

A Collection of Ballads

by Andrew Lang

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INTRODUCTION

When the learned first gave serious attention to popular ballads, from the time of Percy to that of Scott, they laboured under certain disabilities. The Comparative Method was scarcely understood, and was little practised. Editors were content to study the ballads of their own countryside, or, at most, of Great Britain. Teutonic and Northern parallels to our ballads were then adduced, as by Scott and Jamieson. It was later that the ballads of Europe, from the Faroes to Modern Greece, were compared with our own, with European MARCHEN, or children's tales, and with the popular songs, dances, and traditions of classical and savage peoples. The results of this more recent comparison may be briefly stated. Poetry begins, as Aristotle says, in improvisation. Every man is his own poet, and, in moments of strong emotion, expresses himself in song. A typical example is the Song

of Lamech in Genesis -"I have slain a man to my wounding,And a young man to my hurt."

Instances perpetually occur in the Sagas: Grettir, Egil,Skarphedin, are always singing. In KIDNAPPED, Mr. Stevenson introduces "The Song of the Sword of Alan," a fine example of Celtic practice: words and air are beaten out together, in the heat of victory. In the same way, the women sang improvised dirges, like Helen; lullabies, like the lullaby of Danae in Simonides, and flower songs, as in modern Italy. Every function of life, war, agriculture, the chase, had its appropriate magical and mimetic dance and song, as in Finland, among Red Indians, and among Australian blacks. "The deeds of men" were chanted by heroes, as by Achilles; stories were told in alternate verse and prose; girls,like Homr's Nausicaa, accompanied dance and ball play, priests and medicine-men accompanied rites and magical ceremonies by songs.

These practices are world-wide, and world-old. The thoroughly popular songs, thus evolved, became the rude material of a professional class of minstrels, when these arose, as in the heroic age of Greece. A minstrel might be attached to a Court, or a noble; or he might go wandering with song and harp among the people. In either case, this class of men developed more regular and ample measures. They evolved the hexameter; the LAISSE of the CHANSONS DE GESTE; the strange technicalities of Scandinavian poetry; the metres of Vedic hymns; the choral odes of Greece. The narrative popular chant became in their hands the Epic, or the mediaeval rhymed romance. The metre of improvised verse changed into the artistic lyric. These lyric forms were fixed, in many cases, by the art of writing. But poetry did not remain solely in professional and literary hands. The mediaeval minstrels and JONGLEURS (who may best be studied in Leon Gautier's Introduction to his EPOPEES FRANCAISES) sang in Court and Camp. The poorer, less regular brethren of the art, harped and

played conjuring tricks, in farm and grange, or at street corners. The foreign newer metres took the place of the old alliterative English verse. But unprofessional men and women did not cease to make and sing.

Some writers have decided, among them Mr. Courthope, that our traditional ballads are degraded popular survivals of literary poetry. The plots and situations of some ballads are, indeed, the same as those of some literary mediaeval romances. But these plots and situations, in Epic and Romance, are themselves the final literary form of MARCHEN, myths and inventions originally POPULAR, and still, in certain cases, extant in popular form among races which have not yet evolved, or borrowed, the ampler and more polished and complex GENRES of literature. Thus, when a literary romance and a ballad have the same theme, the ballad may be a popular degradation of the romance; or, it may be the original popular shape of it, still surviving in tradition. A well-known case in prose, is that of the French fairy tales.

Perrault, in 1697, borrowed these from tradition and gave them literary and courtly shape. But CENDRILLON or CHAPERON ROUGE in the mouth of a French peasant, is apt to be the old traditional version, uncontaminated by the refinements of Perrault, despite Perrault's immense success and circulation. Thus tradition preserves pre-literary forms, even though, on occasion, it may borrow from literature. Peasant poets have been authors of ballads, without being, for all that, professional minstrels. Many such poems survive in our ballad literature.

The material of the ballad may be either romantic or historical. The former class is based on one of the primeval invented situations, one of the elements of the MARCHEN in prose. Such tales or myths occur in the stories of savages, in the legends of peasants, are interwoven later with the plot in Epic or Romance, and may also inspire ballads. Popular superstitions, the witch, metamorphosis, the returning ghost, the fairy, all of

them survivals of the earliest thought, naturally play a great part. The Historical ballad, on the other hand, has a basis of resounding fact, murder, battle, or fire-raising, but the facts, being derived from popular rumour, are immediately corrupted and distorted, sometimes out of all knowledge. Good examples are the ballads on Darnley's murder and the youth of James VI.

In the romantic class, we may take TAMLANE. Here the idea of fairies stealing children is thoroughly popular; they also steal young men as lovers, and again, men may win fairy brides, by clinging to them through all transformations. A classical example is the seizure of Thetis by Peleus, and Child quotes a modern Cretan example. The dipping in milk and water, I may add, has precedent in ancient Egypt (in THE TWO BROTHERS), and in modern Senegambia. The fairy tax, tithe, or teind, paid to Hell, is illustrated by old trials for witchcraft, in Scotland. (1) Now, in literary forms and romance, as in OGIER LE DANOIS, persons are carried away by the

Fairy King or Queen. But here the literary romance borrows from popular superstition; the ballad has no need to borrow a familiar fact from literary romance. On the whole subject the curious may consult "The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns, and Fairies," by the Reverend Robert Kirk of Aberfoyle, himself, according to tradition, a victim of the fairies.

Thus, in TAMLANE, the whole DONNEE is popular. But the current version, that of Scott, is contaminated, as Scott knew, by incongruous modernisms Burns's version, from tradition, already localizes the events at Carterhaugh, the junction of Ettrick and Yarrow. But Burns's version does not make the Earl of Murray father of the hero, nor the Earl of March father of the heroine. Roxburgh is the hero's father in Burns's variant, which is more plausible, and the modern verses do not occur. This ballad apparently owes nothing to literary romance.

In MARY HAMILTON we have a notable instance of the Historical Ballad. No Marie of Mary Stuart's suffered death for child murder.

She had no Marie Hamilton, no Marie Carmichael among her four Maries, though a lady of the latter name was at her court. But early in the reign a Frenchwoman of the queen's was hanged, with her paramour, an apothecary, for slaying her infant. Knox mentions the fact, which is also recorded in letters from the English ambassador, uncited by Mr. Child. Knox adds that there were ballads against the Maries. Now, in March 1719, a Mary Hamilton, of Scots descent, a maid of honour of Catherine of Russia, was hanged for child murder (CHILD, vi. 383). It has therefore been supposed, first by Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe long ago, later by Professor Child, and then by Mr. Courthope, that our ballad is of 1719, or later, and deals with the Russian, not the Scotch, tragedy.

To this we may reply (1) that we have no example of such a throwing back of a contemporary event, in ballads. (2) There is a version (CHILD, viii. 507) in which Mary Hamilton's paramour is a "pottinger," or apothecary, as in the real old Scotch affair. (3) The number of variants of a ballad is likely to be proportionate to its antiquity and wide distribution. Now only SIR PATRICK SPENS has so many widely different variants as MARY HAMILTON. These could hardly have been evolved between 1719 and 1790, when Burns quotes the poem as an old ballad. (4) We have no example of a poem so much in the old ballad manner, for perhaps a hundred and fifty years before 1719. The style first degraded and then expired: compare ROB ROY and KILLIECRANKIE, in this collection, also the ballads of LOUDOUN HILL, THE BATTLE OF PHILIPHAUGH, and others much earlier than 1719. New styles of popular poetry on contemporary events as SHERRIFFMUIR and TRANENT BRAE had arisen. (5) The extreme historic inaccuracy of MARY HAMILTON is paralleled by that of all the ballads on real events. The

mention of the Pottinger is a trace of real history which has no parallel in the Russian affair, and there is no room, says Professor Child, for the supposition that it was voluntarily inserted by reciter or copyist, to tally with the narrative in Knox's History.

On the other side, we have the name of Mary Hamilton occurring in a tragic event of 1719, but then the name does not uniformly appear in the variants of the ballad. The lady is there spoken of generally as Mary Hamilton, but also as Mary Myle, Lady Maisry, as daughter of the Duke of York (Stuart), as Marie Mild, and so forth. Though she bids sailors carry the tale of her doom, she is not abroad, but in Edinburgh town. Nothing can be less probable than that a Scots popular ballad-maker in 1719, telling the tale of a yesterday's tragedy in Russia, should throw the time back by a hundred and fifty years, should change the scene to Scotland (the heart of the sorrow would be Mary's exile), and, above all, should compose a ballad in a style long obsolete. This is not the

method of the popular poet, and such imitations of the old ballad as HARDYKNUTE show that literary poets of 1719 had not knowledge or skill enough to mimic the antique manner with any success.

We may, therefore, even in face of Professor Child, regard MARY HAMILTON as an old example of popular perversion of history in ballad, not as "one of the very latest," and also "one of the very best" of Scottish popular ballads.

ROB ROY shows the same power of perversion. It was not Rob Roy but his sons, Robin Oig (who shot Maclaren at the plough-tail), and James Mohr (alternately the spy, the Jacobite, and the Hanoverian spy once more), who carried off the heiress of Edenbelly. Indeed a kind of added epilogue, in a different measure, proves that a poet was aware of the facts, and wished to correct his predecessor.

Such then are ballads, in relation to legend and history. They are, on the whole, with exceptions, absolutely popular in origin, composed by men of the people for the people, and then diffused among and altered by popular reciters. In England they soon won their way into printed stall copies, and were grievously handled and moralized by the hack editors.

No ballad has a stranger history than THE LOVING BALLAD OF LORD BATEMAN, illustrated by the pencils of Cruikshank and Thackeray. Their form is a ludicrous cockney perversion, but it retains the essence. Bateman, a captive of "this Turk," is beloved by the Turk's daughter (a staple incident of old French romance), and by her released. The lady after seven years rejoins Lord Bateman: he has just married a local bride, but "orders another marriage," and sends home his bride "in a coach and three." This incident is stereotyped in the ballads and occurs in an example in the Romaic.(2)

Now Lord Bateman is YOUNG BEKIE in the Scotch ballads, who becomes YOUNG BEICHAN, YOUNG BICHEM, and so forth, and has adventures identical with those of Lord Bateman, though the proud porter in the Scots version is scarcely so prominent and illustrious. As Motherwell saw, Bekie (Beichan, Buchan, Bateman) is really Becket, Gilbert Becket, father of Thomas of Canterbury. Every one has heard how HIS Saracen bride sought him in London. (Robert of Gloucester's LIFE AND MARTYRDOM OF THOMAS BECKET, Percy Society. See Child's Introduction, IV., i. 1861, and MOTHERWELL'S MINSTRELSY, p. xv., 1827.) The legend of the dissolved marriage is from the common stock of ballad lore, Motherwell found an example in the state of CANTEFABLE, alternate prose and verse, like AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE. Thus the cockney rhyme descends from the twelfth century.

Such are a few of the curiosities of the ballad. The examples selected are chiefly chosen for their romantic