LANG, LANG MAY THE LADIES STAND: A BALLAD MOTIF IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES

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Abstract: The biblical books of Exodus and Judges each contain a long narrative song with striking analogies, performative as well as structural, to the Scots ballads that William Motherwell writes about in his 1827 *Minstrelsy Ancient and Modern.* The second of these songs, the "Song of Deborah," also shares a motif with two Scots ballads in particular, the motif of the bereft ladies. This motif may be described as the introduction at the end of the song, for ironic effect, of ladies not implicated in the main action of the plot who rather wait in vain for the return of their husbands, unaware that they have already perished. This motif proves to be rare in the oral tradition of Europe and Asia Minor. But apparently it has entered the popular imagination of United States Americans, as is demonstrated by the common use of the probably inaccurate term *widow's walk* to describe a vernacular architectural feature originally found on some New England homes, and by the choice of the motif to conclude a vernacular poem published on the internet.

Keywords: Bible: Judges; Song of Deborah; ballad; Scotland; oral tradition; vernacular architecture

When I, as a folklorist, came to teach the Hebrew Bible to first- and second-year undergraduate students, I immediately recognized that the Torah and Former Prophets (Genesis through 2 Kings) contained a record of traditions, largely oral, of the ancient Jewish people. It was easy to spot the formulas and themes I'd learned of from oral theory. And it was even easier to identify a host of folk genres, including proverb, prayer, genealogy, novelle, law, saga, myth, fable, legend, and even snatches of song. We do not know how this mass of folk material came to be written down. Of one thing we can be reasonably certain, however. Ancient Israel did not have a William Motherwell systematically going around with notebook in hand, seeking out those souls, aged and obscure, who remembered best the old ways and the old forms, setting down for its own sake, exactly as recited, the traditional material those old ones had to give him, and completing his work with a clear account of what he had done. Indeed, it would seem that no people before the nineteenth-century Scots had a William Motherwell. He was truly an original and a first.[1]

Because the folk material in the Torah and Former Prophets is so thoroughly edited, collated, and synthesized, many stories and songs that probably existed once in longer, fuller renditions have nonetheless been preserved as no more than fragments. There was, after all, no William Motherwell to insist on the integrity of each individual piece. How startling, then, to find something so long and complete, something so close to a ballad, as, first, the "Song of Miriam" and then the "Song of Deborah". The first of these tells the story of the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the sea. The second tells how Deborah, with Barak, led an army against the army of Sisera, and how Sisera, fleeing from defeat, was killed by the woman Jael. Again, we do not know how these longer songs came to be transcribed and included in the books of Genesis and Judges respectively. Two of the oldest passages in the Bible, they are of an antiquity that makes the ballads seem almost new by comparison. And yet some aspects of the songs and their contexts are strangely reminiscent of aspects of the ballad that Motherwell comments upon in the extensive and detailed introduction he prepared for his major work, *Minstrelsy Ancient and Modern* (1827).

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[1] Of course every great gem has its setting. In Motherwell's case, Joseph Ritson, Sir Walter Scott, Peter Buchan, and Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, among others, helped the collector formulate his principles and praxis. For more on Motherwell see BROWN 2001.

Motherwell collected many of his ballads from elderly women, or "old singing women" as he calls them in his notebook, and in the introduction of *Minstrelsy* he refers to these singers as "every venerable sybil in the land" (MOTHERWELL 1827: xxvii). The first and most obvious connection, then, is that these two biblical songs are also attributed to women, indeed to prophetic women of mature years. Miriam was the older sister of Moses, who was no longer young when he led the children of Israel out of Egypt. Deborah was a prophetess and judge, a role she probably would not have taken on until after menopause, and in addition she bore the honorific appellation "mother of Israel" (Judges 5:7, New Jerusalem Bible). In each case the text as it now stands also assigns the song to a prominent male figure. In the case of Miriam, Exodus 15 provides a doublet. The preceding chapter has narrated the story of the crossing, ending with a short comment to the effect that in this way God saved the people and the people reverenced God in turn. At the beginning of Chapter 15, we are told that Moses and the Israelites then sang a song to God that begins as follows:

"I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."
(Exodus 15:1, Revised Standard Version)

At verse 19, immediately after the song, the doublet begins. The reader is carried back to the moment when Pharaoh enters the seabed:

> When the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his chariot drivers went into the sea, the Lord brought back the waters of the sea upon them: but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground.
>
> Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them:
>
> "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
> horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."
> (Exodus 15:19–21, New Revised Standard Version)

The text does not give any more of Miriam's song, but obviously these words are a variant version of the beginning of the same song as is attributed to Moses and the Israelites in verse 1. The editor or redactor retained (or perhaps even created) the doublet but did not deem it necessary to repeat the whole song the second time.

The case of the "Song of Deborah" is simpler. The first verse of Judges 5, as it now stands, states, "Then Deborah and Barak, son of Abinoam, sang on that day, saying ...". But the form of the Hebrew verb that is here translated *sang* is feminine singular. Obviously the name of Barak was added by a later editor or redactor who did not think to—or perhaps dare to—change the verb to make it agree with a double subject. Perhaps a better translation for the verse as it now stands would be: "Then Deborah sang on that day (Barak, son of Abinoam, too), saying ...".

Second, and equally obviously, Motherwell considers ballads as narratives. More significantly, he suggests that in many cases the ancient ballads "were narratives of real facts produced on the spur of the occasion" (MOTHERWELL 1827: xxiii). The two biblical songs are likewise presented as historical narratives immediately occasioned by the very events they narrate. Motherwell goes on to suggest that this mode of composition accounts for the formulaic quality of the verse, replete as it is with commonplaces. These two songs likewise rely to a considerable extent on formulaic language and commonplaces.

A number of other connections might be drawn, some trivial, some more substantial. Let me skip immediately to what I consider the most interesting connection of all, Motherwell's hypothesis that in former times ballads, telling their tale as they do rather jejunely, were preceded by a more prosaic narrative of the events therein commemorated. We may infer, he says, that ballads

> were prefaced with some account of the previous history of the several individuals whom they respectively commemorate; and that many minute circumstances elucidatory of them were detailed, not only for the purpose of interesting their hearers, but likewise to make the abrupt transitions occurring in some of these ballads more easy of apprehension to such as were strangers in the company. That this was the fact admits of little doubt. Traces of such a custom still remain in the lowlands of Scotland, among those who have stores of these songs upon their memory. Reciters [i.e. singers] frequently, when any part of the narrative appears incomplete, supply the defect in prose...
>
> [M]any of these ballads had certain frames in which they were set, and which, like the chorus of the Ancient Drama, discussed the motives of the characters, or entered more minutely into their history than was consistent with the limits and action of the metrical piece ..., information which the Ancient Minstrel in all probability announced orally to his audience before he smote his harp with the hand of power.
>
> (MOTHERWELL 1827: xiv, xvii)

Motherwell cites similar practices from Gaelic, Earse, Welsh, French, Danish, and Icelandic oral tradition. Each of the two lyric narratives under discussion is likewise preceded by a prose account of the events related in the song and, in the case of the

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"Song of Deborah", followed as well by a brief statement of the significance of the events therein recounted. In the latter case, too, the preceding prose account shows strong dependence upon the song, even where the redactor does not understand the ancient language of the song very well. Apparently the redactor (or redactors) has chosen to present these songs within a narrative frame, to use Motherwell's word, in order to remain true to the traditional way in which he would have heard them and others like them regularly sung. In these two songs we may have that rarest of things, a piece of ancient oral tradition presented in the context, at least the oral context, in which it would have been performed.

Clearly, then, there are a number of correspondences between these two narrative songs and ballads, including Scots ballads as discussed by William Motherwell. As these are generic connections, it does not seem unreasonable to assert unity of genre and to call these biblical songs ballads, as J. Blenkinsopp does call the "Song of Deborah" (BLENKINSOPP 1961: 63). True, the events are not narrated as clearly as they might be, and the lyric element is strong. But the same might be said of "The Bonny Earl of Murray" (CHILD 181) or "Sheath and Knife" (CHILD 15/16). Granted these generic connections, however, I want to focus, for the remainder of this paper on a more specific connection between one of these "ballads," the "Song of Deborah", and a particular pair of Scots ballads,

The "Song of Deborah" has attracted a distinguished roster of commentators and explicators in the twentieth century. It is not my intention here to go into the precise relationship of the song to the preceding narrative of Deborah's battle against Sisera and his subsequent death at the hand of the Kenite woman Jael; into the question of whether the song is celebratory of the power of God who can bring down the mighty by the hand of a woman, satirical in its depiction of a great warrior felled by a woman, or merely ironic; into the alliances and non-alliances of Israeli tribes represented by the middle section of the song; into the determination of which parts of the song are probably original and which parts may be accretions; into structural, stanzaic, and metrical difficulties; into such fine points of interpretation as whether Jael is depicted as using a mallet and tent peg or only a tent peg to dispatch her victim; or into such questions of expected audience reception as whether the final scene in the ballad is an example of "poignant description" (YOUNGER 2001: 363) or "delicious sarcasm" (NELSON 1999: 304)[2]. I am, however, interested in that final episode, which is probably the clearest and most ballad-like part of the song.

From the window peered down and wailed
  the mother of Sisera, from the lattice:

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[2] Extensive bibliographies on the Song of Deborah may be found in BAL 1988, LINDARS 1995, and ACKERMAN 1998. Ackerman devotes a whole chapter to Sisera's mother, in her role as Queen Mother. Somewhat as I do further on in this paper, she looks to material culture for parallels to the image that she is concerned with, that of a Queen Mother at a window. She suggests that she may have found such a parallel in representations of a woman at a window found on ninth- and eighth-century ivory plaques collected at four Near Eastern archeological sites (ACKERMAN 1998: 155–156).

"Why is his chariot so long in coming:
why are the hoofbeats of his chariots delayed?"
The wisest of her princesses answers her,
and she, too, keeps answering herself:
"They must be dividing the spoil they took"
there must be a damsel or two for each man,
Spoils of dyed cloth as Sisera's spoil,
an ornate shawl or two for me in the spoil."
(Judges 5:28-30, New American Bible)

These are the last lines of the song, barring a short petition/doxology at the end, almost surely a separate piece of verse:

May all your enemies perish thus, O Lord!
but your friends be as the sun rising in its might.

Coming back to the "Song of Deborah" after years of ballad study, I was indeed startled by this set of verses describing the bereft woman watching in vain for the return of a man dear to her. I knew that motif from Scots ballads. At the end of "The Bonnie Earl of Murray" (CHILD 181A) we are told:

Oh lang will his Lady
Look oer the castle Down,
Eer she see the Earl of Murray,
Come sounding through the Town!

Here too a lady, probably as in the Song of Deborah the man's mother (the Earl's wife had died three months previous to the murder of the Earl himself), is watching for the return of a character in the song, unaware that he is already dead (IVES 1997:93). Similarly, in Sir Patrick Spens (CHILD 58A) we are told:

O lang, lang may their ladies sit,
Wi their fans into their hand,
Or eir they se Sir Patrick Spence
Cum sailing to the land.

O lang, lang may the ladies stand,
Wi thair gold kems in their hair,
Waiting for thair ain deir lords,
For they 'll see thame na mair.

In this ballad a whole shipload of men has perished, and consequently many ladies, not just one, watch in vain.

In all three of these songs a common "theme" (in Albert Lord's sense of the word) or motif is developed. From these examples we can derive the constituent elements of this bereft ladies motif.

1. A central character in the narrative song has died.
2. A woman or some women watch expectantly for him to return, perhaps accompanied by his retainers. These women may be wives, mothers, or presumably sweethearts or sisters. The vantage point from which they watch would seem to be a high place, a window or wall.
3. The woman or women are new characters making their first appearance at this point. They have not figured earlier in the narrative, and are not implicated in the plot.
4. The function of the motif is affective—or supra-narrative, to use Flemming Andersen's term—rather than narrative (ANDERSEN 1985: 102-107). The story is over at this point. The women play no part in the plot. Their vain waiting serves rather as an ironic coda. In the two Scots ballads the dead man is the hero of the ballad, while in the "Song of Deborah" he is the villain, but the note of irony rings through all three occurrences of the motif.

This is the motif in all its effectiveness. What Blenkinsopp says of the "Song of Deborah" also fits the other two examples, *mutatis mutandis:* "This picture of the two women is powerfully drawn and would be difficult to equal in other ancient literatures" (BLENKINSOPP 1961: 78). Implicit in Blenkinsopp's statement, however, is the affirmation that he does not know of any other ancient examples of the motif. But how can this be? How can such an effective and indeed obvious motif have escaped the notice of so many poets? At first I assumed that such was surely not the case in medieval and modern oral tradition. This motif, I believed, must appear in ballads and epics from Norway to Russia, if not in traditions even more far afield. But my own search turned up only these three examples, so widely separated in time and language. And when I turned to friends much more knowledgeable about various oral traditions than I, and to on-line lists, they too could come up with no examples in Scandinavian or Hispanic ballads, in South Slavic epics, in Russian byliny, or anywhere but the in Bible and these two ballads. Nor, when I presented this paper at a Ballad Conference in Budapest in 2001, was any listener able to offer a suggestion. This is not to say that the motif exists only in these three examples. Doubtless there are other instances in world tradition. But the motif does seem to be quite rare, despite its effectiveness.

Widows who wait in vain for the return of their husbands are by no means rare, of course, whether in folk tradition or in literature. But generally these women are characters in the preceding story. They do not appear suddenly after the main action is completed. Andromache on the city walls, at the end of book 22 of the *Iliad,* is a good example. Andromache has been a secondary but still an important character in the epic. As soon as she reaches the wall, moreover, she sees her husband being dragged away behind Achilles' chariot. When she looks out from the city wall her waiting is over, though a major action of the plot is still to take place. A much closer analogy in the *Iliad* occurs in book 3. There Helen, by the invitation of Priam, searches out the heroes of the Greek army spread out before the walls of Troy. After identifying Agamemnon, Odysseus, Ajax, and Idomeneus she says:

> "But there are two commanders I do not see,
> Castor the horse breaker and the boxer
> Polydeuces, my brothers, born of one mother.
> Either they didn't come here from lovely Lacedaemon,
> Or else they did come in their seagoing ships
> But avoid the company of the fighting men
> In horror of the shame and disgrace that are mine."

She looks in vain for her brothers, as the next lines tells us:

> "But they had long been held by the life-giving earth
> There in Lacedaemon, their ancestral land."
> (*Iliad* 3: 236-244; transl. Stanley Lombardo)

Here, as in the biblical and ballad examples, the woman is not central to the action of the particular work itself, the *Iliad*, which is concerned with the interactions of Agamemnon, Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector (though of course she, Helen, is an important character in the larger story or set of stories of which the *Iliad* narrates only a small part). Apparently she is brought on stage, as it were, principally to achieve an ironic emotional effect. The scene, however, occurs early in the epic, and the ironic death of the Dioskouroi has occurred even before the action of the *Iliad* begins. Because examples such as these do not realize the essential elements of the motif, they must be passed over.

The field of folklore, however, is interdisciplinary. Consequently, while a search in one direction may turn up no leads, a search in quite another direction may prove successful. In the field of vernacular architecture I found an unexpected occurrence of this very motif. In the northeast part of the United States, especially in seaport towns, some houses dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are equipped with a railinged walkway along the peak of the roof (see Figs 1 and 2). This walkway provides a fine vantage point for looking long distances. A woman whose husband (or brother, or son) had gone to sea on a merchant or whaling ship could climb up there to watch for the return of his ship. But whaling and trading by sea are risky endeavors, and many a woman waiting for her husband was already a widow and did not know it. Consequently these rooftop walkways are commonly called widows' walks.

Despite the popular name, these walkways may not have been designed originally to serve as lookout posts. More probably they were fashioned to give quick access to the chimneys so that in case of chimney fire somebody could easily lean out from the walkway and dump sand down the flue to smother the dangerous blaze. Whatever the original intended purpose of the walkways, however, doubtless more

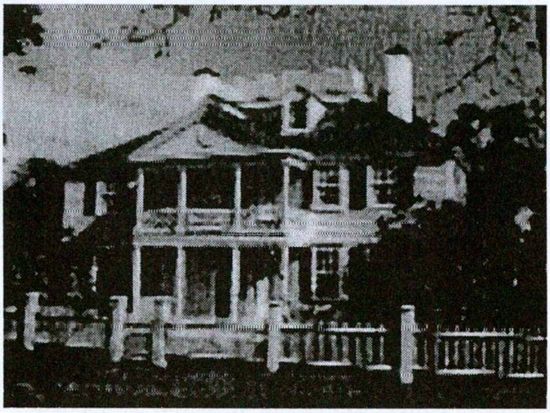

Fig. 1. The Julia Wood House, 1790, Falmouth, Massachusetts. Photo, courtesy of the Falmouth Historical Society

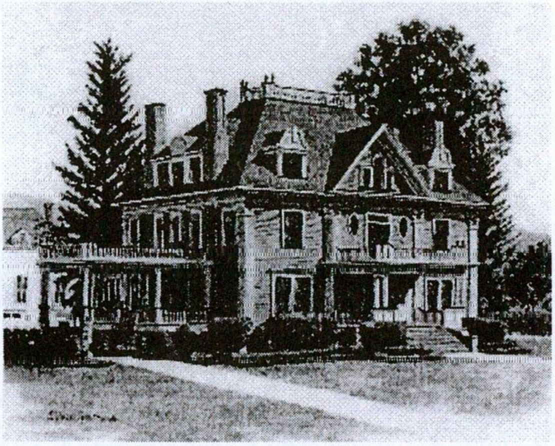

Fig. 2. The Julia Wood House, 1790, Falmouth, Massachusetts. From a drawing by Meredith A. Scott, courtesy of the Falmouth Historical Society

than one seaman's wife climbed up to have a better view out to sea. And tourists will not give up calling them *widows' walks*.

It seems logical to ask how an architectural feature can itself, whatever its original or adapted use, realize a motif. It does so through the nexus of associations that is conjured up mentally by the traditional term *widow's walk.* The Martha's Vineyard *Best Read Guide* calls the tourist's designation a romantic myth. Myth or not, it is certainly an element of the popular imagination, a small iconic motif in the American folk worldview. We ethnographers and folklorists are not so accustomed to speaking of mentifacts as of language, music, customs, and artifacts. Nevertheless, we do write of prejudices, beliefs and belief systems, and concepts of ethnicity and nation. In *Immanent Art* John Miles Foley reminds us that we must do better. In writing of oral-derived literature, for example, we must attend to the whole nexus of associations, connotations, and stories that inhere immanently in the traditional elements used to tell the story. The epithet *swift-footed,* for example, applied to Achilleus even in his night scene with Priam over Hector's dead body, is "a traditionally sanctioned method of invoking a mythic figure more complex than his participation in any one situation.... It is Achilleus's identity in its magnificent entirety—not just that part of it that harmonizes with the situation in which it happens to be embedded—that is encoded in this cognitive category" (FOLEY 1991: 142–143). Foley calls this process "metonymic referentiality" (142). The folklorist must attend to both aspects: the physically perceptible element which serves a metonymic function (e.g. *swift-footed*) and the cognitive nexus of associations, the mentifact, for which the element serves as a metonym. We have already attended to metonymic referentiality once in this essay, in the section where we discussed the supranarrative function of the motif of bereft ladies in the two ballads and the biblical song. At the moment, however, we are not discussing oral-derived literature but vernacular architecture. The rooftop walkway and the attendant designation *widow's walk* are perceptible. But we must not limit ourselves to a practical functionalist interpretation of these perceptible constructs—to discussing access to chimneys and lamenting romantic misnomers. Rather, we must go on to consider their metonymic function, and ask to what they refer. The answer is that they refer to a cognitive construct, a nexus of associations that, in this case, includes all the elements of the motif of the bereft ladies:

1. A central figure has died: the dead husband of the widow is almost always imagined as a sea captain.
2. The widow is watching—and from on high—for his return.
3. The woman has been left behind because she is not implicated in the business of commerce or whaling that is the story of the voyage. And she remains in her lofty position even after story has reached its unhappy end.
4. Finally, the motif is purely one of pathos and irony—a final comment on the vanity or futility of the whole business of commerce, and especially of whaling. The story of each voyage had played itself out, and still the ladies stood waiting. Moreover, the era of sail is now long over. Of that great and heroic period of U. S. history all that remains for our contemplation is a handful of fine houses built by long-dead sea captains for their long-dead wives, complete with widows' walks atop the roofs.

As we look up at those railinged walkways, whatever their original purpose may have been, we experience nostalgia for a bygone time, pity for the bereft, and a sense of the irony of fate. These elements are clearly imminent in the term *widow's walk.* But arguably they are also imminent in the architectural feature itself to which the term refers back, at least as now perceived. They are a crucial part of the metonymic referentiality of widows' walks.

Cruising the Internet for evidence of how the widow's walk has become a metonymic referent in the popular imagination, I found a number of items. I found, for instance, Horton House, built in the late 1800s and recently converted to a bed and breakfast (see Fig. 2). The original builders nostalgically chose to build in inland western Pennsylvania a house in eighteenth-century New England style, and topped their house with a widow's walk that is not functional for either of its supposed practical purposes: it is too far from the chimneys to enable one to reach over with a bucket of sand to douse a fire, and it is too far from the sea, by many hundreds of miles, to enable one to look out for approaching ships. I would argue, however, that the widow's walk is functional in the metonymic sense, completing this house, which metonymically summons up the early New England heritage, with an ornament which metonymically summons up the whole sad but heroic story of shipping and whaling upon which New England prosperity was built. The bed and breakfast that now occupies this house appeals to this nexus of associations in the popular imagination by featuring the widow's walk in its advertisement as one of the house's attractive features (HORTON HOUSE BED AND BREAKFAST 2001: WWW).

Cruising further on the Internet I came upon the poem, "The Molly Bee" by Bob Jackson of Bozeman, Montana. This poem describes a ghost ship:

> She's out of Boston town it is the whaler Molly Bee.
> One hundred and sixty years ago she set sail.

But "[n]o one really knows the fate of the Molly Bee," now a phantom. The poem ends:

> There is an old legend on the docks of Boston town,
> that someday the Molly Bee and crew may sail home.
> If you look at the old houses late on a summer night,
> you see ghost[s] on the widows walks waiting all alone.
> (JACKSON 2001: WWW)

In this highly traditional, indeed ballad-like poem the vernacular poet has reached instinctively for the image of bereft women watching and waiting, in order to bring his piece to a close. In so doing he has actually used the motif in its fullness:

1. The main characters of the story, the crew of the Molly Bee, are now dead.
2. Women watch from a lofty station for their return.
3. These women are new characters, not implicated in the story of the loss of the ship.
4. The effect is ironic and affective, here plainly calculated to elicit that *frisson* characteristic of urban legend. The spondaic movement, low vowel assonance, and *w* alliteration of the last line only serve to heighten this effect.

Tourists in New England, proprietors in Western Pennsylvania, and a vernacular poet in Montana all attest to the hold of the motif of the bereft ladies upon the

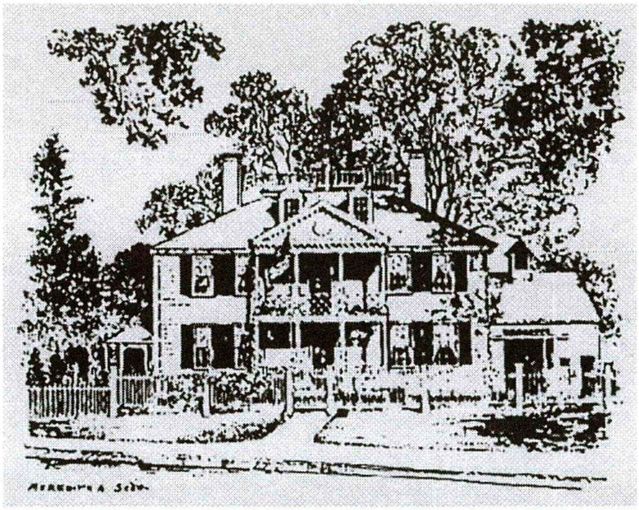

Fig. 3. The Horton House, late 1800s, Warren Pennsylvania. This late inland house, built in the style of colonial sea-captains' houses, demonstrates the grip on the American imagination of the icon of the widow's walk. The Bed and Breakfast now housed there advertizes the widow's walk as one of the features making it an attractive accommodation. From a charcoal drawing by S. Irish Smith, courtesy of The Horton House and the Scalise family

popular imagination of their nation. And two Scots ballads and one biblical song attest to its hold upon the popular imagination across national borders and over centuries. The motif may be rare, but it is also haunting.

So far as I know, only one person has written previously about the motif of the bereft ladies. Edward D. Ives, in a book-length study of the ballad "The Bonny Earl of Murray," compares and contrasts the motif as it is found in that ballad and in "Sir Patrick Spens" with the formula that Flemming Andersen calls "She lookit over her father's castle wa'" (ANDERSEN 1985: 138–147). He points out that the Andersen formula usually occurs early in the song, in most cases functioning to presage tragedy. The present motif, however, functions to "comment on the death that has been" (IVES 1997: 94). What Ives says to conclude his discussion of the motif might almost be applied to all the occurrences of it that we have seen:

> Looking from the quiet of the castle wall to the violence beyond—Queen, wife, mother, any one or all three, it doesn't matter—a woman waits, as women have always waited. It is a perfect ending to a fine song. As I said before, our maker played it right.

Almost, but not quite. In the "Song of Deborah" two women wait, but two more have chosen instead to take up arms against impending threats, and by opposing end them. Deborah and Jael refuse to be women bereft.

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