



The Lady of the Lake (Annotated)

Sir Walter Scott

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The poem begins with a rapid-moving hunt, chasing a stag in the forests of the Trossachs. The stag outruns the hunt, exhausting all its members until only one huntsman — who, we later learn, is James Fitz-James — follows it until his horse falls down dead of exhaustion. The huntsman blows his horn to try to contact someone, wanders to the shore of Loch Katrine, where a young woman, Ellen Douglas, rows across and picks him up in a skiff. He is then taken to a house, which he suspects is a concealed hide-out of a Highland chief. There he is given dinner by Ellen, the bard Allan Bane, and Lady Margaret, and a bed for the night. That night he dreams of Ellen, only to see her face suddenly change to that of his exiled enemy, James Douglas — leading him to suspect that Ellen and James Douglas are related.

Since the poem will only work if James Douglas and James Fitz-James do not encounter each other until the sixth canto, this canto has a number of comings and goings. James Fitz-James departs the island first thing in the morning. Ellen and Allan Bane discuss Roderick Dhu, Malcolm Graeme, and James Fitz-James, agreeing that the first is bloodthirsty and homicidal, but the only person who would defend James Douglas, and that James Fitz-James is an attractive person, but may be a secret foe of their kinspeople. Roderick Dhu, James Douglas, and Malcolm Graeme return to the island. As Clan Alpine escorts Roderick Dhu to the island, they sing the boat song, "Hail to the Chief". Roderick Dhu asks Douglas for Ellen's hand in marriage, to conclude an alliance between Douglas and Clan Alpine, which can be the basis of a Highland uprising against King James. James Douglas refuses, partly because he will not force Ellen into a loveless marriage, partly also because he remains, despite all the injuries he has suffered, loyal to King James. Roderick Dhu and Malcolm Graeme quarrel over Ellen, and are about to draw their swords against each other, but James Douglas declares that the first to draw will be his foe. James Douglas also says that it is an insult for an exile for his daughter to be the spoil of a battle between two chiefs. Roderick Dhu tells Graeme to leave his territory, which Graeme does, refusing even to borrow a boat; Graeme instead swims across Loch Katrine to the shore. Despite James Douglas' refusal to participate in the uprising, Roderick Dhu decides to commence the rebellion anyway. With a pagan prophet, Brian the Hermit, Roderick fashions and sets alight the fiery cross, and hands it to his henchman, Malise, to summon the members of the clan to war. The members of the clan drop everything they are doing to respond to the summons of their chief, whether it be a funeral (Angus at the funeral of his father, Duncan) or a wedding (Norman and Mary). Malise runs around the countryside, finally passing the burning cross on to Angus, the son of Duncan, a leading member of the clan who has just died; and Angus, in his turn, passes the summons on to Norman, a bridegroom, interrupting Norman's wedding. James Douglas flees the island for a hermit's cave so that he will not be associated with the Clan Alpine uprising. As Roderick Dhu is about to leave the island, he overhears Ellen praying to the Virgin, singing "Ave Maria." Roderick Dhu sadly realizes that this is the last time he will ever hear Ellen's voice, and then prepares to go off to battle.

Malise and Norman discuss the upcoming battle. Roderick Dhu has decided that the women and old men should take shelter on the island in the middle of Loch Katrine. When Norman asks why Roderick is staying apart from the main body of the troops, Malise says it is the result of a prophecy made by Brian the Hermit. Roderick Dhu had consulted Brian as to what will be the outcome of the battle. To determine this, they sacrifice one of the finest animals that the clan had received from one of its cattle raids, a milk-white bull.

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