

Reading the Story: A Literary and Linguistic Close Reading of 'The Goodman of Ballangiech'

The companion articles in this series argue about Crockett's relationship to tradition and defend his methods against the charge of plagiarism. This piece simply reads the story — attending to what Crockett actually does on the page: how he structures dramatic irony through chapter titles and illustration captions, how he differentiates his characters through distinct registers of speech, how he manages the simultaneous tonal demands of a heroic and a comic narrative, and how the disguised king's voice shifts as his situation changes. ['The Goodman of Ballangiech'](#) was published once in a popular magazine and never collected. The argument here is that it rewards the kind of attention that book publication would normally invite.

The Chapter Titles: Dramatic Irony Engineered in Advance

The five chapter headings of 'The Goodman of Ballangiech' are doing more work than they appear to. Read in sequence, they construct a sustained game with the reader's knowledge relative to the characters' ignorance.

'Andro of the Stout Heart' opens the sequence in the heroic-popular mode — a title that names the story's moral register directly. The ordinary man is the measure.

'The King's Poulterer' is the first act of misdirection. A poulterer is a humble enough trade; the chapter title seems to confirm the alias. But the phrase 'The King's Poulterer' carries a double meaning available only to a reader who already suspects the disguise — it could be read as 'the poulterer who serves the king' or as 'the king who has disguised himself as a poulterer.' The title holds both readings simultaneously throughout the chapter without resolving either.

'The Favourite's Favourite' operates on several levels at once. Ostensibly it names Alison Kennedy as the object of Sir Allan St. Clair's pursuit — St. Clair being the King's favourite, and Alison being the favourite of his designs. But 'the Favourite's Favourite' also gestures toward the concealed king watching from behind his domestic alias: the King's poulterer is, by definition, also a favourite of the king — and the real king is sitting in the kitchen listening to all of this.

'The Spy Under the Bank' withholds its central ambiguity until the chapter forces it open. The word 'spy' has already been applied to the disguised man by the Armstrong outlaws in Chapter I: 'We know him for a spy of the King's.' In Chapter IV, the man lying under the bank overhearing the conspiracy is the spy — but which kind? The outlaws' spy, or the king gathering intelligence on his own court? The title holds both possibilities; the chapter resolves the ambiguity by collapsing them into one another.

'A Little Surprise' is the most quietly effective title of the five. A midnight forced entry, the seizure of a young woman, the materialisation of armed soldiers, a revealed king, multiple dispensations of royal justice, a favourite disgraced, a son sent to the outer islands — 'a little surprise' could not be more precisely underplayed. The chapter title is its own joke, delivered deadpan.

The Illustration Captions: Paratext and the Management of Knowledge

'The Goodman of Ballangiech' was published with five illustrations, captioned as follows: '*We know him for a spy of the King's*' (p. 187); '*The Goodman Meets Alison*' (p. 191); '*The Mistress of Culsharg Welcomes Her Son*' (p. 193); '*The King's Poulterer Overhears the Plot*' (p. 196); '*"The King!" Gasp'd Harry Kennedy*' (p. 198).

These captions are not decorative; they actively manage the reader's relationship to the story's central mystery. By the time a reader of *The Lady's Realm* has scanned the illustrations before reading — a common enough habit with illustrated magazines — they have already been told, in plain English, that the King's poulterer overhears a plot, and that someone gasps 'The King!' The identity of 'James Jamieson' is not, for this readership, a secret to be kept but a dramatic irony to be sustained.

This matters because it tells us what kind of story Crockett is actually writing. He is not primarily writing a mystery in which the disguise must be maintained as suspense. He is writing a story about what disguise *reveals* — what the king learns about the corruption of his own court, and what the characters' behaviour in his hidden presence discloses about them. The illustrations confirm this: the reader is positioned from the outset as knowing more than most of the characters, and the story's pleasure is in watching the consequences unfold rather than in waiting for a surprise.

Speech Registers: Differentiation Through Dialect

Crockett differentiates his characters sharply through speech, and the differentiation follows the story's moral geography as well as its social one.

Andro Kennedy speaks an educated, formal Galloway Scots — direct, biblical in cadence, rooted in the landscape and its loyalties. Facing down Martin Faa on the moor:

'I have no art nor part with you or your like—nor yet troke and barter with any Armstrong that breathes.'

The word *troke* (to deal or barter) is a Scots legal and commercial term; its use by a shepherd on a hillside facing three armed men signals the register Crockett has chosen for him — a man who understands the customs and obligations of his world precisely,

and names them with precision. The speech that follows moves from this legalistic grounding to the explicitly theological:

'There is not water enough in the Silver Flowe to wash your hands clean from blood-guiltiness. The Lord of Innocent Blood deal with you!'

The Silver Flowe (a real peat bog in the Galloway uplands, one of the largest in Britain) functions here as both topographical marker and moral image — a place well known for being impassable and unclean, its water dark with peat. Andro's Scots is grounded in the physical world and in scripture simultaneously.

Later, handing over his sword to the stranger:

'D'ye think the guid King Robert gied that sword to my forbear twa hunder year syne, for you to leave it lying amang the heather as if it were nae better than a tinkler's gullie?'

Gullie (a large knife), *tinkler* (tinker), *gied* (gave), *syne* (since) — the Scots here is dense, historically conscious, and proprietorial. Andro's attachment to the sword is expressed in the language of continuity: the same words used by his ancestors are available to him.

Elsbeth Kennedy speaks a domestic Scots, warmer and more colloquial than her husband's, with a quality of constant motion — her speech is always in the process of managing something, or worrying about something, or taking someone's side. About her son Harry:

'Our Hairry, ye ken, him that's the King's freend'

The *Hairry* (the doubled vowel suggesting both her Scots pronunciation and a kind of maternal tenderness in the orthography) recurs throughout as her verbal signature. Speculating about the visitor:

'He may carry an ill report o' my laddie to the King's ain lug. What differ if he does get the pickle siller a year or twa sooner?'

Lug (ear), *pickle siller* (a little money) — the domestic idiom runs easily alongside anxious calculation. Elspeth is not simple-minded; she is always calculating, and her Scots is the vehicle of that calculation. Her most uninhibited remark — about the king himself:

'this King Jamie is fell weak in the intellects and when he's in the mood he will gie the very breeks aff his hurdies to the first yin that rubs him the richt way!'

Breeks (trousers), *hurdies* (buttocks), *fell* (very) — this is the most richly vernacular Scots in the story, deployed at the moment of maximum irony: the disguised king is sitting at the table eating her butter while his hostess delivers this verdict on him. When Andro reproves her — 'speak no evil of dignities. That is no wise or good talk' — the

Goodman adds, gravely, that the king has indeed a good reputation. Elspeth's response is characteristic: '*Doubtless ye will uphaud him!*' — she assumes the visitor is loyal to the king because he comes from Stirling, and she cannot imagine any other reason for politeness.

Alison Kennedy is the most linguistically surprising character in the story. Her speech is notably more standard than her parents', with Scots surfacing mainly in pointed or ironic moments:

'You had better shake it, as our custom is in these parts. I had even now been milking the kye, and had not my pouncet box with me.'

Kye (cows) is the only Scots element here; the rest is the dry, self-possessed English of a young woman who has read books and knows what flattery from a court favourite is worth. When she challenges the visitor about her brother:

'ye are as unlike to ken my brother as he is to be hand in glove with the King—even as he boasts himself to be every time he comes to the Howe o' Culsharg!'

The Scots emerges at *Howe o' Culsharg* (the hollow of Culsharg) — the home place — as if Scots is available to Alison for the specific and local but not for the general or the polished. This is a precise and economical characterisation.

The disguised king speaks almost entirely in standard English, with Scots appearing only in moments of sudden directness. After being rescued on the moor:

'By holy Peter's mother-in-law; but you are a man! I am rested now. Lend me your sword, and we will waur them yet!'

Waur (worse, meaning here to get the better of) is the one Scots word, in the heat of the moment. In the kitchen, to Andro:

'I would have you know that my little heritage of Ballangiech is nigh to the gates of Stirling, and that I have the honour to supply the King and his court with eggs and butter — with pullets also, and other birds for the table, of which they use many.'

The speech is careful, slightly formal, almost elaborate — a performance of the poulterer persona, which is itself a performance of a man who has had to think about how to speak in a farmhouse kitchen without sounding like a king. When the identity is finally revealed, the register does not change dramatically; Crockett's James V is not a theatrical revealer. He is simply matter-of-fact:

'I know just how innocent you are. I overheard every word you said in the ravine up yonder, this afternoon.'

Tonal Management: The Heroic and the Comic

The most demanding technical achievement of the story is the one that is easiest to take for granted if it is working: the sustained co-existence of a genuinely tense plot and a genuinely funny domestic register.

Chapter IV is the story's most suspenseful passage — the Goodman lying under the bank in the dry torrent bed, hearing a conspiracy to rob, abduct, and murder, while hairy outlaws dangle their feet above his head. The menace is real; Crockett does not soften it:

'the hairy foot hung down over the bank edge, so that the fugitive could see a hand whet a broad-bladed knife upon the sole'

This is immediately preceded, in Chapter III, by Elspeth's running commentary on court politics while setting out the supper table — and immediately followed, as the king returns to the farmhouse to put his plan in motion, by the comic spectacle of David MacMillan's jaw dropping and his chin wagging 'helplessly without sound' at the revelation of who he has been talking to. The story never signals its transitions; it simply moves between registers with the confidence of a writer who trusts the reader to follow.

The same tonal layering governs the midnight revelation. The scene is genuinely alarming — lanterns flashing, Lochaber axes, hackbuts, armed soldiers filling the doorway. But at its centre is Elspeth, 'plumping out of bed and kneeling in her coronation robe of shawls before the King on the hard-beaten earthen floor.' The phrase *coronation robe of shawls* is a small masterpiece of the comic-domestic: regal and ridiculous, affectionate and exact. The shawls have been pulled over her head in the heat and confusion; their improvised grandeur is both funny and oddly dignified. Crockett gives Elspeth exactly the dignity her response deserves — a mother's love expressed in the only ceremonial the farmhouse offers — without for a moment allowing the comedy to deflate it.

The Tradition of the Disguised Ruler

One further context is worth naming, though it cannot be pressed too hard without evidence. The disguised monarch who overhears the truth about his court is a structural device that runs deep in the dramatic tradition well beyond the Scottish incognito stories. Shakespeare's Henry V moves among his soldiers the night before Agincourt to hear what ordinary men think of kings and war; the Duke in *Measure for Measure* disguises himself as a friar and discovers, from the inside, the corruption his deputy has practised in his name. In both cases, the disguise enables the ruler to learn what official apparatus conceals, and to dispense justice that the exposed court structure cannot.

Crockett's James V follows this pattern precisely, and the resemblance may be more than coincidental — he was a reader of Shakespeare, as his fiction's dramatic structures often suggest. Whether or not the parallel was conscious, it places 'The Goodman of Ballangiech' in a tradition of disguised-ruler narratives that extends well beyond the Scottish historical anecdotes, and gives the story a structural seriousness that its magazine publication has helped to obscure. This is not a tale of royal whimsy. It is a story about what a king needs to know that his court will not tell him.

*['The Goodman of Ballangiech' by S.R. Crockett](#) is available in the [S.R. Crockett Online Museum](#). The original publication appeared in *The Lady's Realm*, Vol. 5, December 1898, pp. 185–198, with five illustrations.*