literary pursuits. In this he was not disappointed. In 1799 he obtained the office of sheriff-depute of Selkirkshire, with a salary of £300 and very light duties. In 1806 he obtained the reversion of the office of clerk of session. It is sometimes supposed, from the immense amount of other work that Scott accomplished, that this office was a sinecure. But the duties, which are fully described by Lockhart, were really serious, and kept him hard at fatiguing work, his biographer estimates, for at least three or four hours daily during six months out of the twelve, while the court was in session. He discharged these duties faithfully for twenty- five years, during the height of his activity as an author. He did not enter on the emoluments of the office till 1812, but from that time he received from the clerkship and the sheriffdom com­bined an income of £1600 a year, being thus enabled to act in his literary undertakings on his often-quoted maxim that “literature should be a staff and not a crutch.” Scott’s profession, in addition to supplying him with a competent livelihood, supplied him also with abundance of opportunties for the study of men and manners.

It was as a poet that he was first to make a literary reputation. According to his own account, he was led to adopt the medium of verse by a series of accidents. The story is told by himself at length and with his customary frankness and modesty in the *Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad,* prefixed to the 1830 edition of his *Border Minstrelsy,* and in the 1830 introduction to the *Lay of the Last Minstrel.* The first link in the chain was a lecture by Henry Mackenzie on German literature, delivered in 1788. This apprized Scott, who was then a legal apprentice and an enthusiastic student of French and Italian romance, that there was a fresh development of romantic literature in German. As soon as he had the burden of preparation for the bar off his mind he learnt German, and was profoundly excited to find a new school founded on the serious study of a kind of literature his own devotion to which was regarded by most of his companions with wonder and ridicule. We must remember always that Scott quite as much as Wordsworth created the taste by which he was enjoyed, and that in his early days he was half-ashamed of his romantic studies, and pursued them more or less in secret with a few intimates. While he was in the height of his enthusiasm for the new German romance, Mrs Barbauld visited Edinburgh, and recited an English translation of Bürger’s *Lenore.* Scott heard of it from a friend, who was able to repeat two fines—

“ Tramp, tramp, across the land they speed ;

Splash, splash, across the sea!”

The two lines were enough to give Scott a new ambition. He could write such poetry himself! The impulse was strengthened by his reading Lewis’s *Monk* and the ballads in the German manner interspersed through the work. He hastened to procure a copy of Bürger, at once executed translations of several of his ballads, published *The Chase,* and *William and Helen,* in a thin quarto in 1796 (his ambition being perhaps quickened by the unfortunate issue of a love affair), and was much en­couraged by the applause of his friends. Soon after he met Lewis personally, and his ambition was confirmed. “ Finding Lewis,” he says, “ in possession of so much reputation, and conceiving that if I fell behind him in poetical powers, I considerably exceeded him in general information, I suddenly took it into my head to attempt the style of poetry by which he had raised himself to fame.” Accordingly, he composed *Gleηfinlas, The Eve of St John,* and the *Gray Brother,* which were published in Lewis’s collection of *Tales of Wonder* (2 vols., 1801). But he soon became convinced that “the practice of ballad-writing was out of fashion, and that any attempt to revive it or to found a poetical character on it would certainly fail of success.” His study of Goethe’s *Götz von Berlichiygen,* of which he published a translation in 1799, gave him wider ideas. Why should he not do for ancient Border manners what Goethe had done for the ancient feudalism of the Rhine? He had been busy since his boyhood collecting Scottish Border ballads and studying the minutest details of Border history. He began to cast about for a form which should have the ad­vantage of novelty, and a subject which should secure unity

of composition. He was engaged at the time preparing a collec­tion of the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border.* The first instalment was published in two volumes in 1802; it was followed by a third next year, and by an edition and continuation of the old romance of *Sir Tristram,* and Scott was still hesitating about subject and form for a large original work. Chance at last threw in his way both a suitable subject and a suitable metrical vehicle. He had engaged all his friends in the hunt for Border ballads and legends. Among others, the countess of Dalkeith, wife of the heir-apparent to the dukedom of Buccleuch, interested herself in the work. Happening to hear the legend of a tricksy hobgoblin named Gilpin Horner, she asked Scott to write a ballad about it. He agreed with delight, and, out of compliment to the lady who had given this command to the bard, resolved to connect it with the house of Buccleuch. The subject grew in his fertile imagination, till incidents enough had gathered round the goblin to furnish a framework for his long-designed picture of Border manners. Chance also furnished him with a hint for a novel scheme of verse. Coleridge’s fragment of *Christabel,* though begun in 1797—when he and Wordsworth were discussing on the Quantock Hills the principles of such ballads as Scott at the same time was reciting to himself in his gallops on Musselburgh sands—was not published till 1816. But a friend of Scott’s, Sir John Stoddart, had met Coleridge in Malta, and had carried home in his memory enough of the unfinished poem to convey to Scott that its metre was the very metre of which he had been in search. Scott introduced still greater variety into the four-beat couplet; but it was to *Christabel* that he owed the suggestion, as one line borrowed whole and many imitated rhythms testify.

The *Lay of the Last Minstrel* appeared in January 1805, and at once became widely popular. It sold more rapidly than poem had ever sold before. Scott was astonished at his own success, although he expected that “ the attempt to return to a more simple arid natural style of poetry was likely to be welcomed.” Many things contributed to the extraordinary demand for the *Lay.* First and foremost, no doubt, we must reckon its simplicity. After the abstract themes and abstruse, elaborately allusive style of the 18th century, the public were glad of verse that could be read with ease and even with exhilaration, verse in which a simple interesting story was told with brilliant energy, and simple feelings were treated not as isolated themes but as in­cidents in the Eves of individual men and women. The thought was not so profound, the lines were not so polished, as in *The Pleasures of Memory* or *The Pleasures of Hope,* but the “ light- horseman sort of stanza ” carried the reader briskly over a much more diversified country, through boldly outlined and strongly coloured scenes. No stanza required a second reading; you had not to keep attention on the stretch or pause and construe laboriously before you could grasp the writer’s meaning or enter into his artfully condensed sentiment. To remember the pedigrees of all the Scotts, or the names of all the famous chiefs and hardy retainers “ whose gathering word was Bellenden,” might have required some effort, but only the conscientious reader need care to make it. The only puzzle in the *Lay* was the goblin page, and the general readér was absolved from all trouble about him by the unanimous declaration of the critics, led by Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review,* that he was ’ a grotesque excrescence, in no way essential to the story. It is commonly taken for granted that Scott acquiesced in this judgment, his politely ironic letter to Miss Seward being quoted as conclusive. This is hardly fair to the poor goblin, seeing that his story was the germ of the poem and determines its whole structure; but it is a tribute to the lively simplicity of the *Lay* that few people should be willing to take the very moderate amount of pains necessary to see the goblin’s true position in the action. The supernatural element was Scott’s most risky innovation. For the rest, he was a cautious and conservative reformer, careful not to offend established traditions. He was far from raising the standard of rebellion, as Wordsworth had done, against the great artistic canon of the classical school—

“ True art is nature to advantage dressed.”