

# BALLADS

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A GREAT deal of misconception, uttered by word of mouth and written in newspaper and periodical, exists at present on the subject of ballads. It seems to be taken for granted that, as the ballad was man's first manifestation of literature and, therefore, considered the literature of the simple and unlettered, it should be quietly annexed as a happy hunting ground for any literary prospector anxious to sustain a claim as literary critic. It is rather difficult to explain why this misconception has gained a footing except (a) on one hypothesis, more apparent than real, that the ballad is a simple form of literature—which, of course, it is not, seeing that it is a refined and polished form of the great epic, of which it is the most important branch—and (b) on the other hypothesis, more real than apparent, that commentators know no ballads except in their own language, and understand the mechanism of the ballad only from the English point of view. Now, sweeping as this assertion may seem, the ballad cannot be understood thoroughly by those who have no knowledge of comparative literature. The languages and literatures of Greece and Rome, supplemented by a working knowledge of Teutonic and Romance languages and literatures, are necessary *desiderata* in the correct estimate of the ballad, because it is in these literatures that the ballad has assumed its nearly perfect form.

But there is another reason for this misconception; viz, the historical one. Editors and selectors of ballad material have not always been fortunate in the selection and grouping of their material for their anthologies. Jeffrey, who was ever on the outlook for literary discrepancies, complained that Bishop Percy must have had his eyes hooded—to quote him literally—when he included, in his compilation of the “Reliques”, ballads that had not the slightest resemblance or claim to ballad structure or treatment; adding further, that some of the ballads in the “Reliques” were more lyrical and elegiacal than ballad. Now Bishop Percy was quite as good a critic as Jeffrey, but he had to labour under the disadvantage of not being able to get what he wanted for his compilation. His scope was limited in the first place, for he restricted his groupings to recitals of chivalry, war, the chase and love; what he could not glean from local records, he had to hunt up in

village, hill and dale; and his task in some cases was well nigh impossible. The predicament he found himself in was not unlike that of Sir James Murray in compiling his great Oxford Dictionary, when, with his collaborators Drs. Bradley, Craigie and Onions, he had to seek here and there among peasants, farm servants and miners for the primary and secondary meanings of words. Thus that misconception regarding the true function of the ballad may arise from various causes.

To obtain a clear definition of its essentials, it is necessary to hark back to the history of the civilization which gave rise to the need, the evolution and the fixed form of the ballad. There exists a time in the earlier history of every nation when the individuals composing it suffer from primitive wants. Civilization, as we know it, has not come to them. Their primitive brains, however, show much curiosity and intelligence. The enlightened persons of the community may have access to books and other accessories of culture, but amongst the majority there is little reading or writing. Not having these comforts, they long for some information about past times. They are delighted by narratives which present pictures to the eye of their mind. A few among them, cleverer than the rest, know a story and can put it into the form of a metrical romance. It sounds fascinating. It catches the imagination. It is valued less on account of the pleasure which it gives to the ear than on account of the help it gives to the memory. As a result of this, the poets or ballad-makers became a profession. Some were mediocre in their attainments, because in a rude form of society these attainments were largely the result of gift. So, many of their productions were worthless, because they did not measure up to the standard of popular estimate and appreciation. But the good remained, and being all oral at this stage were handed down from generation to generation by recital, losing much of their simple beauty in the process, but as soon as the poetasters and ballad-makers grew proficient in their art, were committed to writing. And so this is the genesis of the ballad—a species of literature, rude, unformed and simple in its infancy, but acquiring in its evolution a traditional stage and a fixed form, and exhibiting features common to all nations.

Some general features of the ballad are worthy of note. The ballad, being a division of the great epic, partakes somewhat of its characters. But it is a division which is refined and improved on. It must be short and simple by rapidity in the succession of incidents, and by leaving out many things merely suggested; hence it is less discursive than the epic tale. As a result, it is like the short

story, very difficult to create and sustain. When it reaches the zenith of its perfection, after having gone through a period of evolution, it is a piece of literary artistry that can be performed only by an expert. The ballad, whether ancient or modern, is essentially the same in all nations. For the need of its birth is constant; the manner of its evolution and growth towards improvement is similar; the slow movement when it arrives as a finished and perfect product is the same. The only difference to its kind which it manifests lies in the mentality of the people affected by it, for a new atmosphere is then created, as, for instance, the last flowering of mediaeval philosophy in England, which tintured the ballad so much as to give it the colour of the Dark Ages.

The analytical study of ballad form gives one the conviction that the ballad-makers were sentimentalists. Sentiment is the warp and woof of their stanza at a certain stage. Now sentiment is like love, passion or any violent emotion, largely, if not wholly, the product of the feelings, of what Dr. Bain calls the emotional side of our mind. When this emotional side is disciplined and held in restraint by the intellectual, the corrective influence is seen in a new aspect of the ballad. It assumes a masculinity of thought and feeling and literary execution, which resolves itself into the verse of doughty deeds, of the chase, chivalry, war and the tourney, instead of the tales of love, the trials in the lists for the sake of ladies' favours; and the literary style shows itself in such qualities as strength, force, energy, nerve, animation, sublimity, fervor, loftiness, brilliancy.

A great deal of curiosity has been aroused as to who were the ballad-makers. It is certain that they did not belong to the peasantry, as many have surmised from the slow simple forms of speech, with its frequent use of archaic and dialectic terms, known only to folk-lore. It has been observed that ballad-makers flourished in abundance before some sudden social upheaval—such as the Sack of Troy, the foundation of the City of Rome, the tribal revolutions among the earlier Teutonic races, the assertion of the Jutes, Angles and Saxons over the Danish invaders of their country, following the Roman conquest—; and all these are tolerable premises for the deduction that the educated nobles and gentry, fleeing their country to escape the vengeance arising from having taken part in unsuccessful factions, left manuscripts in the hands of the common people, who recited them orally at public fairs or in private communion. The Reformation in England is a striking example of this. A great number of educated Scots—George Buchanan among them—probably found it imprudent to write poetry for Reformers,

and their talent was thus diverted. Instead, they composed ballads which conveniently became hid for long spaces of time, but came to light again on the lips of the people. This is conjecture of course, but at least plausible; and it is safe to reason from analogy that a similar state of circumstances occurred in European countries where a social upheaval was on the point of taking place.

We have no accurate notion from tradition, legend, or even authentic literary history, when the ballad form became established, of how great literary artists these ballad-makers were. It is known, however, that their works were so mangled and twisted in the passage downwards from hand to hand and from generation to generation when they were still in the oral state, that they lost greatly in their general characters. That they did not finally disappear beyond recognition, is a matter for congratulation. There exist no authors' manuscripts of some of the most beautiful and haunting of ballads. Yet the student of literature is able at a glance to distinguish the traditional, transitional and corrected ballad from the original. One thing on which most critics agree is that, however beautiful and perfect in composition these ballads are, after having endured the rough handling of centuries, they are bound to have been much better when originally composed.

The history of the ballad in England and Scotland in early Saxon times is a trustworthy index to what was happening in mediaeval Europe. In every land there is some special part of its topography round which romance and illusion cluster. It is, to put the matter in a nutshell, worth singing about. The Forest of Ettrick, the enchanted ground of the "Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border", suggested everything of romance, legend and folk-lore that would establish song or story. This classic ground with its burns, its cleughs, its hopes and howes, its shaws and peel-towers, where intestine fray and foray, trans-Border raid and reiving, battle and bloodshed took place at intervals, was the ideal spot round which to weave ballad, legend, song and story, relating to feats of tragedy, chivalry, and derring-do. Back in Malcolm Canmore's time and that of his consort Queen Margaret, when the royal chase took place along its borders, tales were nightly told over the camp fires, which lost nothing in the telling, but became more circumstantial and vivid and were collected into a compilation or anthology by some makar or balladist, or were composed in like manner to the original or to the variants which generally were a feature of the original theme.

One of the most famous of all these ballads,—a ballad in form but elegiac in matter,—took its origin here and was named *The*

*Flowers of the Forest*, known far beyond the borders of the British Empire or America. The forest referred to was the Ettrick, and the original ballad is supposed to date from Flodden Field, although palaeographers cannot agree on this point or on its original author. But Jean Elliot, of Minto, and Alison Rutherford (Cockburn) wrote versions of it, and a contrast of one of their stanzas serves to reveal in striking characters the essential characters of ballad form.

Miss Rutherford's version of four verses, arranged in six lines to the verse, was as follows:—

I've seen the smiling,  
Of fortune beguiling,  
I've felt all its favours, and found its decay,  
Sweet was its blessing,  
Kind its caressing;  
But now 'tis fled—fled far away.

Miss Elliot's version consisted of six four-line verses, and was as follows:—

I've heard them liltin' at our yowe-milking,  
Lasses a'liltin' a'fore the dawn o' day;  
But noo, they're a'moaning on ilka green loaning,  
The Flowers o' the Forest are a' wede away.

It is not difficult to note the difference here. The former version is general and abstract. "The smiling and beguiling of fortune with its favours and decay" is an abstract and general condition of feeling and emotion, and the ballad effect is lost. But turn to the latter version, and one's mind's eye immediately catches the vivid, simple, concrete picture "the lasses liltin' at the yowe-milking" in the early dawn, and the picturesque contrast of the loanings or lanes filled with the sound of moaning after Flodden Field. Anyone can catch the spirit of the ballad after that; it must be simple, concrete, suggestive, passing over many things it can only briefly touch. And so at the time this was happening among the Gaelic-Saxons of the Borders and among the descendants of the Jutes, the Angles and Saxons of Northumbria and Northern England, the mediaeval-Teutonic ballad with its slow guttural speech was permeating the Nordic races, and the Romance languages, the descendants of the Latin, were full of song and story.

A wonderful feature of the ballads is the existence of the variants. Similar to the species of variant, caused in Greek and Roman literatures before the advent of printing by faulty copying of the exemplar or original manuscript by careless scribes, they give

rise to heart burnings and controversies in literary criticism. But these variants are not difficult to detect, because nearly always the original theme is preserved; the measure, too, is the same; and the characters are usually identical. The type of variant to which we refer is different. A classic example is the John Peel hunting song. A friend of John Peel, Graves by name, was wont to meet Peel nightly over the fire in his Cumberland home during the hunting season, to arrange the particulars of the following day's hunt. During the evening's conversation, the pair listened to a crooning song, a dialectal Cumberland ballad, sung by the mother of Graves to her grandchild. Graves, in a sudden inspiration, perceived the melody to be an admirable setting for recording the prowess of Peel in the hunt, and immediately wrote the stirring words "John Peel", adding, 'You will be sung, John, when you and I are run to earth' The song was sung by the hunting men of Cumberland, and soon went far beyond the lands where the English language was spoken, and was afterwards translated into several foreign languages. Here is an example of how certain variants occurred and, when popular, diffused themselves through the length and breadth of the land.

But these are not the true literary variants. They are more correctly termed transitional, for they represent the passage from one division of literary expression to another. Most of the forms these latterly assume are lyrical, sometimes elegiac and dramatic; but all losing the original character of the epic-ballad, with its golden, simple speech of one or two syllables, its simple homely quaint terms of dialect, and its still more simple images of beauty of thought and feeling. And they do not occur in one literature only. The haunting, weird lyric of the *Lorelei*, so well translated from the mediaeval German by the Rev. A. Trotter, was once a written ballad on the banks of the Rhine, which had a previous existence as a recited fragment of a lay of the Nibelungs. The finished products of Goethe's *Bride of Corinth* and Schiller's *Diver*, though meant to be ballad, are essentially lyric in composition, and are true examples of this variant or transitional spirit; for in the process of clothing them in other dress, their composers also got away from the original theme. Sir Walter Scott's precious relics of the Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border showed his genius in selection and arrangement, and preserved to us some of the most perfect ballads that were ever penned; but when he attempted the rôle of composer, as in his *Tales of Terror* and ballad and lyric pieces, he demonstrated that he could not do anything to equal the old ballad-makers he sought there to imitate.



The exploits of Athelstan treated by Anglo-Saxon balladists and of Canute by Danish, and the deeds of Cuthullin and Fingal in the old chants of the dwellers in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, also are examples of this variant spirit in literature, emerging at intervals in another form more suited perhaps to civilization, increasing knowledge and literary criticism, but losing the beauty, simplicity and finesse of the original ballad,—qualities no imitator has ever been able to approach. It would seem, with the advance of culture and with the study and practice given to the fixed forms of the lyric, dramatic and epic poetry, the simple beauty and stately majesty of the old ballad has to a large extent disappeared, only to appear now and again with the advent of a Scott, a Kipling, or, greater than either, a Housman.

The stately metrical character of ballad poetry shows how native simplicity may sometimes triumph over scientific art. A great many critics have expressed themselves in terms of wonder at the resonant and mellifluous cadences of ballad verse. The reason of this is not far to seek. By the simple expedient of trial and error, the old and original balladists became past-masters in the use of words of one or two syllables, which created simple images to the mind; and when they improved in their art, they also became skilful in the use of dissyllabic and trisyllabic measures. In Greek and Latin, the general rhythm of the language and the recurrence of emphasis at definite intervals, which we know as metre, were to a great extent determined by the length of the syllables. The very reverse is the case in respect of German and French, for here the accent in pronunciation is the feature. But in French, Spanish and Italian, the rule is to take after the metre and rhythm of the parent Latin: hence ballad metre and use of syllable accent differ in the ballad literatures of different countries. But the general features remain the same. For example, heroic verse is the vehicle almost wholly in use in ballad literature, as it was in its parent division of epic. Heroic verse is like the pentameter and hexameter measures of the Greek and Latin ballad. Where the sentiment is more sprightly, as in the Latin and all its derivatives, it is varied by heroic quatrains in stanzas, rhyming by couplets or alternately: but what is more common is the standard ballad metre of seven iambic measures rhyming in couplets. This metre was used later as the service metre for psalms and hymns.

But, as has been previously said, the ballad cannot be understood except in the possession of knowledge of the ancient and modern tongues and literatures. This is strikingly seen in the history of the ballad. The highest degree of excellence in ballad-

making was, according to the best observers, seen in ancient Greece. The great Homeric poems are generically ballads, and though widely distinguished from all other ballads and, indeed, from all other human compositions, are ballads in the ripest perfection of transcendent sublimity and beauty. W. E. Gladstone spoke with great enthusiasm of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as the artistic productions of one man. Gladstone was a great littérateur and accomplished classical scholar, but he had no knowledge of philology. He did not see that the language and the dialect were constantly changing throughout the context. When F. A. Wolf propounded the theory that the poems were handed down orally and had undergone many changes in consequence, and that later revisers would preserve the unity of the epics working on more or less detached poems of various authors, most philologists and literary men accepted his view. Sir W. D. Geddes, in 1879, published his "Problems of the Homeric Poems", advocating the view that the episodes were ballads cunningly written by imitators, and that the Wrath of Achilles and the Return of Odysseus were written by an author of artistic genius. This is an example of how valuable in proof and evidence is the acquaintance with language and literature, ancient and modern, in estimating a ballad.

But we go further. The beautiful and perfectly formed ballads of the Latins must have been the pride and joy of the ballad-makers. Yet, alas, they perished completely, and faded from record and ken. One consolation remaining is that we know exactly what their form was; to a certain extent we know what they treated of, and we know more certainly their archaic forms of speech and the metre that was used in their making. Ennius was regarded as the first Latin poet in the Augustan Age, and was called the father of Latin poetry. But he was really a later poet, for he was the lineal descendant of a race of ballad-makers who, at the banquets over their silver goblets, sang to the strains of pipe and flute the deeds of the great Roman captains, doughty in prowess and war. And they sang, too, of the ancient legends touching the origin of the city, which remained traditional and legendary instead of, if the ballads had been preserved, becoming historical. Ennius speaks of the verses, the fauns and bards in a regretful way, and Cicero in his *Brutus* mourns over the loss of the old verses. Quintus Fabius Pictor, a contemporary of Ennius, and the earliest of Roman annalists, constantly speaks of the old Latin poetry as essentially ballad and admires its perfection, its noble grace, and simplicity. Scaliger, the Italian commentator of Varro's *De Lingua Latina*, spoke of the fauns who created and recited the ballads as a class



equal with and comparable to our bards in Gaul and northern England and the Magians in Persia.

The legacies which the civilizations of Greece and Rome left to their successors in Europe in the matter of ballads were examples of ballad form that come in for a good deal of criticism. But long before that criticism became established, the ballad poetry was still holding its own against all the other forms of poetry and divisions of the epic, lyric and dramatic. And this was not to be wondered at. For the Roman civilization left its influence most markedly in certain places in modern Europe, but in none more so than in the eastern provinces of France, and the Italian territories lying adjacent to the Ligurian Gulf, where the fluent rhythmic dialect of the OC and the soft sounding Tuscan so marvellously fitted themselves as meet vehicles for the expression of the ballad lay, the love cantos, the songs of the chase and the tribal warfare. But among the Teutonic peoples, too, this ballad legacy was treated by its beneficiaries with due respect, and their deep guttural mediaeval language formed the literary expression of many a love lay. For the German was the parent of all the Nordic languages, the low Dutch and the Saxon; and these were all rich in oral tradition and legend, only waiting for the opportunity to convert them into metrical romances through the agency of the troubadour and the balladist.

When, however, that genius Sir Walter Scott gave to the literary world his "Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border"—an exhibition of selection and editorial excellence probably never before witnessed in any language except in the criticisms of the Greek Longinus or the Latin rhetorician Quintilian—the Teutonic mind began to stir; and it is not wonderful that the first logical analysis enquiring into the origin, the evolution and the fixed form of the ballad, should come from Germany. A. W. Schlegel's essay on Burger (1800) may be said to have opened the ballad criticism ball. Schegel's contention was "that the ballad was written not for the people but by the people." He was followed by the brothers Grimm in *Altdeutsche Wälder* (1813), sustaining the argument that the ballads had endured long as people's efforts and that editors were only helps towards their study and comprehension. Then followed an international controversy resembling very much the interest taken in the literary controversies begun by Lord Macaulay over the authorship of the *Letters of Junius*, or by Dr. Johnson's attack on Macpherson's *Ossian*, or to come down to more modern times, by the controversy on the relation of William Sharp to Fionna Macleod.

Professor Child's collection gave rise to the attack on the literary origin of ballads. He said, "Though a man and not a people composed these ballads, the fact that the author counts for nothing requires explanation and interpretation." A general agreement of opinion was, however, established, that the composition of the ballad contained evidence of a co-operative folk-intelligence expressing itself in dance and song; and Andrew Lang, who with his fellow-Scot Sir James Fraser was engaged at the time of this literary warfare in the study of primitive anthropology, connected the ballad with "the outpouring of savage and illiterate folk-lore." Thus opinions swayed for and against the various contentions, but the thread in the warp and woof controversy remained the same, viz; the communal against individual authorship.

The limits of this article forbid an extensive incursion into this criticism. We content ourselves with saying that perhaps there has been no division of literary endeavour that has given more pleasure, enthusiasm and instruction to the unlettered many, as well as to the cultivated few.