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## The "Uniformity" of the Ballad Style

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## THE "UNIFORMITY" OF THE BALLAD STYLE

"It is a significant fact," says a well-known writer on ballads,<sup>1</sup> "that wherever found, the ballad style and manner are essentially the same." Many make the same generalization. But this is true only in the most general sense. It presupposes too great fixity in the ballad style. The ballad is a lyric type exhibiting epic, dramatic, and choral elements; but within the type there is as great variation as within other lyric types. The ballad style is hardly more "essentially the same" than the song style in general, or the sonnet style, or the ode style. There is no single dependable stylistic test even for the English and Scottish traditional ballads; and there are wide differences between the ballads of divergent peoples, Scandinavian, German, Spanish, American. There are differences in the stanza form, in the presence and use of refrains, iteration, and choral repetition, in the preservation of archaic literary touches, in the method of narration, and the like. The similarity in style of the pieces he included was the chief guide of Professor F. J. Child in his selections for his collection of English and Scottish ballads; yet he encountered such variety instead of essential uniformity that he was often in doubt what to include and what to omit, and fluctuated in his decisions. He made many changes of entry between his *English and Scottish Ballads*, published in 1858-1859, and his final collection published in ten parts, from 1882-1898. He would not have altered his decision concerning so many pieces had the test of style been so dependable as is usually assumed.

<sup>1</sup> Walter Morris Hart, *English Popular Ballads* (1916), p. 46.

Even the stanzaic structure of ballads is not uniform. Some of the older ballad texts are in couplet lines, while the later are usually in quatrains, and there are many variants of both forms. The ballad stanza is hardly more stable than the hymn stanza. And it varies not only in form but in movement, in the character of the expression, and in the lyrical quality. Sometimes the story is told in the third person, sometimes, as in *Jamie Douglas*, in the first person, as is the case in so many Danish ballads. The ballads were obviously composed to be recited, or to be sung to or by popular audiences; and, like hymns, they show brevity and simplicity of form. Otherwise there is wide fluctuation. Were the style "essentially the same" the differences in the quality of ballads would lie only in their plots. Yet two texts of the same story often have a gulf between them. A staple example may be found in the narration of the same occurrence in the earlier and the later texts of *The Hunting of the Cheviot*. The earlier text contains the effective and often quoted stanza—

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

The corresponding stanza in *The Chevy Chase* sounds like a travesty—

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

The same discrepancy may be noted between Percy's and Motherwell's texts of *Edward*.

Many critics have commented upon the relative flatness of the style of the English traditional ballads compared to the Scottish. Professor Beers<sup>2</sup> thinks that the superiority of the Northern balladry may have been due to the heavy settlement of Northmen in the border region. Danish literature is especially rich in ballads. It is perhaps due in part to Danish settlement in the North and to the large admixture in Northern blood and dialect that the North

<sup>2</sup> *A History of English Romanticism in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 266, 267.

Countrie became *par excellence* the ballad land. English ballads, unlike the lowland Scotch, are often flat, garrulous, spiritless, didactic. Professor F. E. Bryant<sup>3</sup> thought that the ballad of the Child type was not very current in Southern England, where the institution of the printed or stall ballad came to play so large a rôle and established a current type of another and less poetical pattern. The discrepancy in style between Northern and Southern ballads might then be ascribed to the dominance of stall balladry in London while it played no part in the North. Mr. T. F. Henderson<sup>4</sup> places emphasis upon the superiority of Scotch lyric poetry in general in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Its "makers" and bards were artists of special training and descent. Their influence is dominant for generations and their legacy may be seen in Scottish song of the eighteenth century. Northern vernacular song, he points out, is more closely linked to the past than the popular minstrelsy of England. It represents more fully the national sentiments, associations, and memories. It includes many numbers that bear the hall-mark of an ancient and noble descent.

The relation is close of the Northern ballad style to that of fifteenth century Scottish poetry and to Scottish popular song as it emerges in the eighteenth century. To cite illustration, Henryson's *Robyne and Makyne* and *The Bludy Sark* are astonishingly ballad-like in stanzaic form and in expression, though they were not composed for oral currency and the themes are not heroic or border themes. *The Bludy Sark* opens as follows:—

This hundir yeir I hard be tald  
 Thair was a worthy king;  
 Dukes, erlis, and barounis bald  
 He had at his bidding.

This lord was anceanne and ald,  
 And sixty yearis couth ring;  
 He had a dochter fair to fald,  
 A lusty lady ying.

The ballad mannerism of forced accent is noticeable, and in *Robyne and Makyne* especially striking use is made of dialogue. If these pieces had been composed for recitation or singing, if they had had

<sup>3</sup> *A History of English Balladry* (1913), p. 192.

<sup>4</sup> *Scottish Vernacular Literature* (1898), p. 385.

oral currency for some generations with consequent transformations, assimilations, and re-creation, both might possibly seem the most orthodox of traditional ballads.

To return to the subject of variation of style within the Child ballads, the precariousness of style as a test of what is properly a ballad and what is not is shown by *The Nut Brown Maid*. It resembles some of the traditional ballads so closely in style as to win for itself for a long time treatment as one of the latter. It was included, for example, in the first ballad collection published by Professor Child. But it has now very properly lost such classification since it is really a debate piece, a bit of special pleading, not a lyric tale.

There are some who classify the American cowboy songs as "American ballads."<sup>5</sup> It need hardly be said that their style is utterly different from that of the Child pieces. Conventional epithets, wrenched accent, structural repetition in narration, use of the "legacy" motive, etc., are all missing save where the songs are made over from Old World ballads. Most, however, are songs rather than ballads, and their chief collector has so termed them.

If by the statement that ballads show uniformity of style is meant that all ballads are likely to show a certain structural mannerism, *i. e.*, structural or lyrical repetition, so-called "incremental repetition," it should be pointed out that this is not a *differentia* of the ballad style, or proof of some special mode of genesis for ballads, for it is a characteristic of popular song in general. Parallelism of line structure and incremental repetition are found in medieval songs, both religious and secular, and in folk-songs of many types: carols, student songs, nursery songs and lullabies, revival hymns, etc., as well as (in a distinctive way which is not the ballad way) in game and dance songs. Lyrical repetition in presenting *narrative* is found only in ballads, for the ballad is the only narrative type of folk-song; but ballads can be ballads which do not show it. Its frequent presence in English ballads is a characteristic which they share with other types of folk-song. It is not an essential characteristic of their structure, and it is more abundant in later than in earlier texts. There are many varieties of it; and primarily it is something to be associated not merely

<sup>5</sup> G. H. Stempel, *A Book of Ballads* (1917), p. 145.

<sup>6</sup> J. A. Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* (1910).

with the traditional ballad style but with the style of folk-song in general.

Comparison shows many points of difference as well as of resemblance in the styles of Danish, Russian, Spanish, Scandinavian, English and Scottish, and American ballads. What they have in common are the features on which we rest the definition of folk ballads as a lyric type. They are story pieces, they are singable or are easily recited, and their authors and origins have been lost to view. The real truth of the matter may be stated as follows. There is no universal ballad style essentially the "same" apart from locality or chronology, even when we limit our consideration to traditional folk-ballads. Within one community, however, through a certain duration, there is likely to be uniformity of style in the ballads preserved in folk-tradition. Popular preservation has a levelling effect on pieces which have commended themselves to the folk-consciousness and have been handed down in tradition. Pieces of all types and origins are made over to conform to the horizons of the singers. A negro song may even take on characteristics of the English and Scottish ballads when recovered from white singers in regions where Old World ballads play an important rôle in the folk repertory.<sup>7</sup> Examination of a body of folk-songs may reveal wide divergence of provenance and, originally, of style. Yet, as in the cowboy pieces, the appearance of homogeneity may soon be assumed. They seem to be the product of, and to mirror the life of, those from whom they were recovered. Pieces of all types are assimilated in folk-song; in the course of time they come to borrow elements from one another; mannerisms which are easily caught spread; until similarity of style is approximated. The ballad stanza, like the hymn stanza, has certain limitations conditioned by the powers of the singers, or by the vocal and psychological limitations of popular song in general. Yet in the long run styles change for folk poetry as they do for book poetry. British popular song of the nineteenth century is not like that of the seventeenth, nor is that of the seventeenth like that of the fifteenth. American sentimental, comic, and patriotic popular songs of the twentieth

<sup>7</sup> Compare *John Hardy* (Campbell and Sharp, *Folk-Song of the Southern Appalachians*, No. 87), in which, as in several other songs in the repertory of the singers contributing, a passage has been assimilated from the Old-World ballad, *The Lass of Roch Royal*.

century are of other patterns from those current in the nineteenth. The song modes of *John Brown, Marching through Georgia, Old Dan Tucker, Zip Coon, Lorena*, have given way to those of *Tipperary, Keep the Home Fires Burning, The Long Long Trail, Over There*. These are songs not ballads, and some of them are of British origin; but the same generalization is true for the style of our contemporary story-songs or ballads. The uniformity of the ballad style is a uniformity for one people, or one class of people, during one or more generations; otherwise there is only the uniformity of simplicity to be expected of popular song of all types.

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