

THE RANDAL BALLAD: DEVELOPMENT, TRANSFORMATION AND FUNCTION

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The age of the Randal ballad is a matter of conjecture. Most extant versions stem from the 19th century. But the ballad is, of course, much older. A Veronese broadside version from 1629 proves that it was very popular in Italy at that time. On September 24th, 1656, a canon named Lorenzo Panciatici read a paper in the *Crusca* on *Cicalata in lode della Padella e della Frittura* ('A Cricket's song on the frying pan and on fried food') and quoted parts of *Lord Randal*. From this quotation it has been concluded that the ballad originated during the 16th century at the latest. When discussing the age of the ballad, scholars generally refer to a paragraph in *Piers the Plowman* dealing with poems on Robin Hood and Randolfe, Earl of Chester.¹ Ballads on Robin Hood are well known today. The poems on Randolfe (Randal), however, belong to the *Lost Poetry* of the Middle Ages, and we have no means of finding out what they were like.

There is, however, general scholarly consensus on the fact that the popular ballad originated in the late Middle Ages. During the last decades several well known popular ballads have been traced back to the 14th and 15th centuries. Lajos Vargyas has scrutinised all evidence on the origin of the popular ballad. He comes to the conclusion that the ballad appeared earliest in writing among the French, namely in the 15th century, but there is at least one English ballad which can be dated back to the late 13th century.² In general it can be said that in origin and composition many old English ballads appear to date from the 15th century.³

My paper will deal with the development of the Randal ballad from song to nursery rhyme and back again. This is a problem which has not yet been dealt with. The reason for the evident reserve of literary scholars

1. This is repeated in most comments on the Randal ballad. Cf. J.B. Trapp, *Medieval English Literature* (New York, London, Toronto, 1973), p. 438.
2. Lajos Vargyas, *Researches into the Medieval History of Folk Ballad* (Budapest, 1967), p. 275.
3. See e.g. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford, 1967), p. 62.

in this question is all too obvious. We are not as yet in a position to describe the chronological development from 'genuine' ballad to the nursery rhyme. This is due to the asynchronic character of popular tradition. In addition there is, of course, no single causality underlying the development from ballad to nursery rhyme. Popular ballads can develop in several different directions.

And yet there are evidently certain patterns underlying ballad developments and changes. This can be demonstrated by means of an individual case history, the development of the Randal ballad.

According to the best experts on the ballad, *Lord Randal* was 'the most popular purely traditional song'⁴ in many European countries and also in America. Proof of this is the huge number of versions and variants. It is by no means clear, however, why just this ballad has been so popular and widely known. It seems to me that this question has not even been raised so far.

The same is true of problems connected with ballad development. Even the point of departure presents us with the first difficulties. Archer Taylor has suggested that the oldest known version comprises two originally distinct motifs or scenes, namely the hunt and the banquet.⁵ But the question is whether one can really speak of a banquet at all. According to *Child A* Lord Randal has been out hunting, and was treated to a meal of fish by his True-Love. Thus the meal was rather a fish picnic than a banquet, and insofar an unlikely part of a hunt. The meal and its preparation might be regarded as a social indicator and therewith an innuendo as to a possible *mésalliance* and its potentialities for plot development.

4. Tristram P. Coffin, *The British Traditional Ballad in America* (Philadelphia, 1963), p. 38; versions of the Lord Randal ballad are found in nearly every ballad collection. The most important are: Francis J. Child (ed.), *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols. (New York, 1965), No. 12: I, 151-66; II, 498 f.; III, 499; IV, 449; V, 208 f. and 286; Bertrand Harris Bronson, *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads with their Texts, according to the Extant Records of Great Britain and America*, 4 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1959-72), esp. IV, 517-22 (List of the Printed Collections. My comments and interpretations are based above all on the some one hundred versions presented in Bronson); Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians* (Oxford, 1932); Reed Smith (ed.), *South Carolina Ballads: With a Study of the Traditional Ballad To-Day* (Cambridge, Mass., 1928), pp. 101-03 for Lord Randal; Helen Harnes Flanders (ed.), *Ancient Ballads Traditionally Sung in New England*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia, 1960-65), 175-207, A-R; Eloise Hubbard Linscott (ed.), *Folk Songs of Old New England* (New York, 1939); F. Eileen Bleakney, 'Folk-Lore from Ottawa and Vicinity', *JAF* 31 (1918) 158-69; Phillips Barry, et. al. *British Ballads from Maine* (New Haven, 1929).
5. Archer Taylor, 'A Contamination of Lord Randal', *MP* 29 (1931) 105-07.

This means that the origin must not necessarily be traced to two different stories, as is the case if we accept the banquet hypothesis. On the contrary the ballad may derive from a more psychologically complex nucleus concerning a love affair. Either way it is necessary to take the development of the ballad into consideration.

It is, however, imperative that we do not succumb to the temptation of streamlining and rationalizing developmental tendencies in order to explain away apparent discrepancies and to make our ballad conform to order and logic. We must take the poems as they have been transmitted to us. Ballads come into existence through and after oral transmission. It is therefore no use to search for archetypes or originals. They would lack the aesthetic flavour of balladness. Inconsistencies, mental leaps and bounds, even gaps are part of the specific meaning of the ballad.⁶

This is particularly true of the Randal ballad. The hundreds of extant versions differ in all imaginable accessory parts and details, and yet they all retain a certain Randal nucleus (as I should like to call it), sometimes reduced to vague associations. As it is likely that the popularity of the ballad is due to such similarities or common denominators, it seems necessary to point out what they are.

The hermeneutical function of the dialogue

All different versions have in common an emotional focussing on a murder by poisoning and a strong formal coherence. The dialogue has a distinct logical and aesthetical function. The murderess's deed is detected dialectically. The mother grows suspicious at the young man's remarks on his rendezvous. She asks leading questions and her suspicions become certainty: her son has been poisoned. The *innuendo* of the first lines is thus not simply explained or correlated by further facts; rather the hearer takes part in a process of recognition through the medium of the mother. At the same time he feels for the mother who is, of course, not primarily interested in detecting the crime, but rather suffers with her son.⁷

6. On the problem of defining the folk ballad, as well as the effects of oral transmission, see Wolfgang G. Müller, *Die Englisch-Schottische Volksballade*, Studienreihe Englisch, 44 (München, 1983).

7. In another version (*Bronson*, 36) the nameless protagonist tells his mother that his wife has treated him with 'bread and cold poison'. The following 'bequest' stanzas begin with his wishing his wife into hell; all other bequests seem irrelevant or even redundant.

The recognition of the murder by poison is the emotional climax of the Child ballad (*A*, sixth stanza). Randal is no longer 'wearyed with hunting' but 'sick at (the) heart'. It is obvious that an emotional focussing has taken place. The basic story is not about murder or poisoning, but rather unhappy love. Randal has already resigned himself to his fate. He no longer fights against it. His beloved has betrayed him, and therefore he wants to die.

The entire mental process is thus embedded in question and answer — that is, in dialogue. The regular alternation of the speakers and therewith perspective lends a certain formal coherence to the poem and is thus an antithesis against the storm of emotions in both speakers. The tone of the poem is characterized by detachment and rational indirectness. It signals human greatness in dealing with an extreme situation. Emotions are never explicitly described, but are definitely evoked on the part of the reader. His process of recognition is analogous to that of the mother, but his emotional involvement parallels that of the protagonist.

This double-edged process is reinforced by the archetypal mother-son relationship. The terms 'Lord' and 'son' which occur mostly in a certain pattern, indicate distance and emotional involvement at the same time. This is also true of the parallelism of question and answer, which are syntactically always very similar. Even the uniform, refrainlike request directed to the mother 'make my bed soon', is by no means a mere repetition. It occurs in a different context every stanza, and thus gains an ever increasing meaning. The full impact of the request becomes clear only in the last stanza: the mother is to prepare Randal's death-bed. This is surely one of the finest examples of 'incremental repetition'.

But not all the versions of the ballad contain this subtle structure. In some very corrupt ones the process of recognition is practically inverted. Thus in *Bronson 2* the protagonist, here called Fair Elson, tells his mother bluntly that he has been poisoned. She then inquires concerning details of the meal, and after that she asks about the colour of the fish, which is either want of tact or bad taste. It reminds us of versions especially written for the nursery.

Symbols and Persons

The circumstantial and in most versions metaphorical or symbolical representation of the poisonous meal engages the attention of the reader/listener so intensively and exclusively that he does not ask for the under-

lying motives. The snake has been — since time immemorial — the symbol of evil and is generally associated with the Devil, Hell, the punishment of sins, and in a secondary way with poison. Even the metamorphosis of the snake into an eel still evolves the same associations as the arch symbol of the Devil. This is no wonder, since the eel was regarded as a kind of snake up to the late Middle Ages. People even believed it mated with snakes.⁸

It is not quite clear, whether the singers were consciously aware of the symbolic levels of meaning, but it is evident that the original situation called for the lover's lack of recognition of what he was eating. The character of the meal cannot have been unequivocal, otherwise Randal would have committed a kind of suicide which is sometimes the case in later versions.⁹

It is evident, of course, that subtle symbols were always in danger of misunderstanding. This can be illustrated by American variants which replace symbols by very down-to-earth counterparts. The American settlers who won the West often had to deal with obnoxious snakes — most of all with the rattlesnake. Young Nelson, one of the many aliases of Randal in *Flanders C* is poisoned by means of this unappetizing dish:

'What did you have for your dinner, my own pretty one?'
'A piece of *rattlesnake*, Mother, make my bed soon . . .'

In *Bronson 66* the poisonous eel has become ale: 'Oh, t'is ale I've been a-drinking', but evidently poisonous ale. In *Bronson 56* the protagonist feeds on 'dill and dill broth', in *Bronson 62* on a dish of 'sweet milk and parsnips', and in *68* on 'eggs fried in butter'.

According to the Lord Randal ballads cold food must be especially dangerous — it seems to be very much associated with the idea of poison. Poison itself is often termed 'cold'. In *Bronson 3* and *46* the woman reaches her beloved 'a cup of cold poison' In *Bronson 14* the meal consists of 'cold poison' and 'cold poultry', in *Bronson 36* of 'bread and cold poison', in *Bronson 17* of 'cold pie and cold coffee', and eventually it is for simplicity's sake only 'black pizen' [= poison] (*Bronson 21*).

Even if the author or singer is not quite clear as to the character of the meal, he usually retains the relationships of the people involved. We nearly always know who the murderer is and who the victim. But this basic part

8. The snake is a highly ambivalent symbol. It is an attribute of the Devil but also of Christ. It is the snake of temptation, but also the symbol of healing and salvation. More important is perhaps the sexual symbolism connected with the snake.
9. Cf., for instance, *Bronson*, 25 and 46.

of the plot may also get lost. In *Bronson 45*, the protagonist himself catches the eels with which he is poisoned, or poisons himself:

'Where did you catch the eels, Randal my son?'

'Out on the sunny banks, Mother, make my bed soon'.

These are two lines of a ballad consisting of only four lines altogether. It is nothing but a lyric fragment which has preserved all the essential details and associations of the long version, but does not make sense by itself or without knowledge of the preceding tradition. The same is true of nearly all the other short versions.

Not even the identity of the murderer remains constant. Alone in the versions printed by Bronson there are eleven different murderers and nearly as many variants in plot. The basic model generally has the beloved (sweet-heart, true-love) kill her lover for reasons not revealed.¹⁰ This is true of 38 versions, and that is more than one third of Bronson's texts. The second position is held, surprisingly, by the grandmother, some nine times called murderess.¹¹ The ill-famed stepmother, which fairy-tale tradition would predestine as the murderess, is the culprit in only four versions.¹² Further perpetrators of the crime are wife, sister and criminals called by their Christian names – Mary, Polly, Pretty Betsy, and Julia. Only one version has a man commit the crime – the father! (*Bronson 89*) This is proof of the fact that the problem underlying the Randal ballad is one of prototypical differences and tensions between the sexes.

Thus the evil stepmother as trouble-maker has probably been borrowed from the fairy tale. In *Child (J, Kc, L, M, N, O)*, the child tells its mother it has been poisoned by his evil stepmother with 'small fishes' or with 'a four-footed fish'. It is strange that mother and stepmother should both appear in the same poem. But Barry points out that this is a popular folklore motif in which the ghost of the mother helps her child against the ill-treatment of the evil stepmother.¹³ And yet this scene needed rationalization very soon because people were puzzled by the presence of mother and stepmother together. The grandmother became the deputy of the stepmother.

10. Child A-F; In Bronson this applies to the following versions: 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 14, 17, 18, 21, 22, 24, 26, 28, 31, 32, 33, 35, 38, 41, 48, 51, 52, 53, 56, 64, 66, 67, 70, 72, 73, 74, 76, 77, 83, 86, 89, 91, 96 and 97.

11. Bronson 5, 6, 9, 11, 12, 55, 75, 95, 101.

12. Bronson 98, 99, 100, 103.

13. Philips Barry, et. al., *British Ballads from Maine* (New Haven, 1929), p. 71.

Lord Randal as a Nursery Rhyme

From its first appearance in popular poetry, the ballad of Lord Randal has not been addressed exclusively to adults. Many collectors report that Randal was popular with young and old, that even pre-school children were pleased by Lord Randal or wept for him, just as their grandparents did. Like folksongs, popular ballads are not restricted to a specific age group. The reason for this is probably the concentration of the epic plot on the emotional core in the process of oral tradition. This means that only the most important part of the ballad is preserved. In *Lord Randal* the basic situation of a confrontation between mother and son in an extreme situation of fate is apparently just as comprehensible for children, as for adults.

An overview of the nearly innumerable variants of the ballad discloses the tendency towards change of milieu and social stratum. Originally *Lord Randal* belonged to the aristocracy, but in later oral tradition he descends to the bourgeois and still later even becomes a child. The proper names of the protagonist make the *embourgeoisement* very clear. Lord Randal – probably through dozens of intermediate stages – becomes Johnny Randolph, Jimmy Ransing, Johnny Ramble, McDonald, Fair Elson, Sweet Nelson, Orlando, Tyrante, and eventually ‘my own pretty boy’, ‘my sweet rambling son’, ‘my sweet little one’, and ‘my pretty little one’.¹⁴

The main characters have apparently been adapted to the respective audience. In the end, the main character itself becomes a child, thus when the grandmother for mysterious reasons poisons her little grandchild. In the earlier version, we read: ‘I’ve been to my true-love’s’ (*Barry 61*). This is replaced by ‘I’ve been to my grandmother’s’ (*Child I*). Such a change can only be explained by conscious remodelling of poems for the nursery through adults. This is obvious in the case of facts, motifs, words and symbols which were alien to children and had to be eliminated or at least rationalised.

In some cases children themselves have introduced such changes. Literary scholars have examined versions of the same text recorded by adults and children. They have found out that certain changes are made by children and can thus be considered typical. Thus difficult or unknown words are replaced by easier ones. The ‘pen-knife’, for instance, becomes ‘penny-

14. On Personal Names in *Lord Randal*, see Reed Smith, *South Carolina Ballads*, p. 56.

knife'. Most of these replacements cannot be seen as *ad hoc* improvisations. They are additions which remain stable and are reproduced.¹⁵

If the protagonist himself is a child, this rapidly affects the whole ballad; all other characters have to be adjusted accordingly. In children's versions, grandmother, stepmother and aunt play an important role. In the German and Scandinavian versions the victim is nearly always a child. The murder is committed by aunt, stepmother, youngest sister, mother or grandmother.¹⁶ In a Swedish version the nurse is the murderer, in a Wendish one, the evil neighbour. In German versions the victim becomes a little girl, as for instance, in 'Grandmother as a Snake Cook' [*Großmutter als Schlangenköchin*],¹⁷ 'Aunt as a Snake Cook' [*Muhme als Schlangenköchin*]¹⁸ and the 'Ballad of the Poison-Mixer' [*Ballade von der Giftmischerin*].¹⁹

When we try to define the function of a certain literary type, the questions of the mother deserve special attention. Thus she asks about the fate of the hunting dogs and learns that they have died from the food – sufficient evidence of what has happened. But very often this motif is doubled or trebled (hawks, Warden). This is a repetition device which appeals to children and simpler minds, but is aesthetically redundant. It occurs very often in German versions, but also in an English type of the Randal ballad, called *Croodlin Doo*.

Far-reaching changes would be expected in the bequest stanzas. This is the part of the ballad most affected by social stratum. Poor people have nothing to bequeathe. But this is also true of children, and even adolescents. In several English versions the reader/listener is puzzled when Child Randal wills his farm to his father and his coach-and-four to his mother.

It is typical of the English versions that the bequest stanzas are retained with stubborn persistence, even if they do not make sense in the context. This proves a strong tendency toward continuity. Its results are often formulaic relics which are completely unintegrated. That is why English versions often consist of two unconnected parts. Thus Tiranti is addressed

15. Forster B. Gresham, 'The Jew's Daughter: An Example of Ballad Variation', *JAF* 47 (1934) 358-61.

16. Erich Seeman and Walter Wiora (eds.), *Deutsche Volkslieder und ihre Melodien*, published by the Deutsches Volksliedarchiv (Berlin, 1959), Vo., IV: Deutsche Volkslieder, Balladen, Vierter Teil, p. 203.

17. Ludwig Erk and Franz Böhme (eds.), *Deutscher Liederhort* (Leipzig, 1893), I, 583.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 582.

19. Franz Magnus Böhme (ed.), *Deutsches Kinderlied und Kinderspiel* (Leipzig, 1897), pp. 551-52.

as 'my son' and 'my sweet little one' (in *Child I*), and yet he bequeathes all his gold and silver, a coach and six horses, and, in addition, a rope for his grandmother. These bequests, and in particular, the death wish for the grandmother, are not child-like and unintegrated. It seems remarkable to me that the *Croodlin-Doo* versions which are evidently children's songs, have no bequest stanzas. In German versions the child wills appropriate things, to her father, a golden chair in heaven, surrounded by little angels, to her sister all her clothes, and to her stepmother a wooden chair in hell surrounded by small flames ['Ballad of the Cooker of Poison', 551-52, *Ballade von der Giftköchin*].²⁰

On the way to the nursery, the person of the murderer and the murdered are changed according to the psychological needs of the child. The structure of the plot remains intact.

There is, however, a noticeable shift in the emotional focus. The centre-point is no longer the mother, but rather the victim. The child is not represented as a betrayed lover, nor in his emotional relationship to his mother. Instead he is now simply the victim of murder by poison. This gives additional weight to the action. As the protagonist is now a small boy, there can't very well be a murdering mistress; her place can be taken by someone more suited to a child's world, as for instance a step-mother. A close relationship to the murderess is no longer necessary. The figure of the murderer becomes replaceable and loses interest. The appearance of a neutral neighbour as murderer is quite typical. The entire interest is concentrated on the child.

20. The dialogue character inherent to the Randal ballad was a challenge to play the game of question and answer. According to a North German version the children form a closed ring and walk around in a circle. *Herztöchterlein* and step-mother stand in the middle and sing the verses alternately. All the children accompany them:

Wo bist du denn gewesen, *Herztöchterlein*?
 Bei deiner Mutter Schwester, Stiefmutter mein.
 Was hast du denn gegessen, *Herztöchterlein*?
 Fleisch von einem Knochen, Stiefmutter mein.
 Was tatest du mit dem Knochen, *Herztöchterlein*?
 Ich gab ihn einem Hunde, Stiefmutter mein.
 Was geschah mit dem Hunde, *Herztöchterlein*?
 Der starb nach einer Stunde, Stiefmutter mein.
 Was soll denn auf dein' Grab stehn, *Herztöchterlein*?
 Hier ruht des Königs Tochter, Stiefmutter mein.
 Was soll denn auf mein' Grab stehn, *Herztöchterlein*?
 Lauter Feuer und Flammen, Stiefmutter mein.

(Seemann/Wiora, p. 192).

On the other hand, essential features of the old ballad remain intact during the development of the popular Randal ballad towards the nursery. The most important props of continuity were doubtlessly melody and metre. These formed a kind of mould or basis and thus favoured certain structures and forms of the subject matter. The Randal stanza has a rigid, nearly formulaic structure, and is thus optimal for mnemonic tradition. Incremental repetition, for instance, contributes to easy learnability. The same is true of the refrain, which remains the same and yet structures the action by means of its increasing cognitive function. The result of this development, at any rate, is a series of short, concise nursery rhymes about Randal (or whatever he is called), which are in many respects still near to the original ballad. The Opies comment:

The nursery here preserves in short and simple form what is perhaps the last living (i.e. still orally transmitted) link with a tale possibly terrible in origin and certainly mysterious in its subsequent history.²¹

The version printed by the Opies²² had already been published by Child, and he in his turn had taken it over from *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities*.²³ Halliwell calls his version a nursery rhyme because his informant was a child. It follows that the text has remained nearly unchanged for more than a hundred years. This is proof of the fact that the attitude of children towards popular songs is very conservative. They tend to reproduce without change.

The Croodlin Doo Versions of Lord Randal

This is also true of the *Croodlin Doo* group of ballads which I have already mentioned. All ballad scholars agree that the *Randal* ballads are chronologically prior to the children's versions. Barry calls them a 'secondary form'.²⁴ All the known versions are restricted to England and Scotland; in America this side-branch of the *Randal* ballad remained well-nigh unknown. The key word 'croodle' is Scots and means something like 'to coo'. Croodlin Doo is therefore a cooing dove. Bronson calls this group

21. Iona and Peter Opie, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (Oxford, 1962), p. 76.
22. *Ibid.*, Nr. 44, p. 75.
23. Henry Weber, R. Jamieson, Walter Scott, *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities from the Earlier Teutonic and Scandinavian Romances* (Edinburgh, 1814).
24. Barry, *British Ballads*, p. 71.

'the nursery branch of the ballad', and he argues that the hero has retrogressed from young manhood into pre-adolescence.²⁵

All the *Croodlin Doo* versions contain the poisoning, the dialogue of the victim with his mother, the slow revelation of the crime through hints on the kind of meal eaten and the death of the animals which had been given the scraps. Nearly always the murderess is the grandmother or step-mother. For this reason there is no initial uncertainty as to what has happened, no tragic disillusionment, and above all, no emotional breakdown due to disappointed hope. The testament stanzas, as an expression of the latter, have no further function and are thus dropped. As in the fairy tale, good and bad are juxtaposed and contrasted. In some cases the recitor (according to Sharp the 'nurse' or 'nursery maid') makes it explicitly clear that the step-mother is an evil witch, and the fish nothing but a newt, which was regarded as very poisonous in Scotland.²⁶

The motif of detection is given more space. The suspicious look of the food and its fatal effect on the animals is emphasized. In numerous versions the child himself states that very much like the animals, it, too, must die (*Child J, K, N, O; Bronson 99*). This is a further essential difference to the *Randal* ballads, where this statement is generally reserved for the mother. The concentration of focus upon the protagonist is in direct proportion to the limitation of narrative events. This can be seen in the addition of a final narrative stanza to the *Croodlin Doo* version, a feature which would have been unthinkable in a popular ballad:

They made his bed, laid him down
 Poor Willie doo, Willie doo;
 He turned his face to the wa';
 he's dead now.

(*Child L*)

The incremental repetition so important for growing suspense has fallen out of favour. Evidently repetition is seen as redundant, the subtle differentiation as over-complicated and thus dispensable. The final result of such premises is a reduction to a poem of only two lines, in which only one question and answer have been preserved:

O' whaur hae ye been a'theday, my little we croodlin doo?
 O' I've been at my grandmother's; mak my bed, mammi now.

(*Child K*)

25. Bronson, I, 191.

26. Opie, *Oxford Dictionary*, p. 78.

The language of the Croodlin Doo versions is very well suited to the nursery. It is so consistently child-oriented that conscious reshaping of a popular ballad for children must be regarded as highly probable. The numerous diminutives of nouns are noticeable, as for instance, 'mammie', 'wee fishie', 'wee doggie', etc. Reduplication is used a great deal to imitate the language of children: 'croodlin *doo doo*', 'wee wee pan', 'mammie *noo noo*', etc.

Both in language and in content the *Croodlin Doo* versions are children's songs. And yet they have presented nearly all characteristic features of the ballads, if in an unexpected form. Whereas the element of tragic tension has been lost, there is still an echo of the outrageous event and its reverberation in the child's soul:

And what did your dog when he'd ate up the fish
 My little wee croodlin' doo?
 He stretched his wee limbs and died,
 Marmee, as I do noo.
 Marmee, as I do noo. (Wells, p. 166)

Billy Boy

Another group of children's songs derived from the *Randal* ballad is generally subsumed under the title 'Billy Boy'. The oldest version of the type stems from the pen of a well-known poet, Hector MacNeill, who published the song 'My Boy Tammy' in 1791 in the Edinburgh magazine *The Bee*.²⁷ In the mid-nineteenth century Halliwell recorded two versions from Suffolk and Yorkshire. English settlers transmitted it to America. Eloise H. Linscott says of the song: 'No other song has been more popular throughout the years than 'Billy Boy'. The poem has, again and again, been classified as a nursery classic, but also as an "old folks" song'.²⁸ This ambivalent attitude is already typical of one of the first editors, namely William Stenhouse, who wrote in 1853: 'The old song . . . was quite puerile; the Editor has often heard it sung by old people, when he was a boy, and he still remembers some of the verses'.²⁹ The Opies subsume

27. Cf. William Stenhouse, *Illustrations of the Lyric Poetry and Muse of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1853), p. 440. MacNeill did not use the title 'My Boy Tammy', and it was only later that the song became known under this name.

28. Hubbard Linscott, *Folk Songs*, pp. 166-67.

29. Stenhouse, *Illustrations*, p. 440.

the song under the heading 'nursery rhymes' but emphasize: 'the song still has adult life as a folk song and sea-shanty, "Billy boy, Billy boy"'.³⁰

Today we can no longer be sure of MacNeill's immediate sources. We do not know whether there were popular predecessors of *Billy Boy* (as Stenhouse apparently assumes), or whether the whole *Billy Boy* tradition originated with the Scottish poet. In this case *Billy Boy* would be a kind of parody on a popular ballad, which is an attractive but quite unlikely theory, as children's songs do not feature elements of literary parody or even travesty and are usually worlds apart from this highly sophisticated and artificial type.

The basic story of *Billy Boy* seems simple, transparent and genial, just as if someone had set himself the task of inverting the *Lord Randal* situation and turning it into an idyll. It is only the action that really counts. The story is about Tammy's wooing of a 'sweet young thing' who keeps her mother's sheep. At first the girl is very offish, because she doesn't want to leave her mother alone. But as soon as Tammy promises to take her mother in, she accepts him.

The figure of the mother recedes into the background; she is only the object of negotiation. We find a second mother, however, who is Tammy's partner in the dialogue, as in the *Randal* ballad. She begins with the question: 'Where have you been all day, my boy Tammy?' Stanza form, structure and the dialogue situation are clearly reminiscent of the *Randal* ballad, but all in all, the poem strikes us as a comic counterpart of the tragic ballad.

The point of departure of the *Billy Boy* versions is the original dialogue situation. The mother asks her son when he returns at night, where he has been so long, and he replies that he has seen his 'lassie young and gay'. And what has he done with her? 'I've been rolling in the hay'. This strikes a realistic chord which determines the character of the rest of the poem. The listener learns at least one important feature of the young girl. Typically the information is offered by the young man at the very beginning and spontaneously. It is also typical that Tammy's mother is far more interested in the domestic qualities of the future bride than her son's adventures in the hay. The girl's child-like attachment to her mother, however, has disappeared completely or been turned into its opposite:

Wasn't she the young thing
That lately left her mammy, oh? (Bronson, 227)

30. Opie, *Oxford Dictionary*, p. 80.

The most striking feature of all the versions is their naive humour. It is expressed most of all in witty comparisons and slapstick. The matter in question is nearly always her suitability as a wife and housekeeper. Can she keep the house clean?

She's just as fit to soop the house
As the cat to tak' a mouse (Stenhouse, 440)

Can she make a decent pudding?

Yes, she can make a pudding well
You can tell it by the smell. (Hudson, *JAF* 39, 93)

Did she give you a proper greeting and take your hat?

Yes, she took my hat
But she fed it to the cat (Gardner, *JAF* 33, 91)

Did she offer you a chair?

Yes, she offered me a chair,
But the bottom wasn't there (Gardner, *JAF* 33, 91)

Is she the right height for you?

Yes, she is very tall
But she has no hair at all (Hudson, *JAF* 39, 93)

It is easy to see what children like about such rhymes. Elements such as the burlesque, the fantastic, the droll and the humorous are juxtaposed with a pointed realism – all qualities typical of English children's songs. It has been said that they appeal to the intellect, the 'sense of humour', and the 'sense of fun'.³¹ That is why nonsensical verses with their ridiculous and comical contents are often regarded as very English in character.³²

This may well be true, but it is far from the whole answer. I am convinced that the main reason for the popularity of this and similar verses is the motif of marriage, which has such a strong fascination for girls at play – at least it had when I was a boy! I remember very well that circle games were nearly always about marriage:

Petersilie, Suppenkraut wächst in unserem Garten
so und so ist die Braut, soll nicht länger warten.
(Parsley and green grow in our garden,
da-di-da is the bride and shall have to wait no longer).

31. Lotte Böckheler, *Das Englische Kinderlied* (Diss: Tübingen, 1935), pp. 60-65.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

I recall very definitely that the organisers of the games were always girls and the boys were always younger and rather diffident about the whole thing. I wonder whether the same is true of English play-party games. In one version of *Billy Boy* which is made up of nonsensical loose ends, the basic situation of a marriage aptitude test is still recognisable.

Can you lie close to me, my boy Billy
 Can you lie close to me, Billy Boy Tommy
 I can lie close to thee as the bark unto the tree
 Yes oh yes too young to be taken from her mammy
 Twice six twice seven twenty and eleven
 Yes oh yes too young to be taken from her mammy. (Bronson, 231)

Billy Boy was very popular as a play-party game, as is particularly well documented in America:

Narrative and dialogue songs appeal to the play-party for one of three reasons: a dramatic situation, love and marriage interest, riddles or guessing. Perhaps because of the starkness of the English and Scottish ballads the play-party prefers comic versions, such as *Billy Boy* and the three Ravens.³³

As Emelyn E. Gardner tells us,³⁴ the main thing was definitely the action. The song was often merely a pretext for games of movement. Verbal degeneration may therefore be due to the fact that the song was used for circle games.

The Randal Ballad in the Twentieth Century

The popular ballad belongs to oral literature. This definition reveals the problematic character of the genre, for literature is, of course, only what is transmitted by means of *litteræ*.³⁵ Popular ballads, however, live only in oral recitals, and one of their main prerequisites is illiteracy. Perhaps more important are sociological conditions, family structures, but above all cultural traditions, such as the American community gatherings for corn shucking, or cider making.

Most of these prerequisites have been lost today, and that is why the genre has only been preserved in a kind of artificial way – in the huge

33. B.A. Botkin, 'The American Play Party Song', *University Studies of the University of Nebraska* 37 (1937), p. 16.

34. Emelyn E. Gardner, 'Some Play Party Games in Michigan', *JAF* 33 (1920), p. 93.

35. Müller, *Die Volksballade*, pp. 27-52.

printed ballad collections, in festivals, in nostalgic public performances, and by institutions for the preservation and transmission of local tradition. Only the nursery rhymes remain as active and alive as they used to be – at least in English-speaking countries. They may be the last remnant of oral poetry. Since many of them go back to folk ballads, it cannot be said that the popular ballad is dead. It lives on in the mouths of children – even if only in a crude and degenerated form. The relationship to the original ballad is sometimes scarcely recognizable. From the standpoint of the original ballads these children's verses are nothing more than sad ruins of a once popular, yet highly artistic genre. No wonder that nearly all ballad men sentimentally mourn the passing of the ballad. As Reed Smith put it in 1928,³⁶ ballads are 'on the road downhill', and he verified this claim by a totally corrupt version of *Lord Randal* which he had received from an informant in South Carolina.³⁷

But there are other final stations of the development of popular ballads, such as the intended comic *rifacimento*, the parody. It is certainly not the least remarkable feature of the Randal ballad that it has spawned a good deal of parodies, some of them even preserving a fish poisoning as their pivotal point:

The Tale of Lord Lovell

Lord Lovell he stood at his own front door,
 Seeking the hole for his key;
 His hat was wrecked, and his trousers bore
 A rent across either knee,
 When down came the beauteous Lady Jane
 In fair white draperie.
 'Oh, where have you been, Lord Lovell?' she said,
 'Oh, where have you been?' said she;
 'I have not closed my eye in bed,
 And the clock just struck three,
 Who has been standing you on your head
 In the ash-barrel, pardie?'

36. Reed Smith, *South Carolina Ballads*, p. 54.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 64. It is obvious that the South Carolina version is a late descendant of *Lord Randal*; nearly every detail of the old popular ballad has been misunderstood, mutilated or trivialized. Thus the 'breely broth' with which Lord Randal is originally poisoned becomes the supper which he asks his mother to prepare for him: 'Make me a little breely broth soup/ For I'm sick in my heart, I should fail and lie down'. The South Carolina version is a product of a degenerative process which will hardly bring joy to the heart of a ballad-lover.

‘I’m not drunk, Lad’ Shane,’ he said:
 ‘And so late it cannot be;
 The clock struck one as I entered –
 I heard it two times, or three;
 It must be the salmon on which I fed
 Has been too many for me.’

‘Go tell your tale, Lord Lovell,’ she said,
 ‘To the maritime cavalree,
 To your grandmother of the boary head –
 To any one but me:
 The door is not used to be opened
 With a cigarette for a key.’³⁸

Bertrand Bronson, who is certainly one of the most prominent ballad researchers of this century, bemoans this ‘dead end’ of ballad development. He refers explicitly to the parodic versions of the *Randal* ballad, which he regards as a kind of generic fate rather than error in taste.

Such, incidentally, appears to be the destined end of too many fine old tragic ballads: they are not to be permitted a dignified demise, but we must madly play with our forefathers’ relics and make a mock of their calamities. The high seriousness of the parents is the children’s favourite joke.³⁹

Bronson’s resentment of ballad parodies is very understandable. But it will certainly not be shared by all ballad lovers – not even by all members of the older generation. There are parodies which are witty and sophisticated and yet at the same time very balladesque. This is true of a *Randal* version sung by Pete Seeger, one of the most popular folk singers in America (see next page).

The song needs no interpretation, but perhaps one word in the text should be explained. ‘Savaloy’ was once a very well-known kind of sausage in England, and the word was used as a term of endearment. The colour of the snake is, in several other versions, also green and yellow (*Bronson* 5). But that the victim requests green and yellow flowers for his grave, is, admittedly, a feature alien to the ballads but a successful and witty point.

He who finds the tone of this parody inappropriately frivolous might find more enjoyment in Bob Dylan’s version of *Lord Randal*: ‘A Hard

38. Anonymous. Printed in: Alfred Knopf, *The Stag’s Humbook* (1943), p. 136-37. The text of this parody has been communicated to me by Dr. Erich Theumer, Bonn.

39. Bronson, *Traditional Tunes*, p. 191.

I.

Where have ye been all the day,
Henry, my son,
Where have ye been all the day,
My Honey Bun?

In the woods, dear Mother,
In the woods, dear Mother,
Mother be quick, I'm gonna be sick,
And lay me down to die.

II.

What did ye do in the woods all day,
Henry, my boy,
What did ye do in the woods all day,
My pride and joy?

Ate, dear Mother,
Ate, dear Mother,
Mother be quick, I'm gonna be sick,
And lay me down to die.

III.

What did ye eat in the woods all day,
Henry, my boy,
What did ye eat in the woods all day,
My Savaloi?

Eels, dear Mother,
Eels, dear Mother,
Mother be quick, I'm gonna be sick,
And lay me down to die.

IV.

What colours was them eels,
Henry, my son,
What colour was them eels,
My pretty one?

Green and yellor,
Green and yellor,
Mother be quick, I'm gonna be sick,
And lay me down to die.

V.

Them eels were snakes,
Henry, my boy,
Them eels were snakes
My pride and joy!

U-u-a-gh, dear Mother,
U-u-a-gh, dear Mother,
Mother be quick, I'm gonna be sick,
And lay me down to die.

VI.

What colour flowers do ye want,
Henry, my boy,
What colour flowers do ye want,
My pride and joy?

G-r-e-e-n and y-e-l-l-e-r,
G-r-e-e-n and y-e-l-l-e-r,
Mother be quick, I'm gonna be sick,
And lay me down to die.⁴⁰

Rain's a-gonna Fall'.⁴¹ Naturally everyone today would associate the title of this song with acid rain or radioactive fall-out after a nuclear bomb test, or even after an atomic holocaust. But Dylan flatly rejected this interpretation.⁴² He said he thought of the American press and the many lies it showers upon the public.

Similar to the parodies, these versions are also *rifacimentos* in Bronson's sense of the word. And naturally they are not genuine folk ballads. On the other hand they do cast doubt on the hypothesis of the irredeemable death of the ballad. We do not know for sure how popular ballads came into existence and how they spread all over the country – perhaps in a manner very similar to those of today's folk singers?

40. 'Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie Together in Concert', No. 2R2214 on the Reprise Label, issued 1975.

41. Bob Dylan, *Writings & Drawings* (Bungay, Suffolk, 1973), pp. 66-67; on the poet-singer, see also: Daniel Kramer, *bob dylan* (New York, 1967), p. 43: 'Dylan is a self-contained unit of communication, capable of delineating the experiences of his generation with his words'; cf. also, Mathias D. Schmidt, *Bob Dylans 'message songs' der Sechziger Jahre* (Frankfurt, 1982), and Dennis Anderson, *Bob Dylan's Reception in the USA and Germany* (München, 1981).

42. Cf. Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan. Eine indiskrete Biografie* (Frankfurt, 1976); according to Dylan, the heavy rain refers to all the lies that the people from radio and the newspapers are telling and which are meant to cloud our understanding, p. 205.

This is very definitely the opinion of Pete Seeger, who says in *The Incomplete Folksinger*:

In many places one finds singers composing whole new ballads, often without bothering to write them down. And their songwriting method is the same as that of the ballad makers of old: First, they borrow an old melody, using it either note for note, or making slight changes. Second, their verses often start with the words of the older song, changing them to localize the story and make it more meaningful for friends and neighbours who may be listening . . .⁴³

What more is lacking to make them a ballad? The answer is: oral tradition. But students have told me that Dylan's 'Hard Rain' has been at least as popular and well-known as a folk song in America, and that it has been sung at demonstrations and protest-marches all over the country. This is true of so many other modern folksongs as well, which in the meantime continue to circulate in numerous variants. The singers of the *Randal* Ballad could hardly have foreseen the long and colourful history of their songs: *Habent sua fata carmina*.

43. (Simon & Schuster, 1972), cited from Kristin Baggelar & Donald Milton, *The Folk Music Encyclopedia* (London, 1977), p. 28.