Raimund Borgmeier

Twelve Popular Child Ballads:
Texts and Interpretations

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B·A·S·E

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Cover image: "Robin Hood and two of his companions"
(Woodcut, *Roxburghe Ballads*, c. 1630)

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Contents

General Editor's Preface

B·A·S·E offers a home to many different forms of scholarly engagements with Ballads and Songs, and with our publisher WVT based at Trier in Germany, we are particularly pleased to offer a volume firmly rooted in the German philological tradition.

The author, Raimund Borgmeier (Justus Liebig Universität Gießen), is one of the leading ballad scholars in Germany, and, like Natascha Würzbach (Cologne) and Wolfgang G. Müller (Jena), is based in a Department of English. Drawing on his years of teaching the ballad as a genre encompassing both popular and literary ballads, Raimund Borgmeier presents in Volume 3 of B·A·S·E a close reading of twelve selected ballads from the canon of English ballads, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-98). Through text and interpretation he makes these ballads accessible, particularly to students whose native language is not English.

Borgmeier's main concern is to position the ballad as a highly influential and extremely interesting poetical genre of English literature. This is not to minimise the ballads' cultural and musical engagements, which James Porter wrote about in *Genre, Conflict, Presence* in Volume 2 of B·A·S·E, nor to negate the vital role of the performer or the 'Sitz im Leben' (life-setting). By insisting that ballads can also be read as poems, Borgmeier takes the discussion back to its very beginning, when ballads were first put into books by J. G. Herder and Bishop Percy in the eighteenth century, and when ballad variants were first collated and compared by Sir Walter Scott and F. J. Child in the nineteenth century.

Much has been written about German influence on F. J. Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-98): how the young Harvard man came under the spell of the Brothers Grimm, and how the German philological *zeitgeist* became a decisive factor in the making of his canonical ballad collection (see for example B·A·S·I·S 7: *Child's Children: Ballad Study and its Legacies*). The thoroughness of German philology, with its attention to the minute detail of language and rhetoric, helped Child understand the history of English language and literature, and it is with this tradition in mind that Borgmeier focuses on the variants of one particular ballad type.

It was, after all, the Romantic poet Wordsworth who claimed that the first major ballad collection, namely Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), had, in effect, come to the rescue of English poetry and, one might want to add, enhanced its international reputation and appeal.

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The Twelve Ballads: Introduction

Popular ballads, or ballads of tradition or folk ballads (the terms are used here synonymously; Sigrid Rieuwerts in "The Folk-Ballad" makes a finer distinction), are a very special kind of poetry, fundamentally different from the kind of poetical texts students of literature are usually familiar with. Their authors are unknown and, originally, they were not written down or printed but transmitted orally from one generation to the next. By this transmission the text is changed and takes on very specific features which characterize the genre. It is not uncommon that the same ballad can be found in different countries and languages – though nobody knows how the story travelled from one country to the other.

Gordon Hall Gerould, in his important study of the genre, *The Ballad of Tradition*, gives the definition: "A ballad is a folk-song that tells a story with stress on the crucial situation, tells it by letting the action unfold itself in event and speech, and tells it objectively with little comment or intrusion of personal bias" (11). This appropriate definition, which is also supported and quoted by other scholars (see, for example, Hodgart's *The Ballads* 11), very succinctly points to the most essential characteristics of popular ballads, which are also fundamental for the interpretations of individual ballads in this volume.

It has been suggested that a ballad of tradition has something essential in common with all the three main literary genres – fiction, drama, and poetry. Like fiction or narrative literature, a ballad tells a story. In the words of E.M. Forster, a ballad offers "a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence" (93; ch. 5). And usually the story is not about unimportant and insignificant aspects of everyday life but it deals with matters of life and death, and, in most cases, the outcome is tragic. And where the end is not fatal, the adventures told are at least potentially dangerous or decisive.

Like drama, a ballad does not gradually and patiently elaborate and develop a story, but concentrates on the critical phase, the climax, as it were, which is presented immediately and directly. And this is usually done with a lot of direct speech (very often put forward without prosaic *inquit*-formulas, like 'he said'). Some ballads – as, for example, *Edward*, which will be analyzed later – even consist exclusively of direct speech passages, without any narrative parts, and a ballad like this resembles a play even more clearly.

Like poetry – it *is* poetry, of course – a ballad must be seen as a metrical composition, it is distinguished by rhyme and metre. There is even a formal pattern known as *ballad metre* or *ballad stanza* (or *common measure*), a four-line stanza or quatrain containing alternating four-stress- and three-stress-lines with

the rhyme scheme *abcb* or *abab*, to be found in many of the popular ballads. And rhyme and metre, as students of literature know, are not accidental and external features but essentially influence and shape the language of the ballads, which gains a distinctly formulaic quality. Many ballads also have, like many folk songs generally, a refrain. About a third of the ballads collected by Child "show in some version evidence of chorus or refrain" (Gummere qtd. in Gerould 118).

In contrast to other kinds of poems, popular ballads were originally not spoken and recited or meant to be read, but they were sung by ballad singers, in most cases old women or men, for an audience. This form of realization, of course, shaped the texts in a remarkable way and very much contributed to rendering them more stylized and formulaic. Songs are even further removed from inconspicuous prose than ordinary verse.

As we shall see in the following chapter, the early collectors of folk ballads very much neglected the musical side and were only or predominantly interested in the texts, but originally the tunes were an important aspect of ballad art. On the other hand, it seems possible to consider the texts separately, since one ballad is sung to completely different tunes, which shows that the music may be important but it is not an integral part of the individual ballad. In the present context, since the interpretations are intended mainly for readers, the musical aspect can only be touched upon.

That the term *ballad* is originally derived from Latin *ballare* (*to dance*) appears to be merely of historical interest and concerns rather the culture and art of the Middle Ages in France and Italy. The relationship of the form to communal dance in England that some theorists have speculated about is highly questionable. As Hodgart explains,

> The term was taken into the English language and gradually lost its precise meaning, until in Elizabethan times it became applied to various kinds of popular and semi-popular songs, lyric and narrative alike. [. . .] It was only in the eighteenth century that the word "ballad" became applied exclusively to popular narrative poetry. (*The Ballads* 78)

The popular ballad must be distinguished from the broadside or street ballad, i. e. a ballad printed on one sheet of paper and sold by hawkers, as it became common in the sixteenth century. In broadsides, the narrator usually makes an appearance in the first person, he appeals to his audience in a very emotional way and comments emphatically on the story he tells (see, for example, the poems in Palmer's *Ballad History*), which contrasts fundamentally with the impersonal presentation that is characteristic of a popular ballad.

At the same time, though, there are points of contact between the popular ballad and the broadside. Ballad printers occasionally printed popular ballads, and some text versions of ballads of tradition that we have can be traced back to such origins. Ballad-mongers also frequently set their words to old tunes (Gerould 235-254). So the street ballad exerted some influence on the popular ballad, and in some texts, e. g. in the very popular ballad *Chevy Chase*, as will be shown in the detailed interpretation below, there are noticeable broadside elements.

Although popular ballads differ so fundamentally from mainstream poetry, they nevertheless exerted a great influence in literary history. In the late eighteenth and in the nineteenth centuries, many people became interested in these poems and some collected them (as the next chapter will explain). Since ballads were the art of the people, the Romantic poets regarded popular ballads as an important model for their own poetical creations. Without the popular ballads, for example, Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" would be unthinkable. Before becoming a poet and a literary writer himself, Sir Walter Scott was a collector and editor of popular Scottish ballads, and in the Waverley Novels, one can find numerous ballads.

The work of collecting the popular ballads was to some extent completed towards the end of the nineteenth century by the American scholar Francis James Child. His collection, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-1898), in five volumes with no less than 305 different ballads with their numerous variants, became the definitive edition, so that popular ballads after that could also be referred to as "Child ballads." From this edition, we have taken the texts for the subsequent interpretations.

In the present collection, twelve examples are chosen, which all belong, more or less, to the small number of famous and well-known ballads, and which, at the same time, represent various different aspects of ballad art. The order follows Child's collection.

Lord Randal (Child 12) is one of the oldest and most popular ballads. Like the following ballad, *Edward*, it consists entirely of dialogue and tells the dramatic story of a terrible crime. The extraordinary popularity of this song, which uses the potential of ballad art in a very remarkable way, is evident by the great number of variants, not only in English but also in other European languages, like Italian and German.

Edward (Child 13) tells a fascinating family tragedy. It is particularly remarkable because, like *Lord Randal* (Child 12) and some other ballads, it exclusively consists of dialogue, without any narrative passages. In common with

many other ballads, it has a refrain. This ballad has especially appealed to German poets so that a look at this influence of the original suggests itself.

The Three Ravens (Child 26), certainly one of the most admired ballads, presents the tragic story of a dead knight. It is to be found in particularly dissimilar variants and was also translated into various different languages.

The Cherry-Tree Carol (Child 54), like *Judas* (Child 23) or *Dives and Lazarus* (Child 56), is one of the small number of religious ballads. The question whether it can be considered a real ballad or rather a carol (as the title seems to suggest) appears to be important. In this case, also the relationship of the text to the religious sources deserves particular attention.

Sir Patrick Spens (Child 58), which is clearly a Scottish ballad, tells the moving story of a tragedy that takes place in the naval realm. The ballad is typical of the genre when it uses techniques otherwise known from film-making or the art of the short story and leaves many things open. An important question that offers itself concerns the historical significance of this outstanding ballad.

In *Clerk Saunders* (Child 69), a pathetic love tragedy is enacted, in which strict notions about family honour clash with the passionate love of two young people and lead to deadly consequences. What is particularly remarkable is that the bloody deed is left out and is not represented directly. Like most ballads, this one is extremely stylized and ritualized.

The Wife of Usher's Well (Child 79) poignantly presents the typical world of the ballad, which is concrete, magic, and pagan. The mother's dead sons who come back from the other world are not ghosts but revenants, i. e. very much like real people. Again, the poem works with the device of ellipsis to achieve its powerful effect and to make it one of the most cherished of all popular ballads.

Bonny Barbara Allan (Child 84) tells another tragic love story, which was, in Scotland, England, and not least in the New World, highly esteemed. The cruel young woman has to suffer in the end the same fate to which she left her unhappy lover. She is at the centre of the poem and it is not without reason that her name provides, like a refrain, the most important, recurring rhyme word. No wonder that this ballad also lives on in translations and adaptations.

In *Lamkin* (Child 93), we find the horror tale of a brutal revenge, which is made all the more shocking through the dominant contrast between the bloody deed and the innocent sphere of the nursery. Again there are mysterious pagan elements, and the meaning of the ballad remains puzzling.

As opposed to these ballads, which – with the possible exception of the religious ballad – are of a tragic nature, *Robin Hood and Little John* (Child 125) is characterized by irony and humour. Like the other poems that belong to the large group of the Robin-Hood-ballads in Child's collection, this poem presents