Literary Magpies: When Influence Becomes Art

The Case of the Kiss in Crockett's *Cleg Kelly* and Barrie's *Peter Pan*

In 1896, Samuel Rutherford Crockett published *Cleg Kelly, Arab of the City*, dedicating it "To J. M. Barrie, With the Hand of a Comrade and the Heart of a Friend." Eight years later, in 1904, J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* premiered on the London stage. Both works feature a remarkably similar scene: a boy who has never heard of a kiss asks: "What is a kiss?" and a girl offers to show him. The textual parallels are specific and striking. Yet this is not a case of plagiarism—it is a perfect example of how writers function as creative magpies, transforming borrowed material into something new.

This case is particularly instructive because it involves two writers in close professional friendship, who read each other's work intensively and supported each other through critical attacks. Their relationship demonstrates how influence operates within circles of mutual respect and how the magpie instinct functions as a creative virtue rather than a moral failing.

From 1893 onwards, Crockett faced persistent attempts to discredit him through plagiarism accusations, many emanating from critics in William Ernest Henley's circle who had their own agendas regarding Scottish literature. Crockett first faced accusations of plagiarism in the spring of that year following the publication of his short work *Mad Sir Uchtred of the Hills*. In November 1894, further accusations arose around his novel *The Lilac Sunbonnet* at which point Crockett received powerful support from his literary friends. Andrew Lang defended him publicly in *The Academy* against William Wallace's charges, whilst Barrie offered private support. Around the same time we have archival evidence that both Lang and Barrie stayed at Crockett's home—a demonstration of solidarity that speaks to their belief in his integrity and their commitment to their friendship.

The context of this 1894 support makes the 1896 dedication particularly significant. Two years after standing by Crockett during accusations of literary theft, Barrie received a book dedicated to him *"with the hand of a comrade and the heart of a friend"*—a book containing new material that would later resurface transformed in Barrie's own work. This is not hypocrisy or betrayal. This is how literary friendship operates: writers read each other closely, absorb effective techniques, and reimagine compelling moments for their own purposes. The relationship between Crockett and Barrie demonstrates that influence within circles of mutual respect is fundamentally different from the adversarial model of plagiarism that critics were attempting to impose.

The Textual Evidence: A Linguistic Analysis

The parallels between Crockett's and Barrie's "kiss" scenes are not merely thematic but structurally and linguistically precise. Both follow an identical five-part dramatic pattern:

A female character offers or mentions a kiss

The male child asks what a kiss is or reveals his ignorance

The female character expresses surprise

She offers to demonstrate or explain

A physical exchange occurs

This is not a common motif in Victorian children's literature. The specific combination (genuine childhood ignorance of kissing combined with an offer of instruction) does not appear as a stock scene elsewhere. Its appearance in both texts, given the documented relationship between the authors, cannot be coincidental.

Crockett's Scene (1896)

In *Cleg Kelly*, the street urchin Boy Hugh has fallen into a burn and been rescued by Miss Briggs, a chattering, self-important little girl from the big house at Rascarrel. After she pulls him from the water, this exchange occurs:

'Take hold of my parolsol. Be careful not to splash me when you shake yourself. And after that I'll give you a kiss. I like nice little boys!'

'What is a kiss?' asked Boy Hugh.

They did not deal in the commodity in the Tinklers' Lands. And even if his sister Vara did kiss him in his sleep every night, and was for ever kissing the baby as if its mouth had been a sweetmeat, she did not think it becoming or menseful to mention the word. So that, quite sincerely, Boy Hugh asked again, 'What is a kiss, little girl?'

'Come up here, nice boy, and I will show you!' replied the maiden promptly.

And somehow or other Hugh knew that this was an invitation by no means to be declined.'

The narrator is highly interventionist here, providing cultural context *("They did not deal in the commodity in the Tinklers' Lands")* and vouching for Boy Hugh's sincerity *("quite sincerely"*). The economic metaphor of *"commodity"* creates a striking register shift, treating kisses as tradeable goods—entirely fitting for a child from the Tinklers' Lands encountering genteel society. The mock-heroic tone in *"an invitation by no means to be declined"* signals the narrator's amused distance from childhood pomposity.

Miss Briggs's dialogue is laden with comic repetition. She calls Hugh *"nice little boy"* repeatedly, creating humour through her patronising attitude despite being barely

older than he is. Her affected speech patterns *("parolsol", "comed a walk", "tooked")* mark her as a child imitating adult propriety. The scene's comedy derives largely from this gap between Miss Briggs's self-importance and her actual status.

Crucially, the kiss apparently occurs. The next chapter opens with: *"Now then, how do you like it?"* and Boy Hugh remaining *"silent as to what he thought of his first knowledgeable kiss."*

Barrie's Scene (1904 –1911-1928)

Eight years later, Barrie's stage version of Peter Pan presents this exchange:

WENDY: I shall give you a kiss if you like.

PETER: Thank you. (He holds out his hand.)

WENDY (aghast): Don't you know what a kiss is?

PETER: I shall know when you give it me. (Not to hurt his feelings she gives him her thimble.) Now shall I give you a kiss?

WENDY (primly): If you please. (He pulls an acorn button off his person and bestows it on her.)

The structural parallels are evident: the conditional offer *("if you like"),* the question about what a kiss is, the promise that demonstration will provide understanding *("I shall know when you give it me").* But Barrie transforms the scene's conclusion. Peter mistakes *"kiss"* for a physical object, holding out his hand expectantly. Wendy gives him her thimble to avoid hurting his feelings, and he reciprocates with an acorn button. No actual kiss occurs—instead, a comedy of substitution.

We must note a caveat: the 1904 stage version was not published until 1928, so we cannot be entirely certain how the scene was presented in the original performance. However, the consistency between the 1928 text and the 1911 novelisation suggests the core dialogue remained stable. And whilst Barrie was known for his flexible dramatic texts, his practice was also to maintain effective theatrical moments when adapting between media. We can put a firm supposition on 'the kiss' being there in the 1904 stage version.

The 1911 Prose Expansion

The novelisation of *Peter Pan* as *Peter and Wendy* in 1911 shows the core dialogue is almost verbatim the same between play and prose.

She also said she would give him a kiss if he liked, but Peter did not know what she meant, and he held out his hand expectantly.

"Surely you know what a kiss is?" she asked, aghast.

"I shall know when you give it to me," he replied stiffly, and not to hurt his feeling she gave him a thimble.

The prose version allows for more psychological elaboration. The narrator can now explain Peter's confusion *("Peter did not know what she meant")* and provide social commentary *("She made herself rather cheap by inclining her face toward him").* Barrie adds a proleptic detail—*"It was lucky that she did put it on that chain, for it was afterwards to save her life"*—that transforms the comic moment into a plot element.

Comparing dramatic and prose versions (whether that be comparing 1904 with 1911 or 1911 with 1928) reveals Barrie's compositional method: create a compressed theatrical version, expanded for prose whilst maintaining the core dramatic structure. The dialogue remains nearly identical; what changes is the narrative scaffolding around it.

The Evidence of Relationship and Opportunity

The textual parallels alone suggest influence from *Cleg Kelly* to *Peter Pan*. The biographical evidence makes it even more likely. Crockett and Barrie first met around 1891-92, beginning a friendship documented through correspondence and mutual support. By 1894, Barrie was sufficiently engaged with Crockett's work to take his novella *The PlayActress* on honeymoon, hoping to adapt it for the stage. This demonstrates that Barrie was actively reading Crockett with an eye toward theatrical transformation, which is precisely the process we see with the "kiss" scene.

The 1896 dedication of *Cleg Kelly* to Barrie—"With the Hand of a Comrade and the Heart of a Friend"—speaks to their close relationship. Given Barrie's demonstrated practice of reading Crockett's work, and given that this book was personally dedicated to him, the probability that Barrie read *Cleg Kelly* approaches certainty.

Crucially, the "What is a kiss?" scene was new material for the 1896 book. *Cleg Kelly* the character had appeared in earlier stories in *The Stickit Minister* (1893) and in magazine publication, but this particular scene was created for the novel. It appeared, therefore, in new material in a book dedicated to Barrie, written at the height of their friendship.

Eight years elapsed between Crockett's publication and Barrie's first performance of *Peter Pan*. This is significant: long enough for deep absorption of the material, long enough for the scene to become part of Barrie's imaginative repertoire, but not so long that the connection becomes implausible.

What is also interesting (if maybe a digression) is that in 1896 Barrie published his own novel about a boy: *Sentimental Tommy.* There is, I suggest, much interest to be gleaned from comparative analysis of *Cleg Kelly* and *Sentimental Tommy* but that's for another adventure. Suffice it to say it's very likely that in their personal conversations in the early 1890s Crockett and Barrie may have talked about their

'boy' characters; it's a shared topic of narrative interest. Barrie will likely have known Cleg from his first outings in magazine form, if not from *The Stickit Minister* (1893).

Transformation and the Nature of Literary Influence

The crucial distinction between plagiarism and literary influence lies in transformation. A plagiarist copies; an artist influenced by another transforms the borrowed material, making it serve new purposes within a different imaginative context. And in the case of Crockett and Barrie there is surely enough evidence to state with a degree of confidence that they shared conversations about their characters—but Cleg came before Peter, and probably before Tommy.

In any case, Barrie's transformation of Crockett's scene is thoroughgoing:

Character Context: Boy Hugh is a street urchin from Edinburgh's slums encountering genteel society for the first time. His ignorance stems from poverty and social exclusion—*"they did not deal in the commodity in the Tinklers' Lands."* Peter Pan is a magical boy who has never grown up, who lives with fairies and lost boys. His ignorance stems from his fundamental alienation from human domestic life. Same ignorance, different meaning. Tommy Sandys sits somewhere between the two. *In Sentimental Tommy* love and kissing are treated in a distinctly different way from *Cleg Kelly* and *Peter Pan.*

Narrative Function: In Crockett, the kiss is one element in Boy Hugh's temporary sojourn in an Edenic garden world, part of his education in class difference. The scene continues with Miss Briggs's elaborate monologue about her ten cats, her Aunt Robina, and her promise of future marriage. In Barrie, the kiss/thimble confusion establishes Peter's otherworldliness and becomes a recurring motif. The button *"afterwards saves her life"* is a comic moment transformed into plot machinery.

The Punchline: Crockett's scene culminates in an actual kiss, after which Boy Hugh remains mysteriously silent. The comedy lies in his inability to articulate the experience. Barrie's scene substitutes objects for the kiss itself. The comedy lies in the substitution, in Peter's literalism, in Wendy's attempt to maintain propriety whilst managing his ignorance. Same setup, entirely different resolution.

Theatrical Adaptation: Barrie compresses Crockett's expansive prose into performable dialogue. Where Crockett can provide elaborate scene-setting (the burn, the birch trees, Miss Briggs's appearance *"in the daintiest creamy stuff, fine like cobweb"),* Barrie must convey everything through speech and gesture. This is not simplification but translation between media exactly what Barrie would be doing when he considered adapting *The PlayActress* in 1894.

Linguistic analysis reveals how thoroughly Barrie has reimagined the material. Crockett's narrator maintains an ironic, knowing distance, commenting on class difference and childhood pretension. Barrie's theatrical version must convey all

meaning through dialogue and action. His prose version creates a different narrative voice—still omniscient, but more focused on psychological interiority and social observation than Crockett's cultural commentary.

Several factors suggest that Barrie's borrowing might have been unconscious rather than deliberate. The (at least) eight-year gap between reading and writing allows for deep absorption. When material enters a writer's imaginative repertoire at that level, it can resurface transformed, its origins half-forgotten. The scene is memorable (a child's first kiss, a moment of social instruction) and carries theatrical possibilities (a clear dramatic question with comic potential). It is, after all, a scene that most of us who know *Peter Pan* remember. It is simply the case that more people have read (or seen) Barrie's version of the scene than Crockett's 'original'.

Whether the borrowing was conscious or unconscious matters less than the creative transformation. If Barrie deliberately adapted Crockett's scene, he did so with sufficient reimagining that it serves entirely different purposes. If he unconsciously recalled it, the time distance and complete change of context demonstrate how thoroughly the material had been absorbed and transformed. Either way, this is the normal process of literary influence. In relationships of mutual respect, such borrowing functions as homage rather than theft.

This pattern of influence and transformation was not unusual in their circle. Andrew Lang, another of Crockett's defenders, provides a telling parallel. Lang wrote to Stevenson that Crockett had unknowingly lifted a whole scene from *Kidnapped* for *The Raiders*. Lang stated that he pointed this out to Crockett, but the novel was still published without change and Lang did not accuse Crockett of plagiarism—indeed he supported him against charges with regard to other works. This demonstrates how writers in dialogue with each other recognise influence as a normal creative process rather than theft. They understand that writers learn from each other by identifying and absorbing effective techniques, and that thorough transformation distinguishes this from plagiarism.

The Crockett-Barrie case demonstrates that this process flourishes within close relationships. Writers reading each other's work with professional intensity and personal warmth create conditions for mutual influence. The question is not whether influence occurs but how thoroughly the material is reimagined, how well it serves new purposes. Barrie recognised something theatrically effective in Crockett's prose: a clear dramatic question, a moment of social instruction, an opportunity for comedy. He compressed it into performable dialogue and reimagined its resolution. This is a playwright's eye at work, identifying and adapting dramatically effective moments from admired sources.

The accusations against Crockett attempted to impose an adversarial model of literary property: writing as zero-sum competition where borrowing equals theft. But the actual practice of writers in creative friendship demonstrates something different: writing as conversation, influence as tribute, transformation as art. No writer invents

everything from nothing. All writers read, absorb, transform. The magpie instinct is essential to literary creation, and most vital when writers work in relationships of genuine friendship and mutual respect.

Conclusion

The "kiss" scenes in *Cleg Kelly* and *Peter Pan* demonstrate how literary creation functions within relationships of creative friendship. Barrie, reading the book his friend had dedicated to him, encountered a dramatically effective moment: a boy's genuine ignorance, a girl's offer to instruct, the question "What is a kiss?" Years later, this situation reappeared in *Peter Pan*, thoroughly transformed but recognisably descended from Crockett's original.

This is not theft but influence—the essential creative process by which writers learn from and build upon each other's work. Authors are magpies, collecting bright moments from their reading and reimagining them for new purposes. In the case of Crockett and Barrie, we see this process operating between friends who read each other’s works and supported each other through critical attacks. The result is enrichment: two different treatments of a dramatic situation, each serving its own artistic purposes, each contributing to Scottish literary culture.

Understanding literary influence properly requires distinguishing between plagiarism—copying without transformation—and the normal process by which writers absorb, reimagine, and transform material from their reading. The Crockett-Barrie case provides a perfect example: specific textual parallels, documented opportunity and relationship, creative transformation serving new purposes. Literary influence is not plagiarism. It is the lifeblood of literature itself.

Read *Cleg Kelly* for yourself at the S.R.Crockett Online Museum Library.