

Folk Ballads in English

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Abstract -

The folk ballads are the poetry of the folk. They are also known as traditional and popular ballads. Their origin can be traced back to that period in English history in which the nobility were expressing their ideas of chivalry in the romances, the people too, were expressing their interests and ideas in a poetry which was cruder and more naïve, but for that very reason more genuine. This paper tries to find out the reasons and situations which give birth to folk ballads. It also describes the kinds of folk ballads which were popular in the medieval age.

Keywords - folk ballad, dramatic, folklore, supernatural, nautical.

The folk ballads represent the ideas of life as the people saw it. It is therefore democratic in origin because it was written by people, for the people. It is primitive and elemental. Although it deals mainly with the lives of the great, the kings and queens, lords and ladies, generals and captains, but it does not mean that they do not have the involvement of the feelings and passions of common men rather they used to represent the imaginations of common men, their dreams, their passions found fit place in these ballads. Goodman writes in this connection:

"In the age of chivalry the common people, undoubtedly got the same thrill from a contemplation of high life that the factory boy and girl obtain today from the presentation on the screen of a conventionalized conception of the lives of the idle-rich - all oriental rugs and tapestried walls, grey - hounds on marble steps, and moneyed villains tempting virtuous chorus girls. The high life in the ballads, like that of the "movie" today, is conventionalized. In the ballads we see the nobility, not as in the romances, but as the people saw them, with king writing orders from his place or "drinking the blue-reid wine", and the ladies sitting "wi' their fans into their hand".¹

The ballad therefore is of the folk because it does deal, and in the manner described, with the lives of a social class above that of the singers. The word popular or folk attached to this form of ballad makes it clear that in this form, the individual was but the mouth - piece of many. Therefore it was written by one author but as soon as people accepted it, they made it their own and author was lost sight of. The words of folk ballad were not printed in a set, copy righted form, and any singer felt quite at liberty to change the phrasing and even the story if he saw fit to do so. "As a result the popular ballad underwent a great deal of unconscious editing, and for the greatest favourites among these songs we have scores of different versions, some varying greatly from others as they have been subjected to the revisions of different districts and periods".²

Like all other primitive poetry ballad tells the stories for its own sake and emotional and objective in nature. It represents how the author of the poem was moved by the events to write the poem, but the author nowhere appears in the poem, nor the poem suggests any solution to the problem it is reporting. In the popular ballad there is no expression of the emotions of admiration, wonder, pity, terror, fear etc. The impression of these emotions were gained partly from the events narrated, and partly, from the manner of their rendition by the ballad-singer. Here is a passage from the ballad Robin Hood's Birth, Valour and Marriage which does not express Robin's love for his would be wife Clorinda, rather it gives the impression of love on the part of Robin Hood for her:

Said Robin Hood, "Lady fair, wander with me
A little to younger green bower;
There sit down to rest you, and you shall be sure
Of a brace or a leash in an hour.

As we were going towards the green bower,
Two hundred good bucks we epy'd.
She chose out the fattest that was in the herd.
And she shot him through, side and side.

By the faith of my body", said bold Robin Hood
I never saw woman like thee

And com'st thou from east, or com'st thou from west
Thou need'st not beg venison from me.

Clorinda said, "Tell me your name, gentle sir";
And he said, "T' is bold Robin Hood;
Squire Gamwel's my uncle, but all my delight
Is to dwell in the merry Sherwood;

"for it's a fine life and 't is void of all strife."

"so 't is sir," clorinda replied.

"But oh" said Bold Robin, "how sweet would it be,
If clorinda would be my bride!"

She blushed at the motion, yet after a pause
Said, "Yes, sir, and with all my heart."

"Then let us send for a priest", said Robin Hood,
"And be married before we do part."³

The popular ballad is dramatic in nature. Like drama it was created to make an emotional impression on an audience willing to be stirred. As we in the passage above see after the other incidents take place in the manner of action and the story is carried forward with more picturesque and stirring episodes and less emotion. Thus the popular ballad possesses a rugged and primitive strength which is not characteristic of more sophisticated poetry. The dramatic quality extends to the use of dialogues. In lord Randal we have only a series of questions and answers between a mother and a son:

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

And wha' met ye there, Lord Randal, my son?
And who met you there, my handsome young man?
O I met wi' my true-love, mother, mark my bed soon,
For I'm wearied wi' hunting, and fain wad lie down'.

With this manner of narration, it is easy to understand why the ballad seems so compressed in form and so rapid in movement. In the ballad quoted above, the excitement of the audience must have increased visibly with each question and answer. Goodman says in this connection," these ballads are built like terraces with emotional interest climbing from step to step until the fatal climax has been reached, after which the ballad frequently builds another terraced approach to still another climax."⁴ Folk ballad was created in a period when printing was not known, even writing was not universally practiced, so, they were orally made and orally transmitted without benefit of pen or press. Because of the fact that they thus depended for their perpetuation on the memory of illiterate men and women, they were necessarily simple in metrical form.

The popular ballad was usually composed in stanzas consisting of two rhyming lines of seven iambic feet each, or, in this same structure broken up into a quatrain of alternating fours and threes, with the rhyme coming, of course, in the second and fourth lines. That is why, poetry in this form of verse is very simple to compose and very easy to memorize. The stanzas of a typical ballad follow the rhyme scheme "ABCB". For instance, here's the first stanza of a famous folk ballad entitled "Tam Lin that exemplifies the traditional ABCB rhyme scheme:

O I forbid you, maidens all, - A
That wear gold in your hair, - B
To come or go by carter laugh, - C
For young Tam Lin is there. - B

The same ballad has a refrain of six lines that shows how the typical "ABCB" rhyme scheme can be modified for stanzas with more than four lines. The following stanza has a rhyme scheme of ABCBDB.

Janet has killed her green kirtle - A
A little above her knee, - B
And she has braided her yellow hair - C
A little above her bree - B
And she's away to carter Laugh - D
As fast as she can lie - B

Words and phrases in the popular ballads tended to become conventionalized, since it was easier for the poet to employ stock language than to create fresh. We get common references to many objects like a horse is usually "milk-white", a lady's hand "lily-white," a cock "red, red" or "gray, gray", a crowd of people consists of "four and twenty". Example from Lord Randal:

What d'ye leave to your mother, Lord Randal,
My son?
What d'ye leave to your mother, my
Handsome young man?
Four and twenty milk kye; mother,
Mak my bed soon,
For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain
Wad lie down.

Many of the popular ballads are characterized by the use of the refrains, which are in a way, a type of repetition which makes the rendition of the song at once more easy and more effective. Much of the repetition of ballads are "incremental", that is, in a given stanza some of the lines are repeated from the preceding stanza, as in stanzas two and three of "The wife of usher's well":

They hadna been a week from her,
A week but barely one,
What word came to the carline wife
That her three sons were gone.

They hadna been a week from her,
A week but barely three,
What word came to the carline wife
That her sons she'd never see.

Kinds of Folk Ballads -

In both subject matter and form ballad is distinctly of the folk and of popular interest. In the ballads we find the appeal to the heroic, as in "Sir Patrick Spens", "The Hunting of

the Chevoit" and other songs of high adventure, on land and sea. There is love tragedy in high life as in Bonny Barbara Allan and Lord Randal, domestic tragedy, with the murder of a father as in "Edward", or of a sister, as in the "Two Sisters". Folklore is the basis of many of the songs, such as Thomas Rymer, Kemp Owyne, Sweet William's Ghost, The Mermaid, and others in which fairie's ghosts or monstros creatures play a role. The popular admiration for bold out laws appears in the Robin Hood cycle of ballads and in other songs of outlawry. Humours ballads of which the number is relatively small, differ from the others in that they deal with figures from low life, and especially with that universal victim of the satirist, the henpecked husband. Following are some examples of the major classes of folk ballads:

1. **Historical Ballad** : Turner in his book Anglo Saxons writes, "In this state of the country, three Saxon cycles, or vessels, arrived from Germany, on or near the British coast, whose leaders were named Hengist and Horsa, two brothers, and discendents from woden. As their numbers were too few for conquest, their visit must have been either a matter of accident, or for the purpose of a transient depredation. Nennius says, they were exils."

We find a historical ballad "The Arrival of the Saxons" perhaps in the context of the above incident:

A Drought is on the thirsty land,
The peasant prays for rain,
A small cloud, like a human hand,
Arises from the main;
And silently its folds expand,
O'er shadowing all the plain.

It bursts, and down the torrent streams,
The affrighted rustic flies;
Sad issue of his hopeful dreams,
His harvest buried lies;
With wrath, and not with freshness, teems
The fullness of the skies.

And yet how little, in its span
The first cloud from the seal
How pleasantly its drops began
To fertilize the lea!
So seldom doth the hopes of man
With the results agree;
So vainly doth he strive to scan
The future that shall be.⁵

The historical events of the early history of Britain find place in the traditional ballads of the mideaval period reporting the true incidents in a very simple, impartial and natural manner unknowingly. Frederick W. Mant's collection of historical ballads of England: "Ballads and Lays: Illustrative of events in The Early English History" includes as much as 42 such ballads. Some of them are as follows:

Invasion of Britain by Caesar, Caligula, Saint Alban, state of Britain after the Departure of the Romans, The Invasion of the Picts and Scots, King Aurthur, The conquest of the Saxons, progress of Religion in England, The Invasion of the Danes Alfred the Great, Edgar and Elfrids etc.

These are the topics on which the folk ballads have been prepared by the artists of that time.

2. Supernatural Ballad: As the folk ballads found their subjects from the daily life of village and semi-urban people, the superstitious beliefs were the utmost popular themes for ballads. Lack of education and proper routes for travelling had helped people believe in supernatural objects like witches, demons, fairies and genii etc. The encyclopedia Britannica reports". The finest of the ballads are deeply saturated in a mystical atmosphere imparted by the presence of magical appearances and apparatus. "The wife of usher's well" laments the death of her children so inconsolably that they return to her from the dead as revenants. "Kemp Owyne" disenchant a bespelled maiden by kissing her despite her bad breath and savage looks. An encounter between a demon and a maiden occurs in "Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight". Similarly "Willie's Lady" cannot be delivered of her child because of her wicked mother-in-law's spells, an enchantment broken by a beneficent household spirit.

Following ballad is Kemp Owyne in which maid Isabel is transformed into a monster by her step mother and the spell can only be undone by three kisses from Kemp Owen. The hideous Isabel tempts Owen by offering, in trade for kisses, three items endowed with magically protective properties; a belt, a ring and a sword:

Says, "Lie you there, done Isabel
And all my sorrows lie with thee
Till Kemp Owyne come ower the sea,
And borrow you with kisses three,
Let all the world do what they will,
Oh borrowed shall you never be!
Her breath grew strong,
her hair grew long,
And twisted thrice about the tree
And all the people, far and near,
Thought that a savage beast was she.

3. Romantic Ballad: The medieval period of the history of Europe has been very harsh and cruel for the lovers. Brutality, assassination, murder, honour killing had been common incidents of life. Ballad like Barbara Allan and The Douglas Tragedy were so popular that they are sung even today in many parts of Europe and America. The Douglas Tragedy occurs when an eloping couple is overtaken by the girl's father and brothers or "Lady Maisry", pregnant by an English Lord, is burned by her fanatically Scottish brother:

"Rise up, rise up, now, Lord Douglas",
She says,
"And put on your armours so bright;
Let it never be said, that a daughter of thine
Was married to a lord under night
"O hold your hand, Lord William", she said,
"for your strokes they are wondrous sair,
True lovers I can get many a one
But a father I can never get mair".

"Hold up, hold up lord William", she says,
For I fear that you are slain;"
"I is nothing but the shadow of
My scarlet cloak,
That shines in the water sae plain".
O they rade on, and on they rade,
And a' by the light of the moon,
Until they cam to his mother's ha door,

Lord William was dead land ere midnight,
Lady Margret lang ere day,
And all true lovers that go thegither
May they have mair luck than they!

In the ballad Barbara Allen a servant asks Barbara to attend on his sick master, whom she visits on his bed side and he pleas for her love. She refuses, claiming he had slighted her while drinking with friends. He dies soon after and Barbara hears his funeral bells tolling, stricken with grief, she dies as well. they are buried in the same church a rose grows from his grave, a briar from hers and the plants form a true lovers' knot:

In scarlet town, where I was born,
There was a fair maid dwellin' ,
Made every youth cry well-a-way!
Her name was Barbara Allan.

O it's I am sick and very very sick,
And it's all for Barbara Allen" -
O the better for me ye'se never be,
Tho' your heart's blood were a-spillin'!

"O dinna ye mind, young man", says she,
"When the red wine ye were filling',
That ye made the healths go round and round
And slightd Barbara Allan?"

"O mother, mother, make my bed,
O make it soft and narrow:
My love has died for me today,
I'll die for him tomorrow".
"farewell" she said, "ye, virgins all,
And shun the fault I fell in:
Hence forth take warning by the fall
Of cruel Barbara Allen.

4. Nautical Ballad: Samuel Pepys' Ballads have a "sea" category which can be easily defined by an occupation - that of sailors. A sea ballad or nautical ballad is a genre of folk ballad that was once commonly sung as a work song to accompany rhythmical labour aboard large merchant sailing vessels. They were found mostly on British and other European ships, and some had roots in lore and legend.

Most people in England had less travel opportunity therefore English men at home could see the world, do battle vicariously, and fantasize about financial gain through hearing or singing a sea ballad. Even though life at sea was rough, sailor's mobility seemed exciting and full of adventures. "The Caesar's Victory" recounts a battle between a British ship bound for the East Indies and a ship of pirates who attempt to overtake her. "Henry Martin" or "The Lofty Tall Ship" is a traditional Scottish folk ballad about Henry Martin (Formerly Andrew Barton) a sea fearer who turns to piracy to support his two older brothers. Writing in 1975, the musician and folklorist A L Lloyd described Henry Martin as "one of the most sung ballads of our time"⁶. In the fifteenth century, John Barton, Andrew's father, had commanded a merchant ship which was captured by the Portuguese. King James IV gave his sons permission to carry out reprisal raids but Andrew carried his piracy too far and attacked English ports, pretending to be Portuguese. The English fleet was sent by King Henry VIII and captured Andrew's ship and fatally wounded him. The ballad says:

There were three brothers in merry Scotland
In Scotland there lived brothers three,
And they did cast lots which of them should go, should go, should go.

For to turn robber all on the salt sea.
The lot in fell on Henry Martin
The youngest of all the three,
That he should turn robber all on the
Salt sea, salt sea, salt sea
For to maintain his two brothers and he
He had not been sailing but a long winter's night
And part of a short winter's day
When he espied a lofty stout ship, stout ship, stout ship
Coming-a-sailing along that way.
'Hello, Hello' said Henry Martin,
'what makes you sail so high?'
'I'm a rich merchant ship bound for
Fair London Town, London Town, London Town,
Will you please for to let me pass by?
'Oh no, oh no! cried Henry Martin,
'That thing it never can be,
For I have turned robber all on the
Salt sea, the salt sea, the salt sea,
For to maintain my two brothers and me?
With broadside and broadside and at it they went
For fully two hours or three,
Till Henry Martin gave to her the death
Shot, the death shot
Heavily listing to starboard went she.
The rich merchant vessel was wounded full score,
Straight to the bottom went she,
And Henry Martin sailed away on the sea
The salt sea, the salt sea
For to maintain his two brothers and he.
Bad news, bad news to old England came,
Bad news to fair London Town,

There was a rich vessel and she's cast away,
Cast away, cast away,
And all of her merry men drowned.

5. Robin Hood Ballad: Robin Hood was a heroic outlaw in English folk ballads. A highly skilled archer and swordsman, he is known for robbing from the rich and giving to the poor, assisted by a group of fellow outlaws known as his "Mercy Men". The ballads also include his lover, Mad Marian and his chief opponent the sheriff of Nottingham. We are told by Britannica, "that the authentic Robin Hood ballads were the poetic expression of popular aspirations in the north of England during a turbulent era of baronial rebellions and agrarian discontent, which culminated in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The theme of the free but persecuted outlaw enjoying the forbidden hunting of the forest and outwitting or killing the forces of law and order naturally appealed to the common people".

The initial Ballads of Robin Hood were prepared in the medieval period but many of the best known ballads belong to post medieval period. These are Robin Hood and the Monk, Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne, and the Lytle Gest of Robin Hood. Gradually as the social condition of England changed, people started losing interest in Robin Hood and other characters were born depending upon the new social conditions.

At the time of Robin Hood, the people of England were Catholics and sincerely believed in the Holy Trinity. But there was wide spread resentment against corrupt monks and bishops. In the ballad Gest Robin tells his men not to harass yeoman, squires, husbandman or knights. Instead he tells little John,

These bishshoppes and these
Archebisoppes,
Ye shall them bête and bynde;
The hye sheriff of Notyngnam,
Hymholde ye in your mynele.

Robin's main targets were figures of medieval corruption like bishops, abbots and the sheriffs. Historian like J.C. Holt feel that the early Robin Hood is a figure for social order and the status quo, upholding society by disposing of its corrupt elements.

Following is an example from the famous Robin Hood ballad - Robin Hood

Rescuing Three squires - It is one of many stories where Robin uses a disguise to trick his enemies and it isn't the only one where the sheriff of Nottingham meets a bad end.

There are twelve months in all the year,
As I hear many men say,
But the merriest month in all the year
Is the merry month of May.

Now Robin Hood is to Nottingham gone,
With a link a down and a day
And there he met a silly old woman
Was weeping on the way.

"What news? What news, thou silly old woman?
What news hast thou for me?"
Said she, "There's three squires in Nottingham
Town to-day is condemned to die".

There are numerous Robin Hood ballads telling the tales of bravery, outlawry and the social and economic life of England during the medieval time various ballads have been separately collected for children which help to know the culture of England as well as Europe of that time. Some important ballads of Robin Hood are - Robin Hood and the Curtal Friar, Robin Hood and Allan Dale, Robin Hood and the Bishop, The Bold Peddler and Robin Hood, Robin Hood and the Butcher etc.

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