

## The English Ballad

### Introduction:

Strictly speaking, the ballad has no place in a history of English literature. To treat of it as one of the literary forms-such as the epic, the ode, or the sonnet-is quite erroneous. The true ballad is "lore" rather than what is known as "literature".

It had its origin and growth at a time before literature, or even the .alphabet, came to be written and read. To find the ballad by the side of such literary genres as the epic and the sonnet is as disturbing as finding the pre-historic ichthvosaur ifi the company of other animals in a modern zoo. The ichthyosaur has had its y, and so has the ballad. The ballad dies when literature comes, just as the ichthyosaur was extinct before the more highly developed forms of life came to their own. The ballad flourishes as long as the means of communication are wholly oral. The arrival of the alphabet and literature, written literature, is a herald of the death of the ballad-as of the rest of folk literature whose dissemination and preservation depend entirely on oral means. But what about the ballads "written" by the poets such as Rossetti, Coleridge, and Scott? These ballads may be'caHed literary ballads but they are not ballads proper, because they do not have folk origin, which is synonymous with a peculiar kind of anonymity.

### Origin:

We have emphasized above the folk origin of the true ballad. But when that is said, still there is need for clarification. In fact the origin of the true ballad is shrouded in a nebula, and is more a matter of conjecture than of scientific demonstration. If we examine the etymology of the word "ballad", we may be helped a little in the job of ascertaining the origin of the ballad. Let us see how. The word "ballad" is derived from the word "bailer," which means "to dance." What is exactly the connexion between the ancient ballad and dancing? This question takes us further backwards, to the wider consideration of the origin of all folk literature.

One can easily recognize the universal human instinct for accompanying all regular bodily movements with vocal expressions. This instinct is more clearly marked when regular bodily movements are being made by a group of people, but is to be seen even when a lonely individual is involved. Thus a man singing in a bathroom, even as he is performing the job of cleaning his body with more or less regular movements, can be easily imagined. A group of men heaving at a log or reaping the harvest or of women weaving together break almost invariably and involuntarily into ejaculations with or without meaning. Dancing, as will be readily granted, involves more regular bodily movements than anything else. Group-dancing practised by ancient communities to celebrate this or that festival then must have come to be accompanied by vocal ejaculations, which later must have assumed a more coherent shape. This is how folk literature and the ballad must have originated. Thus the connexion between dancing and the ballad has to be considered in this perspectives.

### Authorship:

So the ballad must be taken as a later, and more sophisticated, form of the primitive communal song sung to the accompaniment of ritual dancing in celebration of some occasions. But one important point-which has been controversial-needs elucidation still : the one concerning the authorship of the old ballads. The question is : are these ballads the product of collective effort or that of some particular individuals? It is even today a moot point. But there is another point-and one allied to this one-about which there is no

controversy: that the ballad, as it has some sophistication about it which is not shared by the communal song, requires for its conception and writing a kind of artistry, individual or communal. What strikes one about an ancient ballad so abundantly is its downright "impersonality" or "anonymity." Not that the authorship of these ballads, which have survived the mutations of taste for numerous centuries is indeterminable rather (it is so said by a school of critics) they did not have individual writers as their authors. The whole of the community is credited by these critics with the authorship of these ballads. They contend that a ballad, unlike a literary composition, is not written down by a writer once and for all; rather, on account of being transmitted down the generations by wholly oral means, it is modified by every new generation in accordance with its own predilections. Thus the latest version of a ballad, even though highly different from its original one, is to be considered as authentic as the original. Jeanroy, Abercrombie, and Child, for example, favour this view which emphasizes the impersonality of the ballad, ascribing to it communal rather than individual authorship.

But this view, quite sound fundamentally, yet errs to an extreme and has now been wholly discarded. Legouis points out: "It has even been supposed that a ballad is the spontaneous and joint composition of a group of people. Reflection shows, however, that this theory has little plausibility. There could be agreement for the purposes of poetry among a number of people only in the sharing of a passion, and the work of an artist or several successive artists has to be recognized in a ballad of any length. It was artist, however primitive, who interpreted the multitude." We may agree with F. J. Child that so far as a ballad is concerned, "the author counts for nothing" but we cannot say that a ballad has no definite author or authors. A ballad is impersonal in one sense only, namely, that the personality of its author or authors is of little importance in understanding and interpreting it. It expresses the personality not of an individual but of a community. The author never uses personal pronouns nor does he reveal his personality by comments on the action or characters. Still he does count for something.

Stylistic and Other Conventions:

A ballad is always a narrative which is told in a particular way in accordance with some conventions. As a narrative it generally confines itself to a single episode. In this respect it is easily distinguished from an epic which covers a plethora of episodes spread over a number of years. A ballad, though narrative, is often dramatic in effect, for it has that condensation which is peculiar to drama, and not the sprawling diffuseness of the epic, whose material would, as Aristotle says, suffice for a number of tragedies. The ballad, to quote a critic, "sought to impress by the vivid representation of a single event. To bring home to the hearer its wonder, its pathos, its fatefulness or its horror." As it was oral literature (something to be sung and heard rather than written and read) it depended for its emotional effect upon music. The refrain sung by the chorus was its peculiar feature. The singer after having sung a few lines was followed by the chorus singing the refrain. The refrain is of more frequent occurrence in the Continental ballads than the English, because the latter were generally of the chronicle type in which the narrative did not allow too frequent interruptions.

Apart from the regular refrain, frequent repetitions are also a common feature of the ancient ballad. Such repetitions, dexterously handled, make for a peculiar intensification of emotional effect rather than simple embellishment of style. Note the use of repetition in the following lines from Clerk Saunders:

"Is there any room at your head, Saunders?  
Is there any room at your feet?  
Or any room at your side, Saunders,  
Where fain I would sleep? "

"There's no room at my head,  
Marg'ret. There's no room at my feet;  
My bed it is full lovely now,  
Among the hungry worms I sleep. "

The pathos of these lines does not need any comment.

The style of the ancient ballads is altogether down-to-earth, absolutely free from literary ornament, attitudinization, or empty bowwow. Its very simplicity and directness are its intrinsic strength. Even such a sophisticated man of letters of Renaissance England as Sir Philip Sidney was compelled to pay a special tribute to the rude strength and simple directness of old English ballads. Writing in his Apology for Poetry about the ballad of Chevy Chase he confided that his heart was moved by it "more than with a trumpet." And Joseph Addison, the sophisticated "Mr Spectator" writing in the Augustan age, was also full of admiration for the same qualities of this ballad.

As regards metre and versification also, the ballad has the qualities of simplicity and directness. A ballad follows one of the several traditional stanzaic patterns. The more usual ballad stanza consists of four lines, of eight and six syllables alternately. The second and the fourth lines generally rhyme, and the lines usually follow the iambic movement, but variations are not infrequent

Themes:

Themes of most ballads are provided by the more usual human passions in their intense and unsophisticated form—such as love, lust, hate, and jealousy. As most ancient ballads are the product of a basically pagan, even though nominally Christian culture, very few of them (such as Dives and Lazarus) have religious or biblical themes. One-third of them are about love. Quite a few of them are frankly about the supernatural—such as evil spirits, mermaids, ghouls, and even the Devil himself. Thus in The Demon Lover we have the account of a beautiful woman betrayed by an evil spirit who comes to her in the shape of a handsome man. Some of the ballads indulging in the supernatural keep things shrouded in mystery but still strike the reader with a sense of wonder. Thus in James Harris we meet a woman who in the absence of her husband for seven years marries a carpenter but is lured by an evil spirit who appears to her in the guise of her (presumably) dead husband:

And so together away they went  
From off the English shore.

Where they went and with what consequences, and even why, are questions left completely unanswered.

Love and strong but baser human passions provide the usual themes for most ballads. The proverbial jealousy of the stepmother, the cruelty of brothers—usually seven in number—of the woman who desires the love of a man against their wishes, the treachery of a confidant, etc. are to be met with quite often in the old ballads. In Clerk Saunders the lover is killed while asleep by the side of the heroine by her seven brothers. She finds him murdered only when she gets up next morning. In Young Hunting the strong-minded heroine kills her lover after becoming convinced of his infidelity, but he comes in

the form of a bird to reveal the murder. In The Cruel Sister we have a sister who kills another out of sheer rivalry. Babylon is the story of an outlaw who tries to make love to two sisters and kills them both on being rejected. He learns that they are his own sisters and then kills himself. A number of ballads called the "Border Ballads" deal with the English-Scottish skirmishes on the border between England and Scotland, bringing out the bravery of the heroes on both sides.

Another group of ballads-some thirty in number-called "Robin Hood Ballads" deals with the exploits of the kind and generous outlaw named Robin Hood and his followers who believed in a kind of socialism. Robin Hood is presented as a friend of the poor and an enemy of the rich whom he robs for the sake of the former. He is a patriot but does not scruple to live on the king's deer. He rescues women being married to the grooms they hate, to restore them to their sweethearts. He corrects the wrongs of justice by hanging the Sheriff and rescuing the men wrongly condemned. And so on.