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2
Style of the ballads

> I shall omit everything that is not strictly a Popular Ballad.
> (Francis James Child, letter of 4 January 1875 to Sven Grundtvig)

Sir Walter Scott, a professional poet who made a fortune out of narrative verse before applying his talents to the historical novel, was extremely critical of what he took to be a lack of artistic integrity on the part of the ballad makers. In his 'Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry' appended to the 1830 edition of his *Minstrelsy* he positively simmered with moral indignation:

> The least acquaintance with the subject will recall a great number of commonplace verses, which each ballad-maker has unceremoniously appropriated to himself, thereby greatly facilitating his own task, and at the same time degrading his art by his slovenly use of over-scutched phrases.

If the ballad-makers had been, like Scott, professional poets aiming at the immortality of print, then this criticism would be apposite. In ballad after ballad the same narrative method is sustained and the similarity goes right down to details like the obligatory epithets in 'milk-white steed', 'blood-red wine', 'wan water'.

Because he thought, with Percy, that the popular ballads had been composed by professional minstrels, Scott felt justified in his charge of unashamed plagiarism. Yet the ballad style

is the result not of a literary progression of innovators and their acolytes but of the evolution of a form that could be mentally absorbed by practitioners of an oral idiom made for the memory. To survive, the ballad had to have a repertoire of mnemonic devices. Ballad singers knew not one but a whole host of ballads (Mrs Brown of Falkland knew thirty-three separate ballads). So the similarity of the ballads is the result of a successful tradition, not of literary theft as Scott implied.

Obviously the basic structure had to be sound. The metre of the ballads ensures this. The pattern widely known as the ballad stanza is an abcb quatrain in which four-stress and three-stress lines alternate thus (79A):

> There lived a wife at Usher's Well,
> And a wealthy wife was she;
> She had three stout and stalwart sons,
> And sent them oer the sea.

This pattern is used in 179 of Child's 305 ballads and has become synonymous with balladry. According to Gerould, who has closely examined the Grieg and Sharp collections of tunes, this is not a quatrain but 'quite certainly a couplet with seven stresses to the line' (*The Ballad of Tradition*, p. 125). Though the melodic cadence bears this out, it is immaterial: the ballad stanza is an accepted typographical convention and is here to stay. The next most common metric entity in balladry is the four-stress line which is used in 111 Child ballads. Child's earliest ballad examples use four-stress couplets, for example 'Riddles Wisely Expounded' (1A):

> The youngest daughter that same night,
> She went to bed to this young knight.

Most of the four-stress lines are arranged in abcb quatrains.

Child's criterion was that to be popular a ballad had to be orally composed: in his headnote to 'The Laily Worm and the Machrel of the Sea' (36) he said 'it is pure tradition, and has

never been retouched by a pen'. He was, though, obliged to rely on broadside texts for many of his ballads and rationalized this by claiming these were decadent versions of once genuinely popular ballads. As Child made his collection from extant collections, broadsides and, to a lesser extent, manuscripts — rather than from actual singers — it is difficult to estimate the role of the refrain in the ballads, though around half of them carry refrains. These must have been a musical part and parcel of the idiom. 'The Cruel Mother' (20B) has an internal refrain —

> She sat down below a thorn,
>   Fine flowers in the valley
> And there she has her sweet babe born.
>   And the green leaves they grow rarely.

— which adds nothing to the narrative but matches the melody. 'The Elfin Knight' (2A) has both an internal refrain and an external burden which is longer than the narrative stanza, and Child notes that 'this kind of burden seems to have been common enough with old songs and carols'. Poetically the refrains are decorative; musically they are absolutely essential.

The rhymes of the ballads are as predictable as we would expect from an oral phenomenon that depends on memorability. Some are used as a matter of course: in the pining-away ballads of true love one lover fades away and the survivor dies for sorrow on the morrow as in 'Fair Margaret and Sweet William' (74B):

> Lady Margaret died on the over night,
>   Sweet William died on the morrow;
> Lady Margaret died for pure, pure love,
>   Sweet William died for sorrow.

Often the rhymes are technically imperfect — 'Lord Ingram and Chiel Wyet' (66A) has *bower/honour, warm/bairn, man/land* — but in musical performance these are resolved by the emphatic cadences which function with the finality of rhyme.

Music had an important formative influence on the ballads, though not all ballads were sung. The most popular ballads acquired a large number of musical variants: Bronson has, for example, sixty-eight different tunes for 'The Maid Freed from the Gallows' (95). Whether the music determined the genesis of the ballad or whether music was subsequently added as a natural refinement and memorable development of the narrative style is one of those almost unanswerable questions that appear endlessly in the pages of ballad criticism. I am inclined to believe that, as the priority of the ballad is the story, the music had a secondary, mnemonic role. Generations of readers, after all, have been content with the words alone, and the same could not be said of the music. As far as the ballads go we might say that in the beginning was the word as an indispensable step to building a story. Cecil Sharp thought the words took precedence in the evolution of the ballad:

> The pattern of the folk tune has, throughout its evolution been dominated by the words with which at first it was probably always associated. . . . The unit of musical form is . . . the proportioned melody; and that most certainly took shape under the controlling influence of the metrical structure of the words to which it was united.
>
> *(English Folk Song,* p. 92)

Bronson, who has succeeded Sharp as the supreme authority on ballad music, feels that, on the contrary, 'It is the music which has dictated and controlled the stanzaic habit of ballads. . . . The music, again, has governed the strategy of the dialogue in ballads.' (*The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads,* Vol. I, pp. ix-x.) That two great scholars could differ on such a fundamental issue reveals the problematic nature of ballad studies.

Unlike the chromatic scale employed by the composers of art music, folk music used seven diatonic modes. By playing

only the white, or natural, notes of the piano the seven modes can be heard thus: *Dorian* (D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D), *Phrygian* (E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E), *Lydian* (F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F), *Mixolydian* (G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G), *Aeolian* (A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A: the natural minor), *Locrian* (B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B), *Ionian* (C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C: the natural major). To hear the distinctive intervals of the modes even more clearly, they can all be referred to the same tonic, thus: *Dorian* (C-D-E*b*-F-G-A-B*b*-C), *Phrygian* (C-D*b*-E*b*-F-G-A*b*-B*b*-C), *Lydian* (C-D-E-F#-G-A-B-C), *Mixolydian* (C-D-E-F-G-A-B*b*-C), *Aeolian* (C-D-E*b*-F-G-A*b*-B*b*-C), *Locrian* (C-D*b*-E*b*-F-G*b*-A*b*-B*b*-C), *Ionian* (C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C). Although the modes are potentially heptatonic (seven-noted), the singers of ballads were drawn to pentatonic (five-noted) and hexatonic (six-noted) melodies.

To the musically illiterate the musicological exposition of modality can sound forbidding; the tunes themselves, thankfully, do not. The listener experiences the strophic melody in waves that alter subtly with each step of the narrative as the singer exercises a re-creative prerogative. Ballad music was monodic, as the basic story had to unfold without extraneous and distracting accompaniment. Something of the original quality of the ballads can be heard in the many recordings made by great modern ballad singers such as Ewan MacColl or Jeanie Robertson. The stark melancholy of the great popular ballads imposes itself on the listener as the solo voice gives a quintessentially human presence to the performance. Ballads, in this sense, represent the art of storytelling raised to a musical pitch.

It is an extraordinary art of storytelling. It is intensely dramatic, involving an explosive situation, highly volatile characters and a short time-span. Given the situation in almost any ballad, something is *bound* to happen. When the lord leaves his castle in 'Lamkin' (93) we know he is asking for trouble; when Lady Barnard summons Little Musgrave to her bed (81) a tragic conclusion is certain; when the lady responds to the

gypsies at her door in 'The Gypsy Laddie' (200) she is courting trouble. Like classical tragedy the ballads have an inevitability which reflects the folk belief that fate shapes human life so that people are lured into the fatally attractive traps. Like classical tragedy too the fact that the audience are likely to have heard the story before makes little difference; the tale can stand repeated tellings and the ballad style is responsible for this. It is satisfying to the ear and its regular beat reassures the heart.

It has been well established that the popular ballads were created, in the first place, by unlettered folk who evolved an oral idiom appropriate to the stories they wanted to preserve. Whether they also created the stories is irrelevant: nobody thinks any the less of Shakespeare because he lifted his plots from other sources. The impersonality of the ballads precludes a definite point of view; the frequent parade of great wealth in the stories probably gave some folk as much vicarious pleasure as it gave others a cause for envy. Yet there are examples of class consciousness in the ballads where our sympathy is engaged on the side of little people who are seen to suffer. In 'Glasgerion' (67) and 'Lady Diamond' (269) the tragedy results from the fact that a lady has slept with a social inferior, and, in 'Lady Diamond' (269) at least, some emotional purchase is obtained from the injustice of taking human life for that. 'Lamkin' (93) too has class implications, though the hideous aspects of the stonemason's character leave us in no doubt that whatever else the ballads are they are not glorifications of one class at the expense of another.

In the popular ballads we discern an overall style, an idiom that testifies to the enormous creative potential of the folk. Many of the difficulties socially privileged critics have imposed on the ballads derive from their reluctance to credit the so-called lower classes with creative genius. Yet they have always possessed it, and it has produced phenomena like the autodidact Robert Burns, like the astonishingly inventive black jazz musicians of America to whom improvization seems like sec-

ond nature, like the best of the British pop musicians of the 1960s. The great ballads were made by unsung singers, anonymous amateurs — though we should remember, as A. L. Lloyd puts it, that 'The famous anonymity of folk-song is, in the main, an economic and social accident'. *(Folk Song in England,* p. 24).

It is the popular style that we are concerned with here. The broadside will be examined in another chapter and the minstrel ballad is really the popular ballad writ vulgar. Lacking the intrinsic stylistic dignity of popular balladry, the minstrels relied on professional tricks and ear-catching patter; the opening of 'Robin Hood and Allen a Dale' (138) is fairly typical:

> Come listen to me, you gallants so free,
> All you that loves mirth for to hear,
> And I will you tell of a bold outlaw,
> That lived in Nottinghamshire.

In passing it should be said that one modern critic has given a much higher status than is usual to the minstrels. Fowler believes that the Robin Hood ballads were the most popular, most enduring creation of the minstrelsy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and, moreover, that these ballads created a stylistic precedent for the creation of new popular ballads in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They showed the way for the popular music. Fowler is convinced that 'without the impetus of the Robin Hood repertoire the popular ballad would never have come into being'. *(A Literary History of the Popular Ballad,* p. 65).

'Judas' (23), the earliest English ballad preserved in writing, has often had doubts cast on its ballad pedigree, but it displays the features of the real thing. There is no lengthy exposition; instead we are plunged *in medias res.* It is swift and to the point, it admits no irrelevant details, and it relies on dialogue:

> Hit wes upon a Scere-thorsday that ure loverd aros;
> Ful milde were the wordes he spec to Judas.

> 'Judas, thou most to Jerusalem, oure mete for to bugge;
> Thritt platen of selver thou bere up othi rugge.'

Ballad stories tend to be autonomous — that is, they contain in themselves the information they explore. They do not seek historical or, in this case, biblical accuracy. Here Judas, having been given the thirty pieces of silver to buy food in Jerusalem, is lulled to sleep by his sister. He wakes to find the silver gone and when Pilate approaches him he considers selling his Lord in order to recover the lost silver. This makes Judas more a foolish man of the people than a theological bogeyman. The eighteen couplets that comprise 'Judas' (23) are vivid, impersonal, dramatic, rhythmically simple: these qualities make up a genuine ballad.

A much later ballad, 'Earl Brand' (7C), which Child extracted from Motherwell's manuscripts, displays a number of features which have come to be regarded as hallmarks of the ballad style. The opening quatrain is dramatic, is in direct speech, uses the magical number seven, and contains the essential facts of the explosive situation:

> 'Rise up, rise up, my seven brave sons,
> And dress in your armour so bright;
> Earl Douglas will hae Lady Margaret away
> Before that it be light.'

The action takes off with the speed of the finest milk-white ballad steed and by the third stanza Earl Douglas is preparing to defend his conquest by fighting Lady Margaret's father and seven brothers. This willingness to take on impossible odds — one man against eight — exemplifies the hyperbolic texture of the ballads. Earl Douglas, after his amazing triumph in battle, lifts his lady on the omnipresent 'milk-white steed' and himself on the complementary 'dapple grey' and they ride on to the usual wan water:

> They rode, they rode, and they better rode,
> Till they came to yon water wan;

They lighted down to gie their horse a drink
Out of the running stream.

Now the majority of ballads have a romantic and/or tragic dimension and the ballad folk would not expect Earl Douglas to carry his lady off and live happy ever after. She, in fact, perceives proleptically that 'ye are slain'. Accordingly he rides home to that familiar ballad figure, the omnipotent matriarch, to await his death. His request to his mother illustrates the imitative response that is one of the commonplaces of the ballad style:

'O rise, dear mother, and make my bed,
And make it braid and wide,
And lay me down to take my rest,
And at my back my bride.'

She has risen and made his bed,
She made it braid and wide;
She laid him down to take his rest,
And at his back his bride.

It is a *sine qua non* of romantic tragic balladry that if one lover dies the other must follow suit, so he dies of his wound and she of sorrow (conveniently rhyming with morrow).

That, however, is not the end of the story, for convention requires a rose-and-briar ending. This must have given a satisfactory flourish of a finale to the romantic ballads: the entwining of the plants is a much-loved symbolic monument to true love.

The one was buried in Mary's kirk,
The other in Mary's quire;
The one sprung up a bonnie bush,
And the other a bonny brier.

These twa grew, and these twa threw,
Till they came to the top,

And when they could na farther gae,
They coost the lovers' knot.

The features we have observed in this ballad can be seen in scores of others. A man with these effects at his command was perfectly equipped to learn and carry a new ballad and to reproduce it according to time-tested formulas.

F. B. Gummere, whose adherence to choral origins and communal composition have made him a rather dated figure in the discussion of the ballad, is associated with two critical terms that accurately describe key stylistic features of balladry: *leaping and lingering* and *incremental repetition*. The leaping and lingering of balladry refers to its tendency to initiate a sudden act and then to linger hypnotically after the event. In 'Clerk Saunders' (69B) the amorous thought that leaps to the hero's mind is precisely stated:

'A bed, a bed,' Clerk Saunders said,
'And ay a bed for you and me';
'Never a ane', said the gay lady,
'Till ance we twa married be.'

She then mentions the passionate jealousy of her seven brothers and he, in response, suggests that she blindfold herself and carry him to bed so she can claim she never saw him, neither did his feet touch her bedroom floor. They linger over this ploy for five stanzas while suspense is being built up.

Incremental repetition is probably the most readily identifiable of ballad characteristics. By this device a stanza repeats the previous stanza with some significant addition that advances the narrative. This can be used with devastating ironical effect, as in 'The Bonny Earl of Murray' (181A), or more dramatically as in the incest ballad 'Lizie Wan' (51A). The listener is led to think by the end of the second quatrain that the cause of grief is an unwanted pregnancy; by altering the reiteration the ballad soon displays a greater taboo than illegitimacy:

Lizie Wan sits at her father's bower-door,
  Weeping and making a mane,
And by there came her father dear:
  'What ails thee, Lizie Wan?'

'I ail, and I ail, dear father,' she said,
  'And I'll tell you a reason for why;
There is a child between my twa sides,
  Between my dear billy and I.'

Now Lizie Wan sits at her father's bower-door,
  Sighing and making a mane,
And by there came her brother dear:
  'What ails thee, Lizie Wan?'

'I ail, I ail, dear brither,' she said,
  'And I'll tell you a reason for why;
There is a child between my two sides,
  Between you, dear billy, and I.'

Incremental repetition is a superlative mnemonic technique, and the structural beauty of the form must have prompted some fine ballad compositions. One, 'The Maid Freed from the Gallows' (95A), is entirely determined by incremental repetition. It comprises five sets of three linked quatrains. We are suddenly plunged into a catastrophic situation whereby a maid is pleading for her life. No crime is specified, if crime it be, since ransom will easily free her. This is the basic three-quatrain pattern:

'O good Lord Judge, and sweet Lord Judge,
  Peace for a little while:
Methinks I see my own father,
  Come riding by the stile.

'Oh father, oh father, a little of your gold,
  And likewise of your fee!
To keep my body from yonder grave,
  And my neck from the gallows-tree.'

'None of my gold now you shall have,
  Nor likewise of my fee;
For I am come to see you hangd,
  And hanged you shall be.'

The pattern is repeated as the girl appeals to her mother, her brother, her sister. It is only her final appeal, to her lover, that succeeds, so his reply is significantly different:

'Some of my gold now you shall have,
  And likewise of my fee,
For I am come to see you saved,
  And saved you shall be.'

To memorize a ballad like this one the singer's mind could lock on to the three-quatrain pattern.

Another feature which sustains ballad narrative in a memorable way is the nuncupative testament. A dying or departing protagonist is asked to dispose of his or her possessions and does so in a particularly telling fashion. This is not a simple shareout of goods to the family but has ironic overtones, for the villain of the piece is left a curse instead of a commodity. In 'The Cruel Brother' (11A) the beautiful fair-haired heroine is stabbed by her brother John, who is furious at not being asked to consent to her choice of husband. The dying heroine says

'O lead me gently up yon hill,
And I'll there sit down, and make my will.'

She leaves her 'silver-shod steed' to her father, her 'velvet pall and . . . silken gear' to her mother, her 'silken scarf and . . . gowden fan' to her sister Anne, her 'bloody cloaths' to her sister Grace. As for the murderer:

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

The testament also plays its part in 'Lord Randal' (12A), a ballad uniquely built for oral survival. It has perhaps the most

memorable pattern of any ballad, as can be seen if we quote the first quatrain and italicize the only parts that alter in the subsequent nine quatrains:

'O where ha you been, Lord Randal, my son?
And where ha you been, my handsome young man?'
'I ha been at the greenwood; mother, mak my bed soon.'
For I'm wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down.'

The result of the iteration is to give the narrative an almost intolerable urgency; the insistent demand for the deathbed suggests the imminence of the young lord's death. After admitting he has been poisoned by his true love he makes his nuncupative testament leaving livestock to his mother, jewellery to his sister, property to his brother and 'hell and fire' to his homicidal sweetheart.

'Edward' (13B) contains the most celebrated and controversial use of the nuncupative testament in balladry. 'The Cruel Brother' (11A) and 'Lord Randal' (12A) put the testament in the mouths of murder victims so that the final curse is unavoidable. Whereas these ballads are relatively ingenuous, 'Edward' (13B) is incredibly ingenious and does not yield its secret until the very last line. As the ballad opens Edward is being interrogated by his mother who is determined to discover the source of the blood on his sword. After some evasion Edward admits he has murdered his father and the mother then prompts him for the testament. Instead of the gradual build-up to a conventional curse there is something altogether stronger, for Edward leaves his land to decay and his family to starve; as for his mother:

'The curse of hell frae me sall ye beir,
Mither, mither,
The curse of hell frae me sall ye beir,
Sic counseils ye gave to me O.'

That desolate shock-ending, which implicates the mother as instigator of the crime, is untypical of the ballads generally,

where amazing events follow given facts. In 'Edward' (13B) the crucial fact is concealed until the last moment. So unusual is 'Edward' (13B) that Bronson *(The Ballad as Song,* pp. 1-17) has doubted its authenticity. The ballad was sent to Percy by Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes, and Bronson suspects that he was responsible for the literary cunning of 'Edward' (13B). It seems to Bronson altogether too good — in a contrived literary sense — to be a true ballad. Against this we have to set Child's opinion that 'Edward' (13B) 'is not only unimpeachable, but has ever been regarded as one of the noblest and most sterling specimens of the popular ballad'. I think we have to trust Child's ear rather than Bronson's nose for a controversy.

It is likely that Bronson, in his mission to establish the supremacy of tunes, has underestimated the verbal magic of balladry. Yet the words alone do so much. There is the use of irony in 'The Bonny Earl of Murray' (181A), the slow construction of tension in 'The Lass of Roch Royal' (76B), the poetic use of the ominous dream in 'The Battle of Otterburn' (161C), the brooding imagery of revenant ballads like 'The Unquiet Grave' (78), the exquisite melancholy of 'The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry' (113), the romantic poignancy of 'The Gypsy Laddie' (200). A tradition that was capable of such peaks of verbal and structural perfection was capable of 'Edward' (13B). I do not doubt that the ballad was composed by an individual (another anonymous amateur) but I doubt that the individual was Lord Hailes; if he had been responsible for it, then commonsense decrees that he would have eventually stood forward to claim credit for his masterwork.

Felicitous details are the exception, not the rule, in balladry. It could not be otherwise, for the creators of ballads were not poetic innovators but members of a community working within the confines of an all-purpose oral idiom. The ballad style had to serve a whole host of individuals, had to ring as true in London as it did in Aberdeen, had to have an unbreak-

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able formal structure. So most ballad characteristics are big overall effects, features that could be swallowed whole and regurgitated in a recognizable manner. The ballad style is hyperbolic; actions and events are exaggerated so they will appear more vivid. It is this that gives rise to some of the more extreme images. In 'Lord Thomas and Fair Annet' (73D) the hero's wife, the brown girl, murders his lover; the hero's reaction is instant:

> Lord Thomas he had a sword by his side,
> As he walked about the hall;
> He cut off his bride's head from her shoulders,
> And he threw it against the wall.

After Lord Burnard has decapitated the youth in 'Child Maurice' (83D) — in the belief that he is his lady's lover when, in fact, he is his lady's son — he presents the severed head for use as a football:

> He's put it in a braid basin,
> And brocht it in the ha,
> And laid it in his lady's lap;
> 'Said, Lady, tak a ba!
>
> 'Play ye, play ye, my lady,' he said,
> 'Play ye frae ha to bower;
> Play ye wi Gill Morice head,
> He was your paramour.'

It is as if the scenes were visualised, in the mind's eye, in chiaroscuro. Terrible dark shadows alternate with brilliant highlights. Because of the absence of characterization the force of the anecdote has to be concentrated into action. At times this becomes almost bathetic. The eponymous heroine of 'Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight' (4B) is credited with incredible strength in her battle against her adversary:

> She's taen him in her arms twa,
> An thrown him headlong in.

The most famous hyperbolic image occurs in Chevy Chase — 'The Hunting of the Cheviot' (162B) — when we are told:

> For Witherington needs must I wayle
> as one in dolefull dumpes,
> For when his leggs were smitten of,
> he fought upon his stumpes.

Samuel Butler incorporated this image in *Hudibras*, as it fitted in perfectly with his mock-heroic manner:

> Enraged thus some in the rear
> Attack'd him, and some ev'ry where;
> Till down he fell, yet falling fought,
> And being down still laid about;
> As *Widdrington* in doleful Dumps
> Is said to fight upon his stumps.
> (I. iii. 91-6)

In all fairness to Sidney, whose name has been associated with 'Chevy Chase' as its first influential eulogist, it should be said that he was probably acquainted with Child's A text which has the more credible version:

> For Wetharryngton my harte was wo,
> that ever he slayne shulde be;
> For when both his leggis wear hewyne in to,
> yet he knyled and fought on hys kny.

The B text is a broadside vulgarization of the A text.

A Witherington-inspired feat occurs in 'Johnie Cock' (114A) which Child called a 'precious specimen of the unspoiled traditional ballad'. Seven foresters attack the outlaw Johnie:

> O the first stroke that they gae him,
> They struck him off by the knee;

Still, Johnie kills six of his seven attackers. More outrageous heroism is recounted in 'Johnnie Armstrong' (169B):

Said John, Fight on, my merry men all,
I am a little hurt, but I am not slain;
I will lay me down for to bleed a while,
Then I'le rise and fight with you again.

This hyperbolic style partly comes from a desire to astonish; we can imagine how poor folk would delightedly turn from their hard work to hear of the larger-than-life exploits of ballad people. Also the vicarious pleasure they would derive from great displays of wealth. 'Young Beichan' (53A) would have appealed not only as an exotic adventure story but because of the sumptuous parade of wealth, for when Shusy Pye comes after her recalcitrant lover the porter describes her appearance:

'For on every finger she has a ring,
An on the mid-finger she has three,
An there's as meikle goud aboon her brow
As woud buy an earldome o lan to me.'

Such images would have glistened in the eyes of many a person who listened to a ballad in a penurious environment.

Balladry is an art of contrast and counterpoint, the black balancing with the milk-white. A familiar touch is the combination of antithetical emotions in one quatrain, as in 'Mary Hamilton' (173I):

When she cam to the Netherbow Port,
She laughed loud laughters three;
But when she cam to the gallows-foot,
The tears blinded her ee.

As if to emphasize the sacrifice she has made, the lady of 'The Gypsy Laddie' (200B) draws this contrast:

'Last night I lay in a weel-made bed,
And my noble lord beside me,
And now I must ly in an old tenant's-barn,
And the black crew glowring owre me.'

The use of counterpoint is a useful textural device: the colour of gold is good and the golden-haired lady most desirable of all; the colour of earth is suspect and a dark person is devious (we should remember that Shusy Pye redeemed her colour by an ostentatious display of golden jewellery). Hence the dubious role of love-breaker attributed to the nut-brown girl in the ballads. In 'Lord Thomas and Fair Annet' (73) his lordship marries the nut-brown girl for her money instead of taking Annet for her bright beauty. In 'Fair Margaret and Sweet William' (74) William's marriage to the nut-brown girl drives Margaret to suicide.

This discussion has isolated only the major stylistic similarities between the ballads, but there are many more minor features — like the household familiar Billy Blin who appears in 'Young Beichan' (53C) and 'Willie's Lady' (6A) or the talking bird. In 'Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight' (4C) a parrot witnesses the murder and May Colven (an incarnation of Lady Isabel) offers it a golden cup and fine cage for its silence; in 'Young Hunting' (68C) the homicidal lady offers the parrot, or bonny bird, a golden cage if it will keep quiet. The bird in 'The Gay Goshawk' (96A) takes a message south to its master's sweetheart imploring her to join him in Scotland. (Her father being against the match, the girl secures from him a promise that she be buried in Scotland, then takes a sleeping draught which enables her to be resuscitated in the arms of her lover.) 'The Carnal and the Crane' (55) reproduces a theological discussion between two talking birds, while the ornithological discourse in 'The Three Ravens' (26) and 'The Twa Corbies' (given by Child in his headnote to No. 26) concerns the corpse they want to make a meal of.

It is perhaps appropriate to close this account of ballad stylistics with yet another convention — the Last Goodnight. This allows a character to bid a fond farewell to the world. It became a hackneyed standby of the broadside ballads; for, before public executions were banned in Britain in 1866, the

ballad-sellers would sell their wares at the scene of the execution. In the popular ballads the Last Goodnight has the more poetic purpose of allowing a brave man to give a final display of courage. Such is the case in 'Hobie Noble' (189) and in 'Johnie Armstrong' (169B) where the Border hero bids a defiant goodbye to life:

> 'And God be withee, Kirsty, my son,
> Whair thou sits on thy nurses knee!
> But and thou live this hundred yeir,
> Thy fathers better thoult never be.'

3

Content of the ballads

> Strictness is offensive as well as useless. Perhaps it is impossible. Ballads are not like plants or insects, to be classified to a hair's breadth.
>
> (Francis James Child, Child MSS, Harvard Library, Vol. XXIV, pp. 468-9)

The picture painted by Percy, and retouched by Scott, of illustrious minstrels entertaining great lords and ladies in their halls was shown by Ritson and subsequent scholars to have been a false impression. We now distinguish between minstrel and popular ballads and find the minstrels artistically inferior to traditional balladry. But who sang the popular ballads? Do the magical elements in them indicate a credulous peasantry possessed by a collective belief in superstitious irrationality? These are not rhetorical questions, for many scholars are so ready to attribute dark ignorance to the ballad folk that we are in danger of reading between the lines of the ballads to reconstruct a complete folk cosmology.

In many ways the ballads became old wives' tales, and I do not mean this in any pejorative sense. They were stories passed from mother to daughter, perpetuated by women. In John Barbour's fourteenth-century vernacular epic *The Brus* there is a reference to a ballad:

> Young women quhen thai will play,
> Syng it amang thaim ilka day.
>
> (xvi. 521-2)