherish bonny Kilmeny.

The poem has its faults—especially to an Englisher. What—even though he be skilled in his Chaucer—what can he make of the spelling? What can he make of the *guhans* and the *guhairs*, the *ciris* and the *ayries*, not to mention the *hiches* and the *cuches*, and other perfectly innocent English words, sheep in wolves' clothing? The Scottish words, needless to say, are yet more ferocious. Hogg has not improved his beautiful poem by so ungracious a setting. It is not the antique form, but a mongrel mixture of that and phonetics. The illusion of an occasional antique word is not to be despised. The effect, indeed, is often marvellous. But a sparing use—a “daimen icker to the thrave”—would have quite sufficed. He is also now and then obscure, with an obscurity arising mostly from his love of the modern antique, from his presentation of an obsolete word in an “original” dress. Take a few lines, charged with a fine flavour of the supernatural, in illustration:—

“In yond greinwudde there is a waike,
 And in that waike there is a wene,
 And in that wene there is a maike
 That nouter has flesh, bluid, nor bene:
 And dune in yon greinwudd he walkis his lene.”

“Waike” and “wene” and “maike” are not words of everyday occurrence. How many that read and admire the passage know quite what the words mean? The general reader is probably content with the general

meaning, which is sufficiently apprehensible, and frankly avows his ignorance beyond that. He may remark that it reminds him of the rhyme about the drap that was in the caup that was in the kist on Tintock-tap; but while in the latter case the individual words of an obscure rhyme are clearly intelligible, in the former the individual words of a clear enough passage are obscure. These obscure words, specified above, have been the subject of much misapplied comment, and the various interpretations, more numerous than one would suppose, and at times absurdly contradictory, throw a delightful confusion around the precise meaning of the words. It would serve no good purpose to quote those interpretations here. It is proposed rather to offer what is, so far as it goes, a correct interpretation. In the first place, there can be no doubt that "wene" is Hogg's form of the good old word "wane" or "wonne." "Wane" is the spelling in Henryson's fine poem, "The Borrowstoun Mous and the Landwart Mous." The field mouse's house or "chalmer," we are there informed, was "a simple wane, fecklessly made of fog" and other "foggage." "Wonne" is the form affected by the old English poets and their imitators, such as Spenser and Thomson. It will be remembered, too, that Burns uses the verb—"There's auld Rob Morris, that *wons* in yon glen." Clearly, then, Hogg's "wene" stands for "dwelling." Next, with respect to "maike," while it might mean "creature," "something made," it is more probably Hogg's form of the current Scottish word "mak" or "make," which signifies "match," "mate," or "marrow." The "maike" in the poem is to be identified with the "spirit," "the

meike and reverend fere," who had been "eidently watching for a thousand years and mair"—watching, indeed "sen the banquhet of tyme"—for a sinless virgin free of stain in mind and body. He found at last what he sought in Kilmeny, and brought her to the land of spirits—

"Now shall the land of the spiritis see,
Now shall it ken quhat ane womyn may be!"

There is, I must confess, a difficulty with the word "waike." It may be connected with the word "wake," signifying a "ward," or "district to watch over;" or, again, it may be Hogg's form for "walk," with much the same meaning. It ought probably to be taken in connection with such passages in the poem as—

"We haif watchit their stepis as the dawnyng shone,
And deip in the greinwudde walkis alone:"

and

"Oh, wald the fayrest of mortyl kynde
Aye keipe thilke holye troths in mynde,
That kyndred spiritis ilk motion see,
Quha watch their wayis with anxious e'e,
And grieve for the guilt of humanity!"

Or even more probably it is a forced form of "wauk," which the reader will find rhyming to "sake" in the old Scottish ballad of "Erlinton" (see Professor Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Part I., p. 108,—"Erlinton" B, stanza 4). There can be no doubt that Hogg was acquainted with the ballad, and that an echo of the ballad sounds in the disputed passage now under consideration:

"But yonder is a bonnie greenwud,
An' in the greenwud there is a wauk,
An' I'll be there an' sune the morn, love,
It's a' for my true love's sake."

But the faults of the poem—its absurd spelling (think of "comyshonit" for "commissioned"!), its obsolete and obscure phraseology, its structural defect, its incongruous imitation of Allan Ramsay's prophetic "Vision"—sink and disappear as emerges from it all the lovely figure of Kilmeny, encircled with an imagery of this world and not of it, but all in beautiful harmony with the conception of her character.