THE EARLIEST KNOWN PRINTED ENGLISH BALLAD. A BALLADE OF THE SCOTTYSSHE KYNGE

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The Earliest Known Printed English Ballad. A Ballade of the Scottysshe Kynge by John Skelton & John Ashton

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JOHN SKELTON & JOHN ASHTON

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The Earliest known Printed English Ballad.

A

BALLADE

OF THE

SCOTTYSSHE KYNGE.

WRITTEN BY

JOHN SKELTON,

REPRODUCED IN FACSIMILE WITH AN HISTORICAL AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION

BY

JOHN ASHTON.

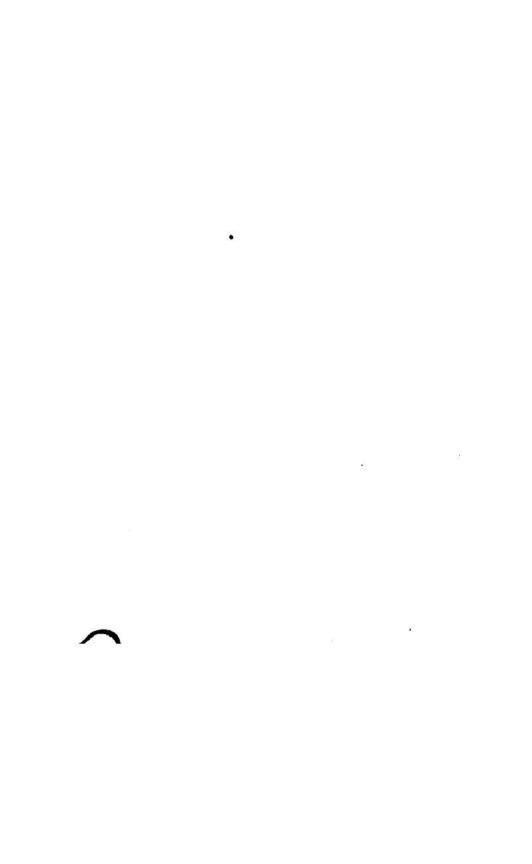
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A BALLADE OF THE SCOTTYSSHE KYNGE.

CHAPTER I.

ORIGIN OF BALLADS.



F all varieties of poetry, the Ballad, in the form which it affects among us, in distinction to other countries, is, perhaps, one of the most attractive. Although deriving its appellation from

a word fignifying a dance in Italy and France, where the ballad was a metrical narrative, or domeftic epic, generally short, or at least not very long, as to its amount, and used as an accompaniment to a dance, the English ballad by no means demanded the dance for its accompaniment, and only signified a fairly short narrative poem in a rhyming metre of a lively, tripping, and popular style, which could be sung or chanted, and as such, was easily distinguished from the true

poem or lay, which was composed in an artificial and more serious verse, and was only intended for recitation. It is difficult, if not altogether impossible, to trace the origin of the present form of the ballad in England. There is great probability that it is contemporary with the times when the alliterative, or initial-rhyming poems of the Anglo-Saxon and Early English poets were gradually giving way to the endrhyming poetry which Chaucer and his school did so much to dignify.

Of our indigenous ballads, many fo-called collections have been compiled. A mere lift of the titles would be tedious and of little profit here. Perhaps the oldest known example is that of "King Horn," derived from an older and unfound ballad, yet certainly written in the form in which it is now extant, as early as the thirteenth century. Another celebrated and early ballad, "Gamelyn," is of the fourteenth century. After this period the ballad, in the elaftic forms to which it lends itself both as to intrinsic narrational character, and extrinfic metrical adaptation, provided only the quality of being capable of being fung be preferved, fprings rapidly into vogue among the copyists, and examples of it abound. In fact, for a feafon, the ballad occupied a dignified position among less sacile forms of poetry. It was a form favoured by the best poets, and admired by the most appreciative listeners. But, after a time, as the progress of

education and the advance of literary tafte directed the attention of the better classes to other channels of composition, so the ballad came to be neglected and despised, until at length, particularly in the seventeenth century, it degenerated into a vehicle for ribaldry, obscenity, and scurrility, printed in the simplest and commonest manner, carried about the country by pedlars who pandered to the depraved taftes of their unlettered customers, and, with few exceptions, worthless in every point of its former excellence. Curiously enough an exception must be made with regard to the Scottish ballads, many of which, particularly those relating to martial deeds, or military prowefs, are of a far fuperior character to those of England, which are found contemporary with them. The fimpler, chafter, and more martial spirit of the Caledonians, no doubt contributed to this refult, and in turn was influenced by it.

Whether the curious "Ballade," which is the subject of the present treatise, should take rank as the earliest known printed ballad in England—or only be entitled to secondary honours—mainly depends on what can be termed a ballad—where a song ends, and a poem commences. It has, however, but one rival, "The Nut-browne Mayd," to which the title of a ballad can be hardly assigned in the same sense of perfectness, and self-completeness that this is. This poem may

¹ It should be borne in mind that Ms. G. Barnett Smith com-