

STURDY STORIES: MEDIEVAL NARRATIVE INTO POPULAR BALLAD¹

Some medieval English romances, lays and tales have close corresponding versions in popular and broadside balladry. This paper aims to study such correspondences in order to characterise the transformation of medieval literature into the popular texts of ballads. We shall analyse seven examples, then consider some remarkable cases that were excluded from our analysis (stories by Chaucer, Langland, the Gawain-poet and Malory that were turned into minstrel ballads, but did not survive in the tradition of popular ballads), and finally generalise some characteristics which, taken together, suggest how the medieval texts were transformed into post-medieval popular culture.² Our seven ballads with indisputable medieval analogues are all represented in Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*:³ "King Orfeo" [19], "Fair Annie" [62], "Hynd Horn" [17], "Thomas the Rhymer" [37], "Sir Hugh" [155], "Child Waters" and "King Henry."

¹ An early version of this work was presented at the I International Conference on Popular Texts, Almagro, Universidad de Castilla - La Mancha, 1998. It is also partly based on the research done for three previous articles in the *SELIM Journal* (see References section), extending their conclusions to a wider field.

² A ground-breaking article which explains why medieval literary scholars have tended to leave the study of the ballad to folklorists and musicologists, while arguing a strong case in favour of their return to it is Green's, which is a fitting part of a tribute to Gray (1989), as he is the great exception to that rule, together with Knight (1993). Green (1997: 179) admits that, while an 18th popular ballad offers little as a witness to reconstruct a related medieval romance, it nevertheless has, for the student of medieval culture, a "potential for preserving clues, however opaque and dispersed, to unofficial attitudes and beliefs that might otherwise have disappeared from view."

³ The number that Child assigned to each ballad is cited in square brackets.

Though Child's editing criteria have been criticised in a number of ways,⁴ some of his textual readings need revision, and we should bear in mind significant variants he did not include in his collection, to which a few ballads might also be added; his work remains the most general source to approach the medieval roots of popular ballads.⁵ He duly summarised likely sources, together with their European, particularly Scandinavian analogues, in his introduction to each ballad, providing us with the starting point for the general study of ballad development. Child, however, never defined theoretically what he meant by a ballad, let alone what medieval texts were more likely to become popular ballads. The latter is also true even of Fowler, whose history of the ballad remains the standard text of its kind. Child and Fowler's identification of ballad sources has not been challenged by later scholarship in a definite way, and it is here assumed to be generally correct. We will therefore refer to the development of each of those seven ballads in an attempt to find out which aspects of the medieval stories made them succeed later as ballads.

The ballad of "King Orfeo" was collected from oral tradition in the Shetlands between the 1880s and the 1920s. But the story it tells may be traced back to the ancient myth of Orpheus by means of the Scottish romance of *King Orphius*, the lay of *Sir Orfeo* and a lost twelfth-century *Lai d'Orphey*, in addition to Boethius' rendering of the classical myth, the Old English translation of Boethius in Alfred's day, and a number of other influences (Friedman 146-210). The question is why this story should prove so enduring. Its appeal probably derives from its virtually timeless theme of tragic loss and marvellous recovery through artistic skill and sensitivity,⁶ a

⁴ The main academic as well as the ideological objections to Child's work are discussed by Harker 1985: 101-20.

⁵ There is now a re-edition of Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* underway (the first of its five volumes came out in 2002) corrected and prepared by Mark Heiman and Laura Saxton Heiman for Loomis House Press. This is evidence of the fact that Child's work has not been totally superseded, and perhaps of a renewed interest in ballad scholarship. Another symptom is Lyle, E. et al. 2002. *The Song Repertoire of Amelia and Jane Harris*. The Scottish Text Society, Edinburgh, which completes and revises a small part of Child's work.

⁶ The barest version of "King Orfeo" to our knowledge, collected from the singing of John Stickle in Baltasound, Unst, April 28, 1947, is just a dozen lines long and its story is extremely eroded, but it still contains the idea of the music "Which might a made a sick heart heal". See Bronson, vol. 1, p. 75: "Sir Orfeo", 1.

poetic subject that could be easily transformed from a classical into a medieval frame of mind (García Gual). In addition, the lay of Sir Orfeo had a typical folktale structure, as we have tried to show elsewhere (Valdés Miyares 1993), which secured its transmission and survival beyond the Middle Ages. Several other articles have demonstrated the usefulness of Vladimir Propp's morphology (1985) in baring the folktale form of popular ballads (Beatie 1978; Buchan 1991; Valdés Miyares 1998). Cutting out rhetoric, poetic ornamentation, and descriptive detail, the sturdy structure of the story allowed it to survive.

Our next case in point has similar medieval roots, being also traceable both to the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman context and to the Auchinleck manuscript (c. 1330). The ballad of "Fair Annie" is related to Mary de France's *Lai le Freine* as well as to the fourteenth-century English version known by the same name. Besides the phonic proximity of French "Freine" and English "Faire-Annie", lay and ballad share the old motif of the twins separated at birth (cf. the Spanish "Romance de Espinelo"), and the long-suffering mistress who even has to prepare the bridal bed for her lord/lover's wife, who turns out to be the heroine's own sister. The story is somewhat related to that of Griselda, which we shall be discussing below. Besides, the structural and thematic relations between the various tales and ballads in this tradition has been dealt with in another article (Valdés Miyares 1998). Suffice it to say now that the similarity between the *Lai le Freine* and "Fair Annie" is significant, since the ballad retains all the drama and emotion that first made the lay popular. The narrow narrative scope of the lays made their transformation into ballads a direct and somewhat natural process. Both genres also shared a thematic affinity, since many Lays dealt with stories of (often tragic) love and magic.

The medieval versions of our next two examples are not brief lays like the former two, but extended romances, which therefore appear severely reduced in the ballads. The first of these romances demands a more detailed attention, not least because its relation to the ballads has seldom been analysed. *King Horn* (c. 1250) is not only reputed to be the oldest English romance, but it has also been said to gather all archetypal-romance motifs compressed to their essentials (Sands 15), which makes its further reduction to the limits of a particularly short ballad a feat of poetic synthesis. The twenty-four or so

episodes that might be distinguished in the romance are reduced to three in the ballad of “Hynd Horn”, and stripped of all detail. In the various ballad versions, always shorter than 70 lines, the action tends to be limited to three episodes:

- 1) Horn’s exile with his lady’s ring,
- 2) his return dressed up as a beggar, and
- 3) his recognition at his lady’s wedding by dropping the ring into a glass.

For example, a variant [Child 17C] noted down by Motherwell in 1825 from the singing of Agnes Lyle, in spite of being very brief, includes a great deal of formulaic repetition, particularly in the dramatic exchange of riches for rags between Hyn Horn and the Beggar, which suggests that the story might originally have been spread by humble pedlars rather than courtly minstrels, and that it might have been influenced by other ballads about beggars or gypsies eloping with young ladies. The feudal context of land rule, fealty and betrayal, combat and marriage treaties, which is so carefully integrated in the romance plot, is replaced by an exclusive attention to the most emotive circumstances, while the many feudal characters (Horn’s brother, kings, retainers, the steward, Irish knights, etc.) are reduced to the main couple and the beggar (their messenger) of whom Horn borrows his disguise; the lady’s father and her bridegroom are scarcely mentioned. Thus the narrative concentrates on what can be regarded as the emotional core of the story: the pathos of separation, the adventure of rescue at the wedding, and the happy denouement. The ring’s magic quality, which in the romance just has the knightly virtue of freeing the hero from fear in combat by reminding him of his lady, is greatly enhanced, since in the ballad its precious stones, by turning pale, warn Horn of the risk of losing her, perhaps replacing the romance’s foreboding dreams. Furthermore, in the ballad she gives him another gift, a wand, which is in fact a sceptre to rule over Scotland, or, in another version not collected by Child, “a birdie sweet singin” which flew home “As soon as your love loves a man.”⁷ The blowing of the horn to summon troops and the drinking horn of the romance, which were probably related to the hero’s name, appear in some variants of the

⁷ See Buchan, D. ed.. 1973: 143-44, stanzas 7-12.

ballad, but the first (when mentioned) is called “trumpet”, and the drinking horn, though remaining essential as a narrative function in all versions, is a “glass”, “cup”, or “can.”⁸ The heroine Rymenhild, when she has a proper name at all in the ballads, is known more popularly as “Jean(ie).”

The other popular ballad which is related to a comparatively much longer and complex romance is “Thomas the Rhymer”, but whether it actually originated in the romance of *Thomas of Erceldoune*, as editors like Child or Murray usually took for granted, was seriously questioned by Lyle. The doubt may of course be extended to all the cases under our scrutiny. But the fact that the ballads perhaps stem from versions of their story which were very different from the extant medieval texts, and that some old version of the ballad, possibly a lay, may have been the origin of the fifteenth-century *Thomas of Erceldoune*, rather than the other way round, should not deter us from comparing the medieval romance to the cognate ballad, even if there is no written evidence of the latter before the eighteenth century. Besides the date, the romance has a better claim to antiquity because it includes many more details of the old legend on which the ballad also seems to be based.⁹ Thomas of Erceldoune is supposed to have lived in the Scottish Borders in the thirteenth century, and was well-known as a prophet by the time John Barbour mentioned him in *The Bruce* (c. 1375, Book II, lines 86-90). The romance is structured in three fits: the first narrates Thomas’ encounter with a Queen of Fairy and his journey into her Land, and the other two present the historical prophecies he made through the gift he got in the Land of Fairy. The ballad, as usual, excises the whole ornamental *descriptio*, as well as some circumstances like the Lady’s transformation into a loathly dame, and it finishes when Thomas leaves Fairyland having obtained his “tongue that can never lie.” The story survived as a ballad well into the nineteenth century by

⁸ This would be a variant of the recognition function (Q) in Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*, and it is indeed a common motif in folktales. See Thompson 1977: 127.

⁹ With such arcane subjects and motifs as those of *Thomas of Erceldoune* and “Thomas the Rhymer” it is always possible to produce different interpretations. For example, they have been read as based on the life in some monastic house in the Eildon area in the thirteenth century by Moffat, B. 1988: True Thomas: The Strange Case of Thomas the Rhymer. *Cencrastus*, 31: 29-36. Alternatively, it can be studied within a broader mythological, rather than historical, background, as in Valdés Miyares, R. 2002: Sir Gawain and the Great Goddess. *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature*. 83.3: 185-206.

concentrating on the romantic and magic episode of the encounter with an otherworldly lady who becomes the hero's guide, and doing without the obscure prophetic element, which, however, continued an independent life of its own in other sorts of publications of various prophecies attributed to Thomas (see Murray's appendixes).

As in the former case, the connection between Chaucer's *Prioress' Tale* and "Sir Hugh, or The Jew's Daughter" may be that both were based on the same legend, rather than the ballad being based on the medieval tale. The legend of a boy who was killed by the Jews of Lincoln might date back to the late twelfth century, and its origins may be assumed to be prior to the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290, though Chaucer's version was composed much later, possibly on the occasion of Richard II's visit to that city in 1387. The anti-Semitic tale was widespread in Medieval Europe, sometimes involving a miracle of the Virgin, who makes the murdered child accuse the Jews. Its revival in ballad form proves the continuity of such prejudice in the modern age. Three parts may be distinguished in *The Prioress' Tale*:

1) The child is killed in the Jewish quarter of an Asian town, for singing a hymn to the Virgin;

2) his mother prays to find him, which she does when they hear him singing from his grave, and,

3) after murderers are quartered and hanged, at his own funeral the child explains the miracle, and the narrator refers to Hugh of Lincoln as an analogous story ("O younge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also / With cursed Jewes ... / ... / Preye eek for us ...", *The Prioress Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, lines 684-687).

In this case, apparently, the ballad derives more directly from the legend, since the ballad hero is called "Hugh" (whereas in Chaucer's tale he remains unnamed), and sometimes associated with Lincoln.¹⁰ Three parts may also be separated in the ballad, though their contents differ from the medieval tale:

¹⁰ In Mrs Brown of Falkland's version [Child 155A] the location is Lincoln, though she, or the women who handed down the song to her, probably knew the legend independently from the ballad, and might have introduced the name of the town in her own rendering of the ballad text. In the Percy Folio version [Child 155B], over

1) The murder acquires sexual and misogynist connotations from the biblical Genesis, in addition to the anti-Semitic, as the child is tempted by a Jewish girl with an apple to enter the garden of the Jew's castle, and then murdered in a ritualistic, even cannibalistic form.

2) The second part is more similar to *The Prioress' Tale*: the mother looks for the child, until he calls her from the well where his body had been thrown.

3) Finally, the child tells his mother to fetch his winding sheet and bury him, for he is dead.

In Mrs Brown of Falkland's version, which Child privileged as his "A" variant, there is a suspiciously contrived closing stanza which stresses the eerie nature of the event by adding other ghostly occurrences following on dead Hugh's words in "merry Lincoln", such as "bells rung without men's hands" and "books read without men's tongue."¹¹ Thus in the ballad the pious element becomes irrelevant, as the supernatural events acquire a rather superstitious or neo-Gothic quality. The Virgin is only mentioned in some variants, and merely because Hugh is thrown into "Our Lady's draw well" [Child 155A]. This is hardly surprising, since Protestantism had long prevailed in England when the ballad was copied down, and the Marian cult was not very popular there (indeed, Mrs Brown was married to a Presbyterian minister). It is more remarkable that the murder should not be punished in the ballad. Thus the religious legend of a martyr and divine retribution was turned into a horror story of crime and a revenant, probably more chauvinistic but with no explicit doctrinal purpose.

Our last two examples of medieval stories turned into ballads are also represented in the *Canterbury Tales*. Both of them also have marked folktale features. The story of Patient Griselda on which Chaucer based *The Clerk's Tale* came from written sources, such as the final story of Boccaccio's

one century earlier, the setting is called "Mirry-land toune", which as Bishop Thomas Percy suggested, may be a corruption of "merry Lincoln". Cited by Fowler 1968: 259.

¹¹ Though Child used Mrs Brown as his most reliable informant, her variants providing him with most of the A texts of his "popular" ballads, she is easily suspect of introducing literary influences from her own readings in her rendering of ballad texts, for example the Gothic touch in her "Sir Hugh". Fowler 1968: 266.

Decameron and a close French translation of Petrarch's Latin version of it in *Epistola Seniles*. Yet it appears to keep the form of the original folktale (Bettridge & Utley). In English balladry it is possible to find two kinds of versions, the broadsides of "Patient Grissel", and a far freer version circulated in oral variants, often known as "Child Waters." The written versions, both Chaucer's and the broadsides, fall into five parts:

1) description of Walter and his agreement with his subjects to marry;

2) description of Griselde, her pledge of obedience to him as her social superior and husband, and their wedding;

parts 3) and 4) tell how Walter tests her patience by kidnapping the daughter and son she had of him, pretending he has killed them,

and finally 5) Griselde herself is cast off and must act as a servant at Walter's new wedding to a rich lady.

As the heroine reacts with her proverbial patience even to that ultimate humiliation, he decides to put an end to her ordeals. This last part includes the family's denouement and is similar to the ballad of "Fair Annie", though the new bride turns out to be Griselde's own daughter, not her sister; besides, the tale lacks the motif of the twins separated at birth, and its drama is more centred on the morganatic wedding: the heroine's predicament in marrying her feudal lord.¹² In "Child Waters" Ellen also suffers from social inequality but of a more general kind: she is pregnant of him and elopes with him in the hope that he will care for her and the infant, but Child Waters tests her patience nearly as cruelly as Walter did, by treating her as his footman and making her run (on foot and in her advanced state of pregnancy) after him, who is riding a horse, for miles and across the river Clyde. In this case much of the drama lies in her having to face motherhood alone, until this is discovered by Waters' mother, whose mediation makes him accept Ellen as his bride. Through its dramatic concentration the ballad tightens up the tension between the disadvantaged woman and her cruel man, perhaps exhibiting more plainly the social problem affecting women with unrecognised children in traditional patriarchy. The folktale element of the

¹² The relation between the stories of rival sisters and patient wives and some of their cultural connotations are discussed in Valdés Miyares 1998.

quasi-demonic testing of an innocent, common to all versions, is also stressed by brevity in "Child Waters."

The medieval analogue of our final example is not easily identifiable at once. The ballad of "King Henry" [Child 32] is about a king who goes out hunting and meets a female monster who forces him to feed her and to admit he will do all her will. The most familiar medieval version today is Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, but this lacks the key topic of the captured man having to feed the bossy hag, a subversion of the social role of women who had to serve food to their old men. The same happens with John Gower's version, *The Tale of Florent*. In fact the closest medieval analogue of "King Henry" is the comic romance *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*, where Gawain not only has to marry the loathly lady but also to suffer the public humiliation of her awful table manners and outrageous appetite at their wedding banquet. Thus the variant that survived in popular ballad form is far removed from the relatively polite versions of Chaucer and Gower, but one that, in its humorous description of the ugly lady's body and her banqueting, matches neatly Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque in medieval popular culture. Like the previous six popular ballads we have considered, "King Henry" shows how certain medieval topics remained attractive for a wide audience far beyond the Middle Ages.¹³

Once we have sampled the kinds of medieval stories that became popular texts of ballads, we should briefly examine the *exclusion* of some well-known medieval stories from the popular ballad repertory. Some of these stories were probably popular in their own age, and received enough appreciation to be copied in manuscripts, included in collections like the *Canterbury Tales*, edited and printed by Caxton, and even turned into minstrel ballads in the seventeenth century, but they never became part of the living oral and broadside traditions for long enough to survive into the eighteenth century. Of the four cases chosen for discussion, which are perhaps the most

¹³ The cultural significance of the subject of "King Henry" is discussed in the light of M. Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* (1965) in Valdés Miyares 1999. Ballad audiences are of course best understood in their local specificity, as Buchan does for the richest popular ballad area in Britain, the North-East of Scotland. But it is also possible to generalise about the kind of traditional societies where folktales as well as popular ballads would flourish, like Vladimir Propp did in his study of *The Historical Roots of the Folktale*.

representative narratives in the Middle English literary canon, the first is Chaucer's works in general, and the other three come from the Percy Folio manuscript¹⁴ and they look like readers' digests of such well-known works as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Piers Plowman*, and *Le Morte Darthur*, which perhaps tried to profit from their well-established reputation, but failed to get any lasting popularity beyond their initial literate public.

As for Chaucer, we have already pointed to three of his tales that also lived on as popular ballads. Chaucer was perhaps the most popular (in the sense of widely appreciated and imitated) medieval poet then as now. But the aspect of his work that his immediate followers (Lydgate, Hoccleve, Henryson, Dunbar, Gavin Douglas, ...) most admired and emulated was the courtly refinement of *The Book and the Duchess*, *Troilus and Cryseide*, and even the inflated style of *The Monk's Tale*, rather than the more apparently straightforward and down-to-earth *Canterbury Tales*, such as *The Miller's Tale* or *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. The latter are more widely enjoyed by students and general readers today, yet in early modern popular culture even these seem to have been too complex (not the least because of their framework, the *Canterbury Tales*) to become successful ballads. Therefore no versions of any of Chaucer's works survived as popular texts, except in cases like the tale of Griselda, Hugh of Lincoln or the knight and loathly lady, which are far more likely to have derived from folktales than from the actual Chaucerian versions. Another interesting case we may mention in passing is Chaucer's tale of Constance (*The Man of Law's Tale*), which, besides a version by Gower, exists as a medieval lay or short romance called *Emaré* (ed. by Mills 1973: 46-74), which is closer to a folktale in structure. It is hard to guess why the well-known adventures of the strong-willed Constance or Emaré did not have its ballad version. Length and number of episodes were not in themselves a hindrance, as the case of *King Horn* suggests. The existence of *Emaré* shows that it was possible to concentrate

¹⁴ The reliable scholarly edition of the Percy Folio, which is the most important single document in the history of the ballad, was not done by Percy himself, whose antiquarian methods in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* would not be admitted as scholarly today, but by J.W. Hales and F.J. Furnivall (1967-68). Modern re-editions of Percy's *Reliques* (such as Percy 1996) however, contain notes on what Percy adapted according to his own taste and interest, and the poems from Percy's *Reliques* we discuss in the present article were also in his Folio, except for "The Jew's Daughter."

the novelistic hagiography of Constance on the simple story the determined sufferance of the heroine and her magic mantle, so that there just remained one step to turn it into a ballad.¹⁵

Some attempts to turn multi-layered medieval stories into plain ballads necessarily foundered. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was turned into a tail-rhyme poem of “The Greene Knight” by some minstrel, but this crude version preserved in the Percy Folio only succeeds in exemplifying the impossibility of translating an elaborated romance into a more popular format which could in turn become a traditional ballad. Taken out of its original chivalric context and reduced to its basic story-line, the romance loses all interest. Much of the appeal of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, leaving aside its language and style, is in the narrator’s skill to sustain an atmosphere of mystery. The minstrel who concocted “The Greene Knight” spoils it all by explaining away too soon (lines 37-72) who that Green Knight is, and why he challenges Gawain: Sir Bredbeddle (Bertilak in the medieval poem) is transformed into the Greene Knight by his mother-in-law Agostes (Morgan le Fay, A-Ghostess, or Argante?) to teach Gawaine a lesson because her daughter was in love with him:

All was for her daughters sake,
That which she soe sadlye spake
 To her sonne-in-law the knight:
Because Sir Gawaine was bold and hardye,
And thereto full of curtesye,
 To bring him into her sight (55-60).¹⁶

Such premature unravelling of the plot that the medieval romance keeps in mesmeric suspense to the very end, and even remains suggestively ambivalent, does not do any good to the story. If the tale of the Green Knight

¹⁵ We may just venture the argument that the story did not have much love interest, as the male characters are dwarfed in comparison to the formidable saintly heroine, who is perhaps too self-centred in her direct relation to God and fate to be a typical ballad heroine: ballads often portray strong-willed, dominant women, but they are seldom shown independently from any some sort of amorous story that is central to the plot.

¹⁶ Quoted from the internet edition of Thomas Hahn, ed. 1995: *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*. Western Michigan University for TEAMS, Kalamazoo.

was ever to become a ballad, this was not the right path, for one of the defining characteristics of the ballad is precisely that it does not like to explain motivations for the action it narrates.¹⁷

In the same Folio there is another minstrel composition about Malory's last tale, which Bishop Thomas Percy published as "King Arthur's Death (a fragment)." If William Caxton chose to print Malory's various tales (as they turned out to be in the Winchester manuscript of Malory's works) under a unified, more marketable title, *Le Morte Darthur*, it was because he knew that it would become popular at least among the literate classes, and the title would be appealing and representative enough. Malory's prose was far more straightforward and engaging than, say, the Gawain-poet's idiom and texture (let alone the dialect). But Malory's works could hardly be reduced or abstracted in any intelligible way either, without sacrificing their peculiar atmosphere and effect. The author of the minstrel poem followed on Caxton's idea of choosing the final tragedy of Arthur's death as not only the culminating but also the central tale of Malory's works as a whole. But in separating it from the other tales of which it is a climax, the minstrel marred its poignancy. In addition, it would have been unlikely for a popular-ballad audience of, say, Scottish labourers in a nineteenth-century *farmtoun* as described by Buchan (1972) to grasp and enjoy from their own experience the pathos of the break-up of an aristocratic Round Table and of the fabulous king's last days.

Our last case from the Percy Folio is a version of William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, which had its chance of becoming a popular text under the title "The Complaint of Conscience." Failing to find a way to sum up such an encyclopaedic spiritual quest, due both to its length and multiple allegorical meaning, the ballad-monger was again forced to select an episode he

¹⁷ This was noted by practically every attempt to define the popular ballad after Child. Thus, "in order to get it told effectively, non-essentials have to be eliminated", for "Vivid and emotionally arresting as are the momentary glimpses or the cumulative speeches out of which the narrative is built up, they furnish little opportunity for explanation" (Gerould 1932: 87 and 89); "This avoidance of circumstantial detail, the broadest generalization of motif, situation, and character, is a leading characteristic of ballad poetry and essential to its traditional preservation" (Entwistle 1939: 27); in short, "The main end of the ballads is to present the story dramatically, and therefore explanation, moralist comment, and even original phraseology are suppressed" (Hodgart 1962: 31).

regarded as the most significant. He chose part of the first few Passus (II to IV), the episodes dealing with Lady Meed and the Knight Conscience, which is a moral satire on the corruption of the royal court. The narrative consists in Conscience's self-account of how he has been expelled from Court, and from the company of Westminster lawyers and London merchants. Much like Langland's Passus IV ends with the king recognising the way in which Meede prevents the fair exercise of law, the "Complaint" also has an optimistic end with a plea for England to banish Pride and restore good administration. Thus it recaptures some of Langland's tone and spirit, though the narrative is just very loosely based on a small fraction of the medieval poem. It curiously departs from Langland in using a Chaucerian stanza instead of alliteration, therefore choosing a relatively sophisticated poetic metre. More importantly, the rather abstract, intellectual and moral meaning of Langland's work made it unsuitable to gain any popular currency beyond the Middle Ages.

Turning medieval texts into popular ballads was, of course, not the purpose of the compiler of the Percy Folio. The manuscript was rather a kind of minstrel's commonplace-book which actually "marks the end of the period of minstrel influence on the evolution of balladry" (Fowler 1968: 133). As such, the Percy Folio was a watershed in the evolution of the ballad. Several of the poems it contained would also become very widespread popular ballads, like "Child Waters." Many others remained curious, belated minstrel versions of medieval stories. This process of, as it were, natural selection of the fittest tales to survive as ballads depended on several factors, or conditions under which medieval stories became popular texts. We may sum up them up as follows.

I. Sturdy folktale structures, rather than minstrels' re-elaborations, survived best. In practical terms, "ballads are schematic story-containers sturdy enough to retain their basic shape despite repeated usage by different people" (Bold 1979: 15). Ballads such as those of Orfeo and Horn, stripped bare of the ornamentation and detail of their romance counterparts, were able to subsist for seven centuries of oral transmission.¹⁸

¹⁸ In the case of some medieval texts, it was unfortunate that they did not become popular texts, as they had certain ingredients that might have helped them in the process. For example, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has been found to contain

II. Emotion and pathos become intensified by brevity. This was probably the cause for the failure of ballad versions that could not retain, in concentrated form, the emotional effect of the original story. "Child Waters", for example, is able to preserve Griselda's kind of suffering, whereas "The Death of Arthur" in the Percy Folio has none of Malory's intensity.

III. Certain themes were more favoured by popular taste: the musings of a knight called Conscience or the epic tragedy of Arthur's death did not seem to make much sense to a popular ballad audience, who preferred naturalistic or romanticised stories about relations between man and woman. The amorous theme appears in all our examples of long-lasting ballads, though in extremely different forms.

IV. The symbolic order prevails over mimetic realism.¹⁹ Even when the story has realistic social echoes, like in the treatment of women in the Le Freine and Griselda stories, the ballad's concentration stylises the symbolic drama of patience and resistance. Farytales like those of Orfeo and Thomas of Erceldoune are favourites thanks to their dream-world setting, and "Sir Hugh" adds eerie details to the legend in order to highlight its symbolic representation of men's fear of the Other (whether that Other is represented by Jews or women).

V. Women's concerns become more focused. Not only does popular taste eschew warriors' stories or priestly moral reflections like those in *Piers Plowman*, but in all cases it tends to bring to the fore women's situations, in the ballad's symbolic representation of either their social disadvantages, or of their socially-unacceptable (in traditional society) ascendancy over men, like in "King Henry" and its role reversal making a sheepish king feed a loathly lady.²⁰

In sum, the reasons why some well-known medieval stories never became popular ballads (in the sense that Child implied) can only be hinted at, as

folktale elements (Luttrell 1988), but the minstrel version we have of it missed that popularising potential altogether.

¹⁹ This psychological point is elaborated by Knight (1993) in order to explain the popularity of the ballad of "Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight."

²⁰ Mary Ellen Brown's article counts itself among the "preliminary attempts to begin the process of looking at women and ballads with gender as a central lens and focus" (Brown 1997: 56).

they are highly conjectural. We have nonetheless speculated on the stylistic complexity and medieval sophistication of some stories which seem to have come close to popular ballad forms, particularly those which appear in the Percy Folio, a manuscript that is regarded as the most important document for the development of the popular ballad. The minstrels that, according to Fowler, would have been determinant in the transition from medieval narrative to early modern popular poetry, failed to fit the old stories to the new culture. On the other hand, we have found it easier to see why certain other medieval stories lived on as ballads. They were folktales that probably existed in oral tradition quite apart from the extant medieval texts, emotive, amorous, symbolic stories, and chiefly told from a female perspective.

Rubén Valdés Miyares
Universidad de Oviedo

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