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The Ballads of *Tam Lin* and *Thomas the Rhymer*: transformations and transcriptions

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The oral tradition can be defined as messages or testimony transmitted orally from one generation to another. Transmitted in speech or song, these may take the form of, for example, folktales, sayings, ballads, songs, or chants. In this way, it is possible for a society to transmit oral history, oral literature, oral law and other knowledge across generations without a writing system. In some disciplines, a narrower definition of oral tradition may be appropriate. For example sociologists might also emphasize a requirement that the material is held in common by a group of people, over several generations, and might distinguish oral tradition from testimony or oral history. In a general sense though, the "oral tradition" refers to the transmission of cultural material through vocal utterance.

A strongly surviving ballad tradition can be considered a major influence on Scottish fantasy writing. Thus, the aspect of the oral tradition on which this paper will focus is the ballad tradition and on two Scottish ballads in particular, *Tam Lin* 39A (Child, 1857) and *Thomas the Rhymer* 37 (Child, 1857) which seem unique to Scotland, not least because of their debt to native fairy lore. These ballads are unusual because they have been adapted or re-told in novelistic form so many times, particularly for young readers. Novelistic retellings of such traditional material became more common in the twentieth

century and could be considered the 20th century's unique contribution to the telling of traditional tales.

Since the 1920s the retelling of traditional tales has taken two identifiable forms: the traditional re-telling where authors retell the stories in their own words but do not develop it beyond the original , and the more creative re-telling in which a new story is built on the foundation of the old.

The ballad form lends itself particularly well to prose transformations. A ballad, traditionally is a story told in poetic form, with a very regular structure, metre and rhyme scheme. Ballads contain lots of dialogue, and action is often described using the first person. Even in ballads told from a more impersonal third person point of view, dialogue is always included, usually between the two main characters. Ballads are well known for getting straight to the point of the subject: there is little compromise in them and everything is clear cut: they also concentrate on the most dramatic part of the tale.

In the ballads you will find no wordy introductions or descriptions; the reader is immediately drawn into the focal point of the story. All background detail is cast aside in favour of action and excitement. This action often takes the form of stark violence. We read of murder, scandal, battles and even incest in the ballads, all of which are designed to capture our interest. However, as part of the oral tradition, the use of traditional motifs and phrases was heavily relied upon to "flesh out" a ballad story. The singer had a number of stock phrases--"grassy green", "milk-white steed", "massy gold", "maiden fair", "and an angry man was he," "silk so fine", to name but a few — to use when singing a ballad. If the performer forgot the exact wording of a certain line and it did not

include any action important to the ballad, a stock phrase could easily be slipped in, resulting in the varied forms of ballads when they were eventually transcribed. This use of archetypal or traditional motifs features even in the most contemporary prose settings of such stories.

Many ballads also feature elements of loyalty, the supernatural, comedy and fantasy. The characters in *Tam Lin* argue, they engage in premarital sex, they argue over abortion, human sacrifice, and magic. The stories often end with the curse of the Queen of the Fairies rather than a simply happily ever after. These characteristics as well as a remarkable number of motifs associated particularly with Scottish fairy lore and a notably feminist perspective make the ballad *Tam Lin* “perhaps the most important supernatural ballad of them all” (Briggs, 1977) *and* among the more obvious choices for prose transformations.

The title (almost always) names the ballad's secondary character, Tam Lin (known variously as Tamlane and Tom Lynn, among others), who begins the narrative a captive of the faerie queen, and ends it a freed and mortal man. The protagonist of the ballad's story is the young man's rescuer, a courageous and defiant young girl usually called Janet (but also in variations Margaret, Jenny, and less commonly Elaine); it is probably due to the strength of her character and the appeal of the "girl saves boy" storyline that so many modern writers have chosen as projects adaptations and re-tellings of this ancient tale. Some of the versions start with ‘fair Janet’, others with Margaret, defying her father’s

wishes and ignoring his warnings against Tam as a womaniser, going to Carterhaugh where she allows herself to be seduced by Tam, and she becomes pregnant. Rebuked by her family, she returns to Tam to ask him to marry her, but he informs her the Fairy Queen is holding him prisoner, while at the same time managing to instruct her as to how she can set him free. She must stand at Miles Cross on Samhain or Halloween night, when the fairy folk ride from beneath their fairy hill and pick him out, on his white horse, as he passes her. She is warned that his re-capture will not be as simple as it seems at first and that the Fairy Queen will turn him into a number of shapes in her arms with the intention of making her drop him. However, if she holds on to him she will have won through and he will be released from Fairy Land, and thus be free to marry her. The whole story is of feminine dominance, because Tam is the slave of the Fairy Queen and is unable to escape on his own.

The second ballad often folded in in the re-tellings, *Thomas the Rhymer* describes how the poet Thomas became enthralled to the Fairy Queen for seven years after kissing her. He presents as an even more passive male because, after his initial reckless act, he is led about as the Queen's helpless slave. Both these ballads conform to Scots fantasy's emphasis on the matriarchal structures, of which the fairies, long confined to their subterranean mounds, seem to be among the last representatives. Colin Manlove, an authority on Scottish fantasy, contends that these two ballads can be seen as "two halves of a whole, the first showing the beginning of the enchantment the other the ending."(Manlove, 1994)

Late twentieth century retellers of these ballads break the tales down and weave new patterns from the core motifs: stories are told from a different viewpoint, with different or more developed characterisation and plot and they often celebrate or portray different social themes and values from the originals. The literature produced for children contains a far greater proportion of these re-told stories. In part this is because some domains of retelling, especially folk and fairy tales, have long been considered more appropriate to child rather than adult culture. (Stephens and McCallum, 1998) This is not simply because these materials can seem ingenuous and more accessible to children, but rather because they serve important cultural functions. Under the guise of offering children access to strange and exciting worlds removed from everyday experiences, the retellings initiate children into aspects of a social heritage in an accessible way, transmitting many of the culture's central values and assumptions as well as a body of shared allusions and experiences.

To date I have been able to identify twenty eight tellings or retellings of these ballads specifically aimed at children and young adults. (Farrell, 2008) The question of why this material should exert such a strong appeal for modern children's writers, particularly those writing for young adults is an interesting one. Part of the answer may lie in the subject matter, involving as it does such seemingly contemporary issues as pregnancy outside marriage, abortion and intergenerational conflict or, in the presence of a strong female protagonist reversing the stereotype of fairy-tale heroines being little more than decorative victims who require rescue. A strong female protagonist is one of the key elements that makes Scottish fantasy distinctive.

In examining novelistic re-tellings of the texts it is intriguing to explore what constitutes the resonance or core of these ballads: by that I mean what elements, motifs or meaning remain or are retained throughout various transformations, including those regarding plot, genre and characterisation, as well as considering why the stories still have meaning for today's audiences and authors.

Examples of three novelistic re-tellings can be used to elucidate the transformation from ballad form, all by Scots authors, *The Gold of Fairnilee* (Lang, 1888) *The Big House* (Mitchison, 1950) and *The Haunted Mountain* (Hunter, 1972). In most, but not all of these texts both the ballads of *Tam Lin* and *Thomas the Rhymer* form the basis of the stories. Additionally I will briefly discuss Liz Lochhead's 1981 poem *Tam Lin's Lady* (Lochhead, 1981) which offers a modern poetic re-telling of the tale. In all cases, the central incident of a male character being held in thrall to Fairy Land and rescued by a human from the 'real' world appears either directly or indirectly. All three novel versions are creative retellings that relocate the story to different times. In one case, *The Haunted Mountain*, the gender of the rescuer is changed and MacAllister, the man taken by the fairies, is rescued by his son Fergus, while in the case of *The Big House*, the *Tam Lin* element by itself forms only a section of the whole novel.

When these oral ballads were generically transformed into literary fairy tales, first in collections of folktales for children and later in picture-book versions for young audiences, key stylistic changes were initiated: a smoothing out of the narrative voice and

a more coherent plot; stronger characterization and a more defined setting and an idealization of Janet's reason for braving the wrath of the Fairy Queen and the trial of holding Tam Lin through a series of transformations. The overall narrative *pattern*, however—the sequencing of events—remains largely the same, as do the basic characterizations of both Janet and Tam Lin (who is a fairly undeveloped character in all versions, both ballad and literary fairy tale). The most significant change in the novels is the shift from cautionary tale to love story, an idealization of romantic love that is characteristic of the fairy tales that dominated twentieth-century children's literature and popular culture.

If the ballad form itself eludes definition because it is not a fixed or unchanging phenomenon, then novelistic transformations and translations may well be considered their natural successors and thus modern-day variations of the ballad tradition.

Andrew Lang's *The Gold of Fairnilee* derives much of its power from its setting in the Selkirk region of his own childhood, and from its foundation in Scottish legend and balladry. One Midsummer day, or more specifically on the night of St John “when the guid folk hae power”, Randal Ker of Fairnilee decides to visit a fairy wishing well on the hills beyond the Tweed. When he reaches the well about nightfall he has wishes to see the Fairy Queen, and she in turn spirits him away to Fairy Land. He is missing for seven years, at the end of which, Jean, an adopted ‘sister’ returns to the wishing well on Midsummer's Eve and wishes for three things: that she might see Randal, that she might win him back from Fairy Land and to help the local people in the famine. She looks into

the well, sees Randal and is then drawn deeper into the wood where she plucks a rose she finds there. A dwarf materializes and accuses her of stealing the rose but after crossing herself three times the dwarf turns into Randal and she has won him back. Much of Randal's experiences in fairyland are reminiscent of *Thomas the Rhymer* but his rescue by Jean parallels the central event of the Tam Lin ballad. The spirit and the manner of this tale differs significantly from Lang's other fairy tales, showing wistfulness and a somewhat melancholy soul. The cold, clear magic of the north, as austere as the landscape in which it is set, is evident throughout the whole piece. But this spareness is rooted in simplicity and integrity. Lang's style throughout *The Gold of Fairnilee* is romantic, a voice more frequently displayed in his poetry.

The version of the tale told in Naomi Mitchison's *The Big House* is subsumed within the first half of the novel. Su, the central protagonist has to save a talented piper from being pursued by 'Yon Ones' (p16) since he has been a prisoner in the Fairy Hill for 'twice seventy years', having agreed to play at a fairy wedding. To keep the piper in this world, Su has to endure the ordeal of holding on to him while he goes through a series of magical transformations. He turns into a snake, a 'slater' (woodlouse) a wild deer, a bar of white-hot iron, but she holds tight and he is finally changed into a small baby. In that form he can stay in the present day and will be brought up in the Big House and is thus rescued from the fairies.

The third specifically Scottish retelling of these stories I wish to consider is Mollie Hunter's *The Haunted Mountain*. This novel does not just retell an old story, but re-

imagines the story of *Tam Lin* the man stolen by the fairies and released after seven years of bondage by the power of human love. In constructing her framework, Mollie Hunter uses many other familiar incidents and motifs from the fairy world. Set against this world of shadows and illusions is the real world of a Scottish Highland farming community any time in the nineteenth century. MacAllister, a young, proud and rash young farmer living in the shadow of Ben MacDui, disobeys the taboo that leaves a field of every farm unworked in case the sidhe want it. He further angers the sidhe by calling them by name rather than the placatory euphemism, 'the good people'. MacAllister is stubborn and ambitious, partly driven by his love for his Peigi-Ann, and partly by the deep feeling that it is up to him to make a stand for the land which is his life. He ploughs and sows the forbidden field and in so doing reaps a whirlwind of trouble. Initially he seems to have beaten the fairy folk but, eventually MacAllister is captured and imprisoned by the sidhe for seven years, after which time he is to be sacrificed to their 'strange gods' replacing one of the sidhe themselves. MacAllister's son Fergus determines to save his father and is given the following advice

The whole kingdom of the sidhe will be abroad in the first hour of darkness on Hallowe'en, and they will use all the force of their magic against you.. But if you seize tight hold of MacAllister's hand, and keep your grip on it no matter what happens, he will be freed from the power of the sidhe and the golden chains will drop from him of their own accord. (p.83)

Fergus holds his father's hand through transformations into a snake, a stick which bursts into flame, a Scottish wild-cat, a hedgehog and finally a slimy toad. In this retelling of the *Tam Lin/Thomas the Rhymer* ballads, it is the son rather than the wife who rescues the captured man. Hunter has enlarged and invented aspects of the original texts to make them compatible with her philosophies, one of which is the heroic part played by a young

boy. Peigi-Ann, the wife and mother, can do nothing to stop her son setting out on this perilous journey — the journey itself being symbolic of the journey through life, as, Hunter comments, is traditional in Highland stories. (Hunter, 1992) In this, as in all Hunter's work, a child or adolescent has a crucial role to play in the action, and often the child has more wisdom than the adult characters. Most often, the child has insights that are closed to the adults and along with this understanding comes the need for steadfast courage in facing dangers that the child alone knows to exist, or which they alone must undergo. The substance of Hunter's fantasies accords completely with the manner of their telling. The narrative comes essentially from a spoken voice of distinctive quality. It is matter-of-fact, crisp and almost dares the reader to find something implausible in its fantastic tales. It is confidential and intimate, while at the same time it is spare and economical. Like Lang and Mitchison before her, Hunter's voice is almost bardic in its adroit and dignified simplicity. The music of Gaelic idiom and sentence form infuses the language in a unique manner. These diverse qualities merge, with extraordinary consistency and control, to express a wide span of moods and emotions within a taut, and concise, narrative structure. This is an impressive achievement, allowing the author to create the smooth and delicate transition from sorrow and wistfulness to acceptance and joy which occurs at the end of the story.

In all of these retellings there are clear and identifiable elements of the original ballads that inspired them: the rescue of the 'Tam' character by, in two cases, the female character, and the means of rescue by holding Tam as he is put through a series of transformations. The fairy folk described in all the versions are true to the Scottish

description of fairies in that they are supernatural beings straight from the Scottish tradition of fairies. They are not little fluttering creatures who live in flowers, but are the tall and handsome descendants of the gods, living underground. More often than not they are malevolent and show clear evidence of their soullessness. Certainly they are not to be trusted and after their beauty the most notable quality is their coldness. They have no kind feelings, no pity, and certainly no conscience. In *none* of these re-tellings does the idea of pre-marital sex or possible abortion appear, only the magical translations are consistent, but then all of them have a child audience specifically in mind and the genre is consistently fantasy with a strong romantic element.

Liz Lochhead's re-telling is a poetic version but very different from the original ballad. *Tam Lin's Lady* appeared in her collection of poems called *The Grimm Sisters* and is most definitely a feminist re-telling in the true sense of the word. Of all the re-tellings this is the only one where the woman appears in the title of the piece. It opens quoting the first verse of the ballad, clearly situating it in the oral context and the whole poem is one side of a conversation, where the author is being told the version of the story. The language is informal, contemporary and Scots and is undoubtedly cynical in tone.

So you met him in a magic place?
O.K.
But that's a bit airy fairy for me.

Lochhead transposes the assignation from Carterhaugh to a coffee bar, juxtaposing the element of charm with the somewhat sordid, quotidian atmosphere. She both re-tells and references the old story,

And if, as the story goes nine times out of ten —
he took you by the milkwhite hand & by the grassgreen sleeve

& laid you on the bonnie bank & asked of you no leave,
well, so what?

She considers this to be “dumb” on the part of the lady, and completely disbelieves the idea that Tam has been enslaved by a fairy for seven years. She directly names the ideas of unwanted pregnancy, abortion and abortifacient drugs and outlines the transformations through which the woman will have to see him. The narrator remarks that in the end it turned out “conventionally right” but in this version the narrator raises the question directly whether the “fair fallen maiden” will end up happy and whether Tam Lin will be as constant in seeing her through the changes. This is a sophisticated version of the ballad tale, given a modern poetic twist yet remaining true to the oral tradition as well as magical aspects of the ballad. But it is firmly rooted in contemporary society with a far more pragmatic and realistic view of the outcome.

To be a retelling a text must exist in relationship to some kind of source, the ‘pre-text’. Only in a minority of cases is that source as fixable as a single work by an identifiable author — these texts are examples of that minority. Few retellings, and all of the works discussed here come in to this category, are simple replications, even when they appear to reproduce the story and point of view of the source text. In such cases the purpose is usually cultural reproduction, in the sense of transmitting desired knowledge about society and the self, modes of learning and forms of authority. Retellings cannot replicate the significance of the original source and always impose their own pre-suppositions in the process of the retelling. Stephens and McCallum say:

Pre-texts are often already shaped by some kind of meta-narrative, and their status makes them a good site on which to impose meta-narratives expressing social values and attitudes prevailing in the time and place of the retelling. A

meta-narrative is a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience. (Stephens and McCallum, 1998)

The retelling of stories has the potential to be intellectually and culturally oppressive, but there are always possibilities for resistance, contestation and change. Retold stories also have the potential to disclose how old stories suppress the hidden, the untold and the unspoken. All of these retellings have this potential and some of them realize it.

I contend that all of the re-tellings mentioned in this paper have the potential to make a reader seek out the original ballad form and all of them demonstrate poetic essence while offering contemporary spin on cultural essentials.

Tam Lin

O I forbid you, maidens a',
That wear gowd on your hair,
To come or gae by Carterhaugh,
For young Tam Lin is there.

There's nane that gaes by Carterhaugh
But they leave him a wad,
Either their rings, or green mantles,
Or else their maidenhead.

Janet has kilted her green kirtle
A little aboon her knee,
And she has broded her yellow hair
A little aboon her bree,
And she's awa to Carterhaugh
As fast as she can hie.

When she came to carterhaugh
Tam Lin was at the well,
And there she fand his steed standing,
But away was himsel.

She had na pu'd a double rose,
A rose but only twa,
Till upon then started young Tam Lin,
Says, Lady, thou's pu nae mae.

Why pu's thou the rose, Janet,
And why breaks thou the wand?
Or why comes thou to Carterhaugh
Withoutten my command?

"Carterhaugh, it is my own,
My daddy gave it me,
I'll come and gang by Carterhaugh,
And ask nae leave at thee."

Janet has kilted her green kirtle
A little aboon her knee,
And she has broded her yellow hair
A little aboon her bree,
And she is to her father's ha
As fast as she can hie.

Four and twenty ladies fair
Were playing at the ba,
And out then came the fair Janet,
The flower among them a'.

Four and twenty ladies fair
Were playing at the chess,
And out then came the fair Janet,
As green as onie glass.

Out then spake an auld grey knight,
Lay oer the castle wa,
And says, Alas, fair Janet, for thee,
But we'll be blamed a'.

"Haud your tongue, ye auld fac'd knight,
Some ill death may ye die!
Father my bairn on whom I will,
I'll father none on thee."

Out then spak her father dear,
And he spak meek and mild,
And ever alas, sweet Janet," he says,
"I think thou gaest wi child."

"If that I gae wi child, father,
Mysel maun bear the blame,
There's neer a laird about your ha,
□ Shall get the bairn's name.

"If my love were an earthly knight,
As he's an elfin grey,
I wad na gie my ain true-love
For nae lord that ye hae.

"The steed that my true love rides on
Is lighter than the wind,
Wi siller he is shod before,
Wi burning gowd behind."

Janet has kilted her green kirtle
A little aboon her knee,
And she has broded her yellow hair
A little aboon her bree,
And she's awa to Carterhaugh
As fast as she can hie.

When she came to Carterhaugh,
Tam Lin was at the well,
And there she fand his steed standing,
But away was himsel.

She had na pu'd a double rose,
A rose but only twa,
Till up then started young Tam Lin,
Says, Lady, thou pu's nae mae.

"Why pu's thou the rose, Janet,
Amang the groves sae green,
And a' to kill the bonny babe
That we gat us between?"

"O tell me, tell me, Tam Lin," she says,
"For's sake that died on tree,
If eer ye was in holy chapel,
Or christendom did see?"

"Roxbrugh he was my grandfather,

Took me with him to bide
And ance it fell upon a day
That wae did me betide.

"And ance it fell upon a day
A cauld day and a snell,
When we were frae the hunting come,
That frae my horse I fell,
The Queen o' Fairies she caught me,
In yon green hill do dwell.

"And pleasant is the fairy land,
But, an eerie tale to tell,
Ay at the end of seven years,
We pay a tiend to hell,
I am sae fair and fu o flesh,
I'm feard it be mysel.

"But the night is Halloween, lady,
The morn is Hallowday,
Then win me, win me, an ye will,
For weel I wat ye may.

"Just at the mirk and midnight hour
The fairy folk will ride,
And they that wad their true-love win,
At Miles Cross they maun bide."

"But how shall I thee ken, Tam Lin,
Or how my true-love know,
Amang sa mony unco knights,
The like I never saw?"

"O first let pass the black, lady,
And syne let pass the brown,
But quickly run to the milk-white steed,
Pu ye his rider down.

"For I'll ride on the milk-white steed,
And ay nearest the town,
Because I was an earthly knight
They gie me that renown.

"My right hand will be gloved, lady,
My left hand will be bare,
Cockt up shall my bonnet be,
And kaimed down shall my hair,
And thae's the takens I gie thee,
Nae doubt I will be there.

"They'll turn me in your arms, lady,
Into an esk and adder,
But hold me fast, and fear me not,
I am your bairn's father.

"They'll turn me to a bear sae grim,
And then a lion bold,
But hold me fast, and fear me not,
And ye shall love your child.

"Again they'll turn me in your arms
To a red het gand of airn,
But hold me fast, and fear me not,
I'll do you nae harm.

"And last they'll turn me in your arms
Into the burning glead,
Then throw me into well water,
O throw me in with speed.

"And then I'll be your ain true-love,
I'll turn a naked knight,
Then cover me wi your green mantle,
And hide me out o sight."

Gloomy, gloomy was the night,
And eerie was the way,

As fair Jenny in her green mantle
To Miles Cross she did gae.

At the mirk and midnight hour
She heard the bridles sing,
She was as glad at that
As any earthly thing.

First she let the black pass by,
And syne she let the brown,
But quickly she ran to the milk-white steed,
And pu'd the rider down.

Sae weel she minded what he did say,
And young Tam Lin did win,
Syne covered him wi her green mantle,
As blythe's a bird in spring

Out then spak the Queen o Fairies,
Out of a bush o broom,
"Them that has gotten young Tam Lin
Has gotten a stately-groom."

Out then spak the Queen o Fairies,
And an angry woman was she,
"Shame betide her ill-far'd face,
And an ill death may she die,
For she's taen awa the bonniest knight
In a' my companie.

"But had I kend, Tam Lin," said she,
"What now this night I see,
I wad hae taen out thy twa grey een,
And put in twa een o tree."

Child ballad #39A *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, 1882-1898* by Francis
James Child

Thomas the Rhymer
also known as "True Thomas"

True Thomas lay on Huntlie Bank,
A ferlie he spied wi' his eye,
And there he saw a lady bright,
Come riding down by Eildon Tree.

Her shirt was o the grass-green silk,
Her mantle o the velvet fine,
At ilka tett of her horse's mane
Hang fifty siller bells and nine.

True Thomas, he pulld aff his cap,
And louted low down to his knee
"All hail, thou mighty Queen of Heaven!
For thy peer on earth I never did see."

"O no, O no, Thomas," she said,
"That name does not belang to me;
I am but the queen of fair Elfland,
That am hither come to visit thee."

"Harp and carp, Thomas," she said,
"Harp and carp along wi' me,
And if ye dare to kiss my lips,
Sure of your bodie I will be."

"Betide me weal, betide me woe,
That weird shall never daunt me;
"Syne he has kissed her rosy lips,
All underneath the Eildon Tree.

"Now, ye maun go wi me," she said,
"True Thomas, ye maun go wi me,
And ye maun serve me seven years,
Thro weal or woe, as may chance to be."

She mounted on her milk-white steed,

She's taen True Thomas up behind,
And aye whenever her bridle rung,
The steed flew swifter than the wind.

O they rade on, and farther on--
The steed gaed swifter than the wind--
Untill they reached a desart wide,
And living land was left behind.

"Light down, light down, now, True Thomas,
And lean your head upon my knee;
Abide and rest a little space,
And I will shew you ferlies three."

"O see ye not that narrow road,
So thick beset with thorns and briers?
That is the path of righteousness,
Tho after it but few enquires.

"And see not ye that braid braid road,
That lies across that lily leven?
That is the path to wickedness,
Tho some call it the road to heaven.

"And see not ye that bonny road,
That winds about the fernie brae?
That is the road to fair Elfland,
Where thou and I this night maun gae.

"But, Thomas, ye maun hold your tongue,
Whatever ye may hear or see,
For, if you speak word in Elflyn land,
Ye'll neer get back to your ain countrie."

O they rade on, and farther on,
And they waded thro rivers aboon the knee,
And they saw neither sun nor moon,
But they heard the roaring of the sea.

It was mirk mirk night, and there was nae stern light,
And they waded thro red blude to the knee;
For a' the blude that's shed on earth
Rins thro the springs o that countrie.

Syne they came on to a garden green,
And she pu'd an apple frae the tree:
"Take this for thy wages, True Thomas,
It will give the tongue that can never lie."

"My tongue is mine ain," True Thomas said;
"A gudely gift ye was gie to me!
I neither dought to buy nor sell,
At fair or tryst where I may be.

"I dought neither speak to prince or peer,
Nor ask of grace from fair ladye:"
"Now hold thy peace," the lady said,
"For as I say, so must it be."

He has gotten a coat of the even cloth,
And a pair of shoes of velvet green,
And till seven years were gane and past
True Thomas on earth was never seen.

Child ballad #37C *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, 1882-1898* by Francis
James Child

Tam Lin's Lady

Liz Lochhead

*'Oh I forbid you maidens a'
who wear gowd in your hair —
to come or go by Carterhaugh
for young Tam Lin is there.'*

So you met him in a magic place?

O.K.

But that's a bit airy fairy for me.

I go for the specific — you could, for instance,
say that when he took you for a coffee
before he stuck you on the last bus
there was one of those horrible congealed-on
plastic tomatoes on the table... oh don't
ask me

I don't know why everything has to be so sordid these days....

I can take *some* sentiment.—

Tell me how charmed you were

When he wrote both your names and a heart in spilled coffee.—

Everything except that he carved them on the elder tree.

But have it your own way.

Picking apart your personal

Dream landscape of court and castle and greenwood

Isn't really up to me.

So call it magical. A fair country.

Anyway, you were warned.

And if, as the story goes nine times out of ten.—

He took you by the milkwhite hand & by the grassgreen sleeve

& laid you on that bonnie bank & asked of you no leave,

well, so what?

You're not the first to fall for it,

good green girdle and all —

with your schooltie rolled up in your pocket

trying to look eighteen. I know.

All perfectly forgivable.

Relax.

What I do think was a little dumb

if you don't mind me saying so

was to swallow that old one about you being
the only one who could save him.

Oh, I see — there was this lady
he couldn't get free of.
Seven years and more he said he'd sacrificed himself
and if you didn't help him he'd end up
a fairy forever! Enslaved.

Or worse still in hell without you.

Well, well.
So he stopped you wandering in the forest
and picking pennyroyal and foxgloves
and making appointments and borrowing money for the abortion.
He said all would be well
If only you'd trust him this once
and go through
what he was honest enough to admit in advance
would be hell and high water for you.

So he told you which relatives to pander to
and which to ignore.
How to snatch him from the Old One
And hold on through thick and thin
through every change that happened.
Oh but it was terrible!
It seemed earlier, you see,
He'd been talking in symbols (like
adder-snake, wild savage bear
brand of bright iron red-hot from the fire)
and as usual the plain unmythical truth was worse.
At any rate you were good and brave, you did
hang on, hang on tight.
And in the end of course
everything turned out conventionally right
with the old witch banished to her corner lamenting,
cursing his soft heart and the fact she couldn't keep him, and everyone sending
out for booze for the wedding.

So we're all supposed to be happy?
Well how about you, my fallen fair maiden
now the drama's over, tell me

how goes the glamourie?
After the twelve casks of good claret wine
and the twelve and twelve of muskadine,
tell me
what about you?
How do you think Tam Lin will take
all the changes you'll go through?

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