

ENGLISH AND SCOTTISH POPULAR BALLADS

EDITED
FROM THE COLLECTION OF
FRANCIS JAMES CHILD

BY
HELEN CHILD SARGENT
AND
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BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge

1730

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PREFACE

The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, edited by the late Francis James Child, was published in ten parts, forming five large volumes, from 1882 to 1898. It contains three hundred and five distinct ballads, but the number of texts printed is much larger than this, for Professor Child's plan was to give every extant version of every ballad. Thus of No. 4, 'Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight,' he published nine different versions; of No. 58, 'Sir Patrick Spens,' eighteen; of No. 173, 'Mary Hamilton,' twenty-eight, — and so on. Each ballad has an introduction dealing with the history and bibliography of the piece, and containing a full account of parallels in foreign languages, and, in general, of the diffusion of the story, with other pertinent matter. There are also exhaustive collations, elaborate bibliographies, an index of published ballad airs, a collection of tunes, — and, in a word, all the apparatus necessary for the study of this kind of literature.

The present volume offers a selection from the materials collected and edited by Mr Child, and is prepared in accordance with a plan which he had approved. Each of the three hundred and five ballads in his large collection (except Nos. 33, 279, 281, 290, and 299) is represented by one or more versions, without the *apparatus criticus*, and with very short introductions. The notes, which are necessarily brief, give specimens (and specimens only) of significant stanzas from versions not included in the volume. The numbers (1-305) and letters (A, B, etc.) correspond to the designations used in the large collection, and there is, in every case, an implied reference to that work for further information. For instance, 'The Twa Sisters' (No. 10) is here represented by two versions, A and B, selected from those published by Mr Child, which (as the note on p. 642 indicates) are twenty-seven in number. To A is prefixed (both in this volume and in the large collection) a memorandum of the four sources (a, b, c, d) from which Mr Child derived this version. The text, as printed on pp. 18, 19, is identical with the text of A as edited by Mr Child, but the variant readings, fully registered in the large collection, are omitted. The short introduction to No. 10 is extracted from Mr Child's eight-page introduction, to which the student who wishes to pursue the subject will naturally have recourse. Mr Child's own words are retained whenever that is possible. The present volume, it will be observed, is neither a new edition of the collection of Mr Child nor a substitute for it. It differs from that work in scope and purpose. Yet it is, in a manner, complete in itself. It affords a compact view of English and Scottish ballad literature which, it is hoped, may be useful to the general reader and may lead those who feel a more particular interest in the

subject to acquaint themselves at first hand with the full collection of texts and other apparatus in Mr Child's admirable volumes.

The Glossary is based on that in the larger work. It is not intended to furnish material for linguistic investigations, but merely to assist the reader.

For obvious reasons, it has seemed best to reproduce the List of Sources etc. For other bibliographical lists the large collection may be consulted.

The general Introduction has been written especially for this book. It attempts to sum up, as simply and judiciously as may be, the present state of a very complicated discussion.

The portrait of Mr Child is from a photograph belonging to Miss Catharine Innes Ireland.

Professor Neilson has had the great kindness to relieve the editors of the arduous task of preparing the glossary, and Miss Ireland has rendered invaluable assistance in proof-reading. Without the help of these generous and self-sacrificing friends the appearance of the book would have been long delayed.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS., March 16, 1904.

INTRODUCTION

A BALLAD is a song that tells a story, or — to take the other point of view — a story told in song. More formally, it may be defined as a short narrative poem, adapted for singing, simple in plot and metrical structure, divided into stanzas, and characterized by complete impersonality so far as the author or singer is concerned. This last trait is of the very first consequence in determining the quality or qualities which give the ballad its peculiar place in literature. A ballad has no author. At all events, it appears to have none. The teller of the story for the time being is as much the author as the unknown (and for our purposes unimportant) person who first put it into shape. In most forms of artistic literature the personality of the writer is a matter of deep concern to the reader. The style, we say, is the man. The individuality of one poet distinguishes his works, however they may vary among themselves, from the works of all other poets. Chaucer, for instance, has his way, or his ways, of telling a tale that are not the way, or the ways, of William Morris. If a would-be creative literary artist has no individuality that we can detect, we set him down as conventional, and that is an end of him and of his works. In the ballad it is not so. There the author is of no account. 'He is not even present. We do not feel sure that he ever existed. At most, we merely infer his existence, at some indefinite time in the past, from the fact of his product: a poem, we think, implies a poet; therefore somebody must have composed this ballad. Until we begin to reason, we have no thought of the author of any ballad, because, so far as we can see, he had no thought of himself.

We may go a step farther in this matter of impersonality. Not only is the author of a ballad invisible, and, so far as the effect which the poem produces on the hearer is concerned, practically non-existent, but the teller of the tale has no rôle in it. Unlike other songs, it does not purport to give utterance to the feelings or the mood of the singer.¹ The first person does not occur at all, except in the speeches of the several characters. Finally, there are no comments or reflections by the narrator. He does not dissect or psychologize. He does not take sides for or against any of the *dramatis personae*. He merely tells what happened and what people said, and he confines the dialogue to its simplest and most inevitable elements. The story exists for its own sake. If it were possible to conceive a tale as *telling itself*, without the instrumentality of a conscious speaker, the ballad would be such a tale.²

So far we have dealt in generalities and impressions. What has been said is obvious enough, and it is admitted by everybody. There is, as we shall see presently, no agreement among scholars as to the origin and history of what are called popular ballads, but as to the fact of their impersonal quality there is no dispute. Nor will it be denied that this quality puts them in a class by themselves. Whatever the cause or causes,

¹ This distinguishes the ballad, strictly so called, from the purely lyrical poem. Such a song as 'Waly, waly, gin love be bony' (p. 667) is, then, not a ballad, though it tells a story. It should be noted that, in common parlance, the term ballad is very loosely applied.

² There are, of course, slight departures from the type in particular cases, but these are readily accounted for, and do not affect the integrity of the type.

the bare fact is clear and undeniable. No one can read 'The Hunting of the Cheviot,' or 'Mary Hamilton,' or 'Johnie Armstrong,' or 'Robyn and Gandeleyne,' or 'The Wife of Usher's Well,' and fail to recognize that, different as they are from each other in theme and in effect, they belong together. Yet no two of them are the works of the same author. Their common element is not the personality of the writer but his impersonality; and this distinguishes the ballad, as a class, from the productions of the conscious literary artist. In studying ballads, then, we are studying the "poetry of the folk," and the "poetry of the folk" is different from the "poetry of art."

Poetry of the folk is, perhaps, a dangerous phrase; but it is too convenient to be lightly rejected, and, if we proceed with caution, we may employ it without disaster. Let us hasten to acknowledge that in introducing the term at this stage of our discussion we have gone somewhat farther than the logic of the situation warrants. We have seen, to be sure, that all poetry is divisible into two great classes, — that which is manifestly the work of the conscious artist, and that which is not. We have recognized a characteristic difference between 'The Prioress's Tale' and 'Julian and Maddalo' on the one hand, and 'Johnie Armstrong' and 'The Wife of Usher's Well' on the other. But we have not yet discovered anything that justifies us in calling the ballads *folk-poetry*, and we have not defined the folk, though that is a term which assuredly requires explanation.

The alphabet was no doubt a great invention, and everybody should be happy to know that he can write. But now and then it would be convenient if one's thoughts could dissociate literature for a moment from the written or printed page. In theory this is easy enough to do. Practically, however, it is difficult for even a professed student of linguistics to remember that a word is properly a sign made with the vocal organs, and that the written word is merely a conventional symbol standing for the word that is spoken. We are in the habit of thinking that a word should be pronounced as it is spelled, rather than that it should be spelled as it is pronounced. *Author* means to us a man with a pen in his hand, — a *writer*, as we call him. It requires a combined effort of the reason and the imagination to conceive a poet as a person who cannot write, singing or reciting his verses to an audience that cannot read. History, as we understand it, is the written record or even the printed volume; it is no longer the accumulated fund of tribal memories, handed down from father to son by oral tradition. Yet everybody knows that, quite apart from what we usually call literature, there is a great mass of song and story and miscellaneous lore which circulates among those who have neither books nor newspapers. To this oral literature, as the French call it, education is no friend. Culture destroys it, sometimes with amazing rapidity. When a nation learns to read, it begins to disregard its traditional tales; it feels a little ashamed of them; and finally it loses both the will and the power to remember and transmit them. What was once the possession of the folk as a whole, becomes the heritage of the illiterate only, and soon, unless it is gathered up by the antiquary, vanishes altogether.

To this oral literature belong the popular ballads, and we are justified, therefore, in calling them "folk-poetry." They are not, like written literature, the exclusive possession of the cultivated classes in any community. They belonged, in the first instance, to the whole people, at a time when there were no formal divisions of literate and illiterate; when the intellectual interests of all were substantially identical, from the king to the peasant. As civilization advanced, they were banished from polite society, but they lived on among the humble, among shepherds and ploughboys and "the spinsters and the knitters in the sun," until even these became too sophisticated to care for them and they were heard no more.

The process just sketched is not imaginary or merely inferential. It is, to be sure, impossible, from the nature of the case, to cite documentary evidence for every step in the history of the ballads of a given people. But we are not confined to the limits of a single nationality. Every country of Europe may be laid under contribution for evidence, and not a little testimony has come in from other continents. All stages of civilization are represented in the material that scholars have brought together, so that we are enabled to speak with entire confidence. Positive chronology may be out of the question, but relative chronology is all that one can require in such matters. The hostility between education and balladry is not conjectural; its history is known in Great Britain for at least two hundred years. The homogeneous folk — that is, the community whose intellectual interests are the same from the top of the social structure to the bottom — is no fiction; examples in abundance have been observed and recorded. The ability of oral tradition to transmit great masses of verse for hundreds of years is proved and admitted. Ballads themselves exist in plenty, fortunately preserved in old manuscripts or broadsides or taken down from singing or recitation in recent years. It is possible to be ignorant of the evidence, no doubt, but it is not possible to doubt when once the evidence is known. *The popular ballads are really popular, that is, they belong to the folk.* So much is clear. There are problems enough remaining, — the relation of the ballads to written literature, their sources, their origin, the manner of composition, and so on. But these are secondary questions. The main point is established, and, indeed, there has never been any reason to dispute it.

The authorship of popular ballads is a question of great difficulty, which must be considered in due season, but which may be deferred for the present. Before discussing the different theories that have been proposed it is well to refer to other matters that admit of a more satisfactory settlement.

Professor Child's great collection, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, in five volumes (Boston, 1882-98), comprises the whole extant mass of this material. It includes three hundred and five pieces, most of them in a number of different versions, with full collations and other pertinent apparatus. A few variants of this or that ballad have come to light since the publication of this admirable work, but no additional ballads have been discovered. Ballad-making, so far as the English-speaking nations are concerned, is a lost art; and the same may be said of ballad-singing. A few of the ballads in Mr Child's collection are still in oral circulation; but most of them are completely forgotten or are known only in versions derived from print. Among those which survive may be mentioned 'Lord Randal,' 'The Wife of Usher's Well,' 'The Maid Freed from the Gallows,' 'Sir Hugh,' and 'The Twa Sisters.' Much has been lost, and some of the most precious relics of tradition that we possess have been saved by mere accident and in a sadly mutilated condition. Yet what has been preserved is considerable in amount and, on the whole, of excellent quality. No country has better ballads than those of England and Scotland.

On pages 677-684 of the present volume will be found a chronological list of the manuscripts, broadsides, and printed books from which Professor Child derived the texts which make up his collection. Only eleven ballads, it will be observed, are extant in manuscripts older than the seventeenth century. The unique copy of 'Judas' (No. 29) dates from the thirteenth century; next, by a long interval, comes 'Riddles Wisely Expounded' (No. 1), which occurs in a manuscript of about 1445; slightly later, perhaps, are the manuscripts which contain 'Robin Hood and the Monk' (No. 119), 'St Stephen and Herod' (No. 22), and 'Robyn and Gandelcyn' (No. 115); from about 1500 come our

copies of 'Robin Hood and the Potter' (No. 121) and 'Crow and Pie' (No. 111); from about 1550 those of 'The Battle of Otterburn' (No. 161) and the older version of 'The Hunting of the Cheviot' (No. 162); 'Sir Andrew Barton' (No. 167) and 'Captain Car' (No. 178) occur in manuscripts of the seventeenth century. The Percy Folio, which is the most important of all our ballad manuscripts, is in a hand of about 1650. A few ballads are found in printed copies of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Miscellanies of the seventeenth century preserve a number of texts, and broadsides of the same century are plentiful. Then we come to the collectors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to whose enthusiasm for popular poetry are due the majority of the texts which we possess.

Evidently, then, the written and printed documents which we are studying are, in the main, modern documents. But we are not to infer that the ballads themselves are necessarily of recent origin. A sharp distinction must be made between the date of the book or manuscript in which a ballad occurs and the date of the ballad itself.

There is ample evidence for the antiquity of popular ballads in England. Nobody doubts that the Angles and Saxons had them in abundance when they invaded Britain, and the mediæval chroniclers testify to the continuance of the ballad-singing habit. Indeed, there is no difficulty in proving beyond a reasonable doubt that there were ballads in plenty from the dawn of English history (not to speak of what lies before this epoch) down to the seventeenth century, when written and printed documents begin to abound. From the nature of the case, however, such songs very seldom got written down. The substance of many Anglo-Saxon ballads may be preserved in *Béowulf*, but this is an epic poem of considerable pretensions to artistic structure and finish, and we cannot hope to extract from it the separate songs which its author or authors utilized. Much ballad material is doubtless preserved in chronicles, but the ballads themselves are not there. Only a limited class of ballads (those of an heroic or historical character) were likely to afford material to chroniclers and epic poets. What the people sang would only be recorded by accident. Thus it is not surprising that we have but a single ballad written down in the thirteenth century. The existence of this one text, the 'Judas,' completely popular in metre, in phraseology, and in what we call atmosphere, is a valuable piece of evidence. The lack of similar texts for the next two hundred years is no evidence at all, except, perhaps, of the fact that such pieces were in the possession of the folk and circulated from mouth to mouth, but that nobody cared to commit them to writing. 'St Stephen and Herod' is just such another piece as 'Judas' and may be quite as old, yet it did not achieve the perpetuity of pen and ink until about 1450. 'The Maid and the Palmer' (No. 21), which is a popular version of the story of the Samaritan woman in the gospel, belongs to the same class. So far as we know, however, it was not written down until about 1650, when it was included in that extraordinary miscellany known as Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript. When Percy discovered this manuscript it was lying under a bureau in the parlor of a country gentleman's house, and the maids were using it to light fires. Suppose it had escaped Percy's notice. Another month, another week, would have sent it up Humphrey Pitts's chimney in smoke. We should then have no knowledge of the existence of 'The Maid and the Palmer' in English, except for three stanzas and half of the burden, which Sir Walter Scott remembered and which were first printed in 1880 in the second edition of Sharpe's Ballad Book; but we should make a great mistake if we inferred that 'The Maid and the Palmer' was to be dated in accordance with the time when it was first printed or even the time when it was communicated to Sharpe by Scott. To avoid a possible misapprehension it may be

added that Scott was not aware that this ballad occurs in the Percy Manuscript. His knowledge of it, in other words, came from pure oral tradition which was in no manner affected by the accident that some scribe in the seventeenth century wrote down a version that was then in circulation. The case of 'The Maid and the Palmer' is so instructive that we must dwell on it a little longer. The ballad is not confined to England. There are versions in Danish, in Färöe, in Norwegian, in Swedish, and in Finnish. The Danish ballad was printed as a broadside about 1700, and was also taken down from recitation in 1848 and again in 1869. The Färöe version is known from about the end of the eighteenth century, and the same is true of one of the Swedish texts. A memorandum in the handwriting of Arne Magnusson proves that the ballad existed in Icelandic in the seventeenth or early eighteenth century. All these facts are quite independent of the scribe of the Percy Manuscript and of the recollection of Sir Walter Scott. Geographical distribution, then, may give valuable testimony to the antiquity of a ballad. A striking example is 'Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight' (No. 4). This was first printed, so far as we know, in a broadside of about 1765,¹ and next in 1776 by Herd, who took it down from singing or recitation. But these dates are of no value in determining the age of the ballad. What convinces us that 'Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight' came to the printer of the broadside and to Herd from an oral tradition of indeterminable antiquity is its existence among all the nations of Europe. "It is nearly as well known to the southern as to the northern nations. It has an extraordinary currency in Poland. The Germans, Low and High, and the Scandinavians, preserve it, in a full and evidently ancient form, even in the tradition of this generation."² No one can turn over the pages of Mr Child's introduction to 'Lady Isabel' without perceiving that nothing has less significance for the date of any ballad than the precise moment at which it first excited the interest of some collector who reduced it to writing, or of some catchpenny publisher who had it struck off on poor paper in battered type for the gratification of those who, like Mopsa, love a ballad in print a-life.

So long as a ballad continues to be handed down by oral tradition, it is, of course, continuously subjected to the processes of change which every language undergoes. Hence, a version derived from recitation or singing in the nineteenth century will conform, in the main, to the habitual dialect of the singer or reciter, and thus will be, in a real sense, modern. But this has nothing to do with the age of the ballad itself. In printed versions, the linguistic forms may be considerably older than the date of publication, and the same is true of copies preserved in manuscript. Thus, the language of the 'Gest of Robin Hood' (No. 117) is much earlier than 1500, the approximate date of the first edition that we know of. There is nothing surprising in this, for Robin Hood ballads were in circulation a good while before 1377, as the casual mention of them in Piers Plowman proves.

The considerations set forth in the preceding paragraphs have an important bearing on another question which has been much debated,—the relation between ballads and metrical romances. Such romances are, on the whole, preserved in manuscripts much older than the sources from which we derive our ballad texts, and it has therefore seemed natural to many scholars to assume without argument that when a romance and a ballad tell the same story, the ballad is merely a *rifacimento* of the romance. Such an inference is, however, by no means a matter of course. Most romances were literary productions, composed as modern novels are composed, pen in hand. Clearly, then, if a written

¹ Roxburghe Ballads, Ballad Society, vii, 383-4.

² Child, English and Scottish Popular Ballads, i, 22 (1882).

romance was in a given case based upon a ballad which had never been committed to writing, and which continued to circulate from mouth to mouth for a century or two before anybody took it down, the romance, though in fact later than the ballad, would appear, so far as documentary evidence is concerned, to be the older of the two. No doubt certain ballads are based upon metrical romances. Such appears to be the case with 'The Lord of Lorn and the False Steward' (No. 271), which may probably be a retelling of 'Roswall and Lillian,' but in general, there is no presumption in favor of the priority of the romance; and even when the extant ballad does demonstrably go back to a romance, it is sometimes probable that the romance itself goes back to a still older ballad which has perished. *A priori* considerations are of little or no value in solving these problems. Each case requires to be investigated by itself. The reader may find abundant materials for such investigation in Professor Child's introductions to 'Hind Horn' (No. 17), 'Sir Lionel' (No. 18), 'King Orfeo' (No. 19), 'Sir Aldingar' (No. 59), and 'Fair Annie' (No. 62). What has been said of ballads and romances is equally true of ballads and literary material in general. 'Lady Diamond' (No. 269) is unquestionably derived in some way from Boccaccio's Decameron, but nothing is more certain than that Boccaccio's own tale goes back in the long run to distinctly popular sources. Certain historical ballads may come from chronicles, but, on the other hand, it is well known that chroniclers have often drawn without scruple from legendary songs and other forms of oral tradition. Only by comparative study of extensive material and patient scrutiny of details can one hope to arrive at a satisfactory result in these matters, and it often happens that the truth lies too far back for us to discover.

Some ballads are historical, or at least are founded on actual occurrences. In such cases, we have a manifest point of departure for our chronological investigation. The ballad is likely to have sprung up shortly after the event and to represent the common rumor of the time. Accuracy is not to be expected, and indeed too great historical fidelity in detail is rather a ground of suspicion than a certificate of the genuinely popular character of the piece. There can be no object in enumerating the obviously historical ballads in the present collection; the reader will easily find most of them for himself by running through the Table of Contents. But two cautionary observations are necessary. Since history repeats itself, the possibility and even the probability must be entertained that every now and then a ballad which had been in circulation for some time was adapted to the circumstances of a recent occurrence and has come down to us only in such an adaptation. It is also far from improbable that many ballads which appear to have no definite localization or historical antecedents may be founded on fact, since one of the marked tendencies of popular narrative poetry is to alter or eliminate specific names of persons and places in the course of oral tradition. A good example, though not in a case of historical derivation, may be seen in 'Hind Horn' (No. 17), and another in 'King Orfeo' (No. 19). In 'Hind Horn,' but one name is kept, that of the hero himself, which happened to afford the opportunity for a kind of pun ("Drink to Horn from the horn"), and so was preserved. Were it not for this name, we could only say that the ballad belongs to a great class of stories of which the romance of 'King Horn' is also a member; we should have no right to postulate any special connection between the romance and the ballad. The pretty little Shetland ballad of 'King Orfeo' comes in some way from the classical tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, apparently by way of a Middle English lay or romance, but it has lost the name of the hero and has transformed that of the heroine into Isabel.

A popular ballad, as we have seen, seldom or never has an ascertainable date. In fact

the precise date of its composition is not significant in the sense in which the date of an ode or a sonnet is significant. An artistic poem receives its final form at the hands of the author at the time of composition. That form is fixed and authoritative. Nobody either has or supposes that he has the right to modify it. Any such alteration is an offence, a corruption, and the critic's duty is to restore the text to its integrity so that we may have before us what the poet wrote and nothing else.¹ The composition of an ode or a sonnet, then, may be regarded as a single creative act. And with the accomplishment of this creative act, the account is closed; once finished, the poem is a definite entity, no longer subject to any process of development. Not so with the popular ballad. Here the mere act of composition (which is quite as likely to be oral as written) is not the conclusion of the matter; it is rather the beginning. The product as it comes from the author is handed over to the folk for oral transmission, and thus passes out of his control. If it is accepted by those for whom it is intended, it ceases to be the property of the author; it becomes the possession of the folk, and a new process begins, that of oral tradition, which is hardly second in importance to the original creative act. As it passes from singer to singer it is changing unceasingly. Old stanzas are dropped and new ones are added; rhymes are altered; the names of the characters are varied; portions of other ballads work their way in; the catastrophe may be transformed completely. Finally, if the tradition continues for two or three centuries, as it frequently does continue, the whole linguistic complexion of the piece may be so modified with the development of the language in which it is composed, that the original author would not recognize his work if he heard it recited. Taken collectively, these processes of oral tradition amount to a second act of composition, of an inextricably complicated character, in which many persons share (some consciously, others without knowing it), which extends over many generations and much geographical space, and which may be as efficient a cause of the ballad in question as the original creative act of the individual author. It would be a great mistake to regard the results of what we may call, for want of a better term, collective composition, as identical with the corruptions of scribes and editors in the case of a classical text.² Individually they are sometimes indistinguishable from such corruptions, but in the aggregate they amount to a distinct kind of authorship which every student of popular literature is obliged to recognize, not only as actually operative in the production of ballads, but as legitimate. They may even result in the production of new ballads to which no individual author can lay claim, so completely is the initial act of creative authorship overshadowed by the secondary act of collective composition. We may compare the processes of language. A word is created by somebody. It then becomes the property of the whole body of those who speak the language, and is subjected to continuous modification from generation to generation. The primary act of the original creator of the word is not more important, and may be far less so, than the secondary acts of his countrymen who transmit his creation and make it their own as they pass it on.

It follows that a genuinely popular ballad can have no fixed and final form, no sole authentic version. There are *texts*, but there is no *text*. Version A may be nearer the

¹ The author, of course, may revise his own work from time to time; but that does not affect the principle involved. If such revisions are made, the author's latest revised text becomes the authoritative version, and, for our present purpose, simply supersedes the first draught, which, except for minute questions of literary history, is cancelled and practically ceases to exist.

² Of course there are also headlong, blundering corruptions which are comparable to those that take place in the transmission of a written or printed text; but these may, if necessary, be distinguished from the proper and lawful modifications which are of the very nature of oral tradition.

original than versions **B** and **C**, but that does not affect the pretensions of **B** and **C** to exist and hold up their heads among their fellows. It would be interesting if we could have every one of Mr Child's three hundred and five ballads exactly as it came from the lips or hands of its first composer ; but such versions, if we could arrive at them, would not cancel the variants that have come down to us. Oral transmission and its concomitants are not the accidents of the ballad, they are essential to it ; they are constituent elements of its very nature. Without them the ballad would not be the ballad.

Hitherto we have assumed that ballads are initially the work of individual authors like any other poem, and this may probably be the truth with respect to most and perhaps all of the English and Scottish ballads which have survived, although, as we have seen, the function of the individual author is far less significant in the production of a genuinely popular ballad than in the case of poems which are made by the well-defined process of artistic composition. A different theory of ballad origins was held by James Grimm ; and the mystery in which his indistinct utterances involved the subject has long been a matter of controversy. Grimm's general views on myth, popular poetry, and fairy tales are well known, and need not here be particularized. He held that they were, in the fullest sense, the expression of the spirit of the folk, and that they perpetuated themselves, ever changing and continually fitting themselves to new environments, but with little or no intentional alteration on the part of any given reciter. That these theories were somewhat too far-reaching was pointed out by his own contemporaries. In the main, however, if understood with some reserves in particular cases and with ample allowance for exceptions, little fault can be found with them. The "mystery" is reached when Grimm declares that the people, as a whole, composes poetry ; *das Volk dichtet*.¹ It is easy enough to understand that the material for ballads is in the possession of the folk. It is not more difficult to see that a ballad, when once it exists, becomes the possession of the folk, and is subjected to those vicissitudes of oral tradition which, as we have seen, are hardly less important than the initial act of composition. But the difficulty comes when we try to figure to ourselves the actual production of a ballad in the first instance without the agency of an individual author. For this difficulty Grimm has nowhere provided, nor is it certain that he was entirely clear in his own mind as to the scope or the bearings of his theory in this crucial point.

Modern criticism has made merry with Grimm's theory of ballad authorship. Composition, it is held, must be the act of an individual ; it is inconceivable otherwise ; ballads were composed like other poems ; the folk has no voice as a community ; it cannot pour forth unpremeditated and original song in unison. Thus baldly stated, the objections to Grimm's theory are unanswerable, for they speak the words of truth and soberness. But Grimm, though he has not expressed himself with precision, — though perhaps he may even be charged with avoiding the direct issue, — cannot have meant anything so grossly unreasonable as the tenets which his opponents ascribe to him. He was not deficient in common sense, and he certainly had a profound and rarely sympathetic knowledge of popular literature and of the popular spirit in all its manifestations. No doubt he uttered dark oracles, but, though we cannot accept his doctrine in any literal sense, still that is no valid reason for flying off to the opposite pole, — for denying the existence of any problem and asserting that the only difference between ballads and other poems turns on the question of anonymity. Such an explanation is far too simple ; it ignores too many

¹ This famous phrase is to be regarded as a summing up of Grimm's theory rather than as a direct quotation. Professor Gummere notes that A. W. Schlegel anticipated Grimm, though he subsequently protested against Grimm's doctrine (*Beginnings of Poetry*, p. 134).

observed facts and leaves uncorrelated too many phenomena which seem to be connected and which bear at least the appearance of being significant. Before we allow ourselves to be quite so radical as this, we should at all events examine Professor Gummere's theories as to the beginnings of poetry and as to the connection between communal composition and the ballad.¹

"Folk" is a large word. It suggests a whole nation, or at all events a huge concourse of people. Let us abandon it, then, for the moment, and think rather of a small tribal gathering, assembled, in very early times, or — what for the anthropologist amounts to the same thing — under very simple conditions of life, for the purpose of celebrating some occasion of common interest, — a successful hunt, or the return from a prosperous foray, or the repulse of a band of marauding strangers. The object of the meeting is known to all; the deeds which are to be sung, the dance which is to accompany and illustrate the singing, are likewise familiar to every one. There is no such diversity of intellectual interests as characterizes even the smallest company of civilized men. There is unity of feeling and a common stock, however slender, of ideas and traditions. The dancing and singing, in which all share, are so closely related as to be practically complementary parts of a single festal act. Here, now, we have the "folk" of our discussion, reduced, as it were, to its lowest terms, — a singing, dancing throng subjected as a unit to a mental and emotional stimulus which is not only favorable to the production of poetry, but is almost certain to result in such production. And this is no fancy picture. It is the soberest kind of science, — a mere brief chapter of descriptive anthropology, for which authorities might be cited without number.

Let us next consider the manner in which poetry (the word is of course used under pardon) is produced in such an assembly. Here again we can proceed upon just grounds of anthropological evidence. Different members of the throng, one after another, may chant each his verse, composed on the spur of the moment, and the sum of these various contributions makes a song. This is communal composition, though each verse, taken by itself, is the work of an individual. A song made in this way is no man's property and has no individual author. *The folk is its author.*

Communal composition, as just described, is a very simple matter and its products are infinitely crude. That, however, was to be expected. Nobody will hold that 'Robin Hood and the Monk' or 'King Estmere' is the direct result of communal composition. It is unlikely that even the simplest of our extant ballads were made in this fashion. We are not now concerned with the connection, if any there be, between the ballad and the composing folk. That question will come up presently. What is of importance at this stage of the discussion is to get clearly in mind not merely the theoretical possibility of communal composition on a small scale, but the actual fact of its occurrence. The danger of misapprehension comes from attaching too dignified a sense to the phrase or from conceiving the process which it designates as something systematic or elaborate. All that is required is a starting-place. It is necessary to know whether men in a low stage of advancement are familiar with this method of composing, and that point is satisfactorily established. Further, the persistence of the habit among civilized peoples in modern

¹ These are based on a profound and extensive acquaintance with the material, and are developed with great originality and acuteness. See *Old English Ballads* (Athensum Press Series), Boston, 1894 (Introduction); *The Ballad and Communal Poetry*, in the *Child Memorial Volume of Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, Boston, 1896; a series of three papers on *Primitive Poetry and the Ballad*, in *Modern Philology*, vol. I, Chicago, 1903-4; and especially, *The Beginnings of Poetry*, New York and London, 1901.

times is a matter of common knowledge. In the F  roe Islands, a few generations ago, it was common for a group to surround some fisherman who had been unlucky, or had otherwise laid himself open to ridicule, and to improvise a song about him, each contributing his verse or stanza. In the Russian cigarette factories, the girls who roll the cigarettes amuse themselves, while at work, by composing songs about each other in a similar way. One girl begins the song, another follows, and so on, till the result of this act of strictly communal composition is a piece of verse which, in some instances, is retained in the memory and achieves a more or less permanent local reputation. Everybody has heard children engaged in the communal composition of satirical rhymes.

Communal composition, then, is nothing unusual or paradoxical. Not only do we find it among simple peoples in a low state of civilization, but everybody can remember instances of it which have come under his own observation among his contemporaries or in which he has taken part himself. With us it has sunk to the position of a mere amusement, a children's game perhaps, just as the elaborate dances of our forefathers have survived only in such childish dancing games as "Here we go round the gooseberry bush."¹ The products of communal composition among us are trivial and ephemeral, and we fail to observe them, or, at all events, we seldom think of associating them with literature. We have come to associate "authorship" with something quite different from the singing and dancing throng. To us, as has already been said, an author is a solitary individual sitting in his study, pen in hand. When, therefore, we read of "communal authorship," the very idea seems strange and even preposterous. Yet as soon as we begin to consider, we perceive that we have always been familiar with the phenomenon in some form or other; only we have not associated it in our minds with "authorship" at all.

The origin of poetry, like the origin of language, lies too far back for us to find. The singing, dancing throng, with its few rude staves, primitive as it seems in comparison with the multifariousness of artistic literature, must still be very far from primitive in the literal sense. For our purpose, however, we need follow the trail no farther back than this throng. What came before it is, like the probably arboreal, no concern of ours in the present discussion. Our business is with the later history of poetry. Our task is to discern the connection between the authorship of the extant English and Scottish ballads and the conditions of communal composition as described by the anthropologists.

As we examine the most characteristic of these extant ballads with a view to any peculiarities of technique that may distinguish them from other poetry, we immediately note certain features which point straight back to the singing, dancing throng and to communal composition. These elements have been carefully studied by Mr Gummere, so that their significance is unmistakable. First comes the refrain, which, though its history is one of the obscurest chapters in literature and art, is manifestly a point of connection between the ballad and the throng. The refrain can never have been the invention of the solitary, brooding author of our modern conditions. It presupposes a crowd of singers and dancers. Accordingly, as ballads get farther and farther away from the people or from singing, they tend to lose their refrains; the recited ballad has no need of them. It is not meant that all the ballads in this collection were composed for singing; still less that all of them once possessed the refrain. Mr Child's three hundred and five numbers include, as we shall see in a moment, ballads of many kinds and illustrate

¹ For proof that games of this kind are descended from dances that were once popular in society see W. W. Newell, *The Games and Songs of American Children*.

every grade of popularity. What is meant is rather that there is abundant evidence for regarding the refrain in general as a characteristic feature of ballad poetry which gradually ceased to be essential. Some ballads, therefore, retain this feature; others occur both with and without the refrain; still others took shape at a time when its use was no longer obligatory. Exact dates in a matter of this sort are quite out of the question, and indeed would be destitute of significance if we could arrive at them, for periods in the history of literary forms are not like dynasties; one does not come to an end when the next begins. The refrain, wherever it occurs, whether in 'Robyn and Gandeleyne,' which was written down about 1450, or in 'The Bonny Birdy,' as sung by Mrs Brown about 1783, is a very ancient survival which brings the whole category of ballads into close relations with the singing, dancing throng.

Other elements which point in the same direction are commonplaces, or recurrent passages, varying from a line to several stanzas in length. These are to the ballad very much what idiomatic phrases are to language. Each of them must, at some time, have been the creation of an individual, but all of them have become common property. The balladist who utilizes, for example, the stock stanzas —

'Whare will I get a bonny boy,
Wad fain wun hos and shoon,
That wud rin on to my Wayets,
And quickly cume again?'

'Here am I, a bonny boy,
Wad fain wun hoes and shoon,
Wha wull run on to your Wayets,
And quickly cume again,'¹

is not inventing. We may go farther. He is not even quoting from an individual predecessor, any more than you and I are when, in the course of conversation, we say "That depends upon circumstances," or "without let or hindrance."² The testimony of commonplaces is, indeed, to some extent ambiguous. Their occurrence is consistent with several different theories of ballad authorship and ballad growth. Yet they warn us away from our modern prepossession for the solitary writer, and direct our thoughts toward less sophisticated and more communal conditions of authorship.

Simple repetition is so familiar a feature of the ballad style that it may be dismissed with a word. A message, for instance, is regularly delivered at full length and in precisely the terms in which it was entrusted to the messenger. A similar trait, to which Mr Gummere has given the apposite name of "incremental repetition," is even more noteworthy. It may be seen, for instance, in 'The Twa Sisters' (No. 10), 'The Cruel Brother' (No. 11), and many other ballads. Thus in stanzas 21-26 of 'The Cruel Brother' we have: —

'O what will you leave to your father dear?'
'The silver-shod steed that brought me here.'

'What will you leave to your mother dear?'
'My velvet pall and my silken gear.'

¹ No. 66 C (Child, II, 131).

² Examples of commonplaces are No. 82, st. 4, lines 1, 2; No. 39, A 8; No. 42, A 6, lines 1, 2; No. 47, A 2, lines 1, 2; No. 49, B 3; No. 63, A 2, lines 1, 2; No. 64, B 21, lines 1, 2. For a long list, see Child, v, 474, 475 (Index, s. v.).

'What will you leave to your sister Anne?'
'My silken scarf and my gowden fan.'

'What will you leave to your sister Grace?'
'My bloody cloaths to wash and dress.'

'What will you leave to your brother John?'
'The gallows-tree to hang him on.'

'What will you leave to your brother John's wife?'
'The wilderness to end her life.'

With these stanzas before us, incremental repetition defines itself: — each stanza repeats the substance of the preceding, but with some variation which advances the story. Here again, a composing throng is not necessary to explain the phenomenon, but, given the composing throng as an historical fact, we cannot fail to recognize this kind of repetition as a stylistic feature that suits the conditions admirably, and may probably have arisen in the communal period. Once established, such a feature would become what we find it — a bit of ballad technique.

It appears, then, that there is no lack of characteristic traits — besides the general air of impersonality — which justify the conjecture that the history of balladry, if we could follow it back in a straight line without interruptions, would lead us to very simple conditions of society, to the singing and dancing throng, to a period of communal composition. Demonstration, however, is not to be expected, since, from the very nature of the material, the evidence can never be even approximately complete in the case of any particular people. Fortunately, we are not confined to the boundaries of a single nation or language. What has perished in one country has often survived in another, and for the earlier stages of the process we can adduce the plentiful materials which travellers and anthropologists have collected, — materials which have the greater value for our purposes because they were gathered by men who had no thought of any theory of ballad authorship and were not concerned with the origin of poetry.

So far we have said nothing of the professional minstrel, to whom it was formerly the practice of scholars to ascribe the authorship of ballads. Undoubtedly the minstrel is a very ancient figure; we can trace him, in various guises, to remote antiquity. In England, for example, we can follow him back to a time earlier by many centuries than the oldest ballad text that has come down to us.¹ But, during the periods which we are able to study, we do not find that the minstrel stands in any such relation to the genuine and characteristic popular ballad as justifies us in imagining that he is to have the credit of originating or perpetuating that class of popular literature. Such ballads as have been recovered from oral tradition in recent times (and these, as we have seen, comprise the vast majority of our texts) have not, except now and then, been taken down from the recitation or the singing of minstrels, or of any order of men who can be regarded as the descendants or the representatives of minstrels. They have almost always been found in the possession of simple folk whose relation to them was in no sense professional. They were the property of the people, not of a limited class or guild of entertainers. A great number of them (among all nations) have been derived from women, — the most stationary part of the community and the farthest removed, by every instinct and habit, from the roving and irresponsible professionalism which characterizes the minstrel.

¹ This, it will be remembered, is 'Judas' (No. 23), which is preserved in a thirteenth-century manuscript.

Take an example. 'The Cruel Brother' (No. 11) was furnished to Professor Child by Miss Margaret Reburn in a version¹ current in Ireland about 1860. With this as a starting-point, let us see how far back we can trace the ballad as actually in oral circulation. In 1858 Aytoun remarks that "this is, perhaps, the most popular of all the Scottish ballads, being commonly sung and recited even at the present day." In 1846 Dixon notes that it is still popular among the peasantry in the west of England. In 1827 Kinloch recorded it in his manuscripts from the recitation of Mary Barr of Clydesdale. In 1800 Alexander Fraser Tytler obtained a copy from Mrs Brown of Falkland, to whose well-stored memory we owe some of the best versions of the Scottish ballads. In the last years of the eighteenth century Mrs Harris learned the piece, as a child, and she recited it to her daughter long afterward. In 1869 it was printed in Notes and Queries as "sung in Cheshire amongst the people" in the preceding century. In 1776 David Herd recorded it in his manuscript as he had heard it sung. Thus we have a succession of *testimonia* for 'The Cruel Brother' from 1860 back to 1776. Nowhere is there any contact with professional minstrelsy. So much for very modern times.

With 'Johnie Armstrong' (No. 169) the test may be applied for a century earlier. Goldsmith, who was born in 1728, recalls, in a famous passage in his *Essays* (1765), the effect which this ballad had upon him when a child: "The music of the finest singer is dissonance to what I felt when our old dairymaid sung me into tears with Johnny Armstrong's Last Good Night, or the Cruelty of Barbara Allen." In 1658 the ballad was in existence and was printed in Wit Restor'd under the title of 'A Northern Ballet,' and there is no more reason for supposing that it had been in the possession of the minstrel class between that date and Goldsmith's boyhood than for supposing that it was their property between Goldsmith's boyhood and the middle of the nineteenth century. It is superfluous to multiply examples. The reader can collect as many as he likes from Mr Child's volumes. The following proposition will hardly be controverted by any scholar who is familiar with the subject: It is capable of practically formal proof, that for the last two or three centuries the English and Scottish ballads have not, as a general thing, been sung and transmitted by professional minstrels or their representatives. There is no reason whatever for believing that the state of things between 1300 and 1600 was different, in this regard, from that between 1600 and 1900, — and there are many reasons for believing that it was not different.

One other piece of evidence, complementary to that which we have been discussing, makes the case against minstrel authorship almost superfluously convincing. We not only fail to find any special connection between the professional minstrel and the great mass of popular ballads, but we do find an intimate connection between the minstrels and works of an altogether different order. Ballads are one thing: the mediæval *Spielmannsdichtung* or minstrel poetry is another. The two categories are recognized as distinct by all literary historians. In fact, they are much more than distinct, — they are incommensurable. It is not conceivable that the same order of mind and the same habits of thought should have produced them both. The ballads, then, belong to the folk; they are not the work of a limited professional class, whether of high or of low degree.

Let us not misunderstand the situation. It is not maintained that the minstrels never meddled with ballads at all. It was their business to know all kinds of poetry so as to make themselves acceptable to all sorts and conditions of men. No doubt they had a share in carrying ballads from place to place and in transmitting them to posterity. There is direct proof of this. We owe our early copy of the 'Hunting of the Cheviot'

¹ Child's J, not printed in this volume.

(No. 162) to Richard Sheale, a humble member of the guild; but we know that he did not compose the ballad, for we have not only strong external evidence to the contrary but also four pieces of Sheale's own (not ballads) which settle the question forever. Of course the minstrels did sometimes compose in the popular strain. We have a few minstrel ballads, like 'The Boy and the Mantle' (No. 29) and 'Crow and Pie' (No. 111), which put this beyond a peradventure. Not all ballads are of the same origin, as we shall see presently. But the existence of such ballads is only additional proof that the bulk of our traditional material is not of minstrel authorship. The difference between 'The Boy and the Mantle' and the ballads that come straight from the folk is very striking. It is the difference between sophistication and artlessness.

It is time to gather up the threads of our discussion. We have examined the popular ballad from various points of view, and have weighed and measured a good many opinions about it. Let us apply our conclusions to the material that survives, and, so far as possible, let us see what is to be thought of the origin of the three hundred and five ballads that lie before us in Professor Child's collection.

The extant ballads of England and Scotland represent, in the main, the end of a process of which the beginning may not improbably be discovered in the period of communal composition. They were not themselves composed in this way, but were, in the first instance, the work of individual authors, at least in the great majority of cases. These authors, however, were not professional poets or minstrels, but members of the folk, and their function was in many respects different from that which we ascribe to an author to-day. Let us try to figure to ourselves a typical instance. In the first place, the ballad poet stands in a relation both to his material and to his audience that distinguishes his activity from that of the conscious literary artist. His subject is not his own, — it belongs to the folk. It is a popular tradition of immemorial antiquity, or a situation so simple and obvious as to be matter of general experience, or a recent occurrence which has been taken up by the mouth of common fame. He has no wish to treat the theme in a novel way, — no desire to utter his peculiar feelings about it or to impress it with his individuality. He is not, like the artistic poet among us, an exceptional figure with a message, either of substance or form. He takes no credit to himself, for he deserves none. What he does, many of his neighbors could do as well. Accordingly, he is impersonal and without self-consciousness. He utters what everybody feels, — he is a voice rather than a person. Further, his composition is not a solitary act. He improvises orally,¹ with his audience before him, — or rather, with his audience about him. There is the closest emotional contact between him and his hearers, — a contact which must have a distinct effect on the composer, so that the audience, even if they kept silence (as they can hardly be supposed to do), would still have a kind of share in his poetic act. Here is the strongest contrast to the situation of the modern literary artist, who, in the solitude of his sound-proof study, writes down his own thoughts and feelings, uncertain who will read them, or even if anybody will read them, — addressing himself to an audience *in posse*, who know neither his face nor his voice, nor even his handwriting. And the difference, it will be observed, consists in the function which the throng (the "folk") performs — by its mere presence, if nothing more — in the production (the "authorship") of ballad poetry.

¹ Improvisation in verse is a lost art among us, and we instinctively regard it as a very special mark of exceptional genius. But this is a serious misapprehension. It survives in full vigor among the folk in most countries, and is well known to be far less difficult, in itself, than the art of speaking extempore in well-turned prose sentences. The point needs no argument, for it is generally admitted.