

The Ballad

The Ballad at a Glance

- 1) It is a short narrative, which is usually—but not always—arranged in four-line stanzas with a distinctive and memorable meter.
- 2) The usual ballad meter is a first and third line with four stresses—iambic tetrameter—and then a second and fourth with three stresses—iambic trimeter.
- 3) The rhyme scheme is *abab* or *abcb*.
- 4) The subject matter is distinctive: almost always communal stories of lost love, supernatural happenings, or recent events.
- 5) The ballad maker uses popular and local speech and dialogue often and vividly to convey the story. This is especially a feature of early ballads.

The History of the Form

The balladeer remains one of the most interesting and least-defined makers of form. His (rarely her) identity, appearance, ability, and standing changed from country to country. In Ireland he was often a village citizen, a bystander at political events and natural disasters: a storyteller with an ominous errand. In England he stood outside the court, outside history, reminding the populace of their passage through an imperial history, and their exclusion from it: In pursuit of this, he composed ballads on shipwrecks and uprisings and harvest romances. In America, where poetry developed at the same time as literacy, and where there was therefore less need for a division between the oral and written, the ballad became part of the vocabulary of the ordinary accomplishments of the American poet. And so the anonymous balladeer gradually vanished from the landscape.

Despite this, it seems obvious that the ballad came to poetry from song. It is a form found in every language, every country, every culture. Its shape, structure, and rhetoric are all defined by its roots in the oral tradition. As a form it is simple, direct—almost always a short narrative—and subtly left open for the next user, so that details, names, and events can be added on if necessary.

The ballad keeps an audience awake. Its subject matter is tabloid:

death, murder, suicide, disgrace, mystery. It is lurid, musical, communal. It leaps from event to event.

One of the signature traits of the ballad is the way that vernacular dialogue breaks into the narrative, turning it into a living, vivid theater of the speech of its particular moment. In the anonymous fifteenth-century ballad "Sir Patrick Spens," a knight has been sent by the Scottish king to sail out on dangerous seas. He drowns before the ballad is finished. This is a beautiful, economical telling of a story. In these two stanzas, as his voice and the voice of one of his sailors is heard, the immediacy, music, and fatalism of the ballad can be seen in all their raw power:

"Mak haste, mak haste, my mirry men all,
Our guid ship sails the morn."

"O say na sae, my master dear,
For I fear a deadly storm.

"Late, late yestre'en I saw the new moon
Wi' the auld moon in hir arm,
And I fear, I fear my dear master,
That we will come to harm."

The earliest ballad in manuscript form, called Judas, is in a collection in a Cambridge library. The ballad, as we know it, probably dates from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; but maybe earlier. The majority of ballads were not transcribed until the eighteenth century, and so a great deal of information about them has been lost. Not until the end of the nineteenth century did an English scholar, F. J. Child, produce a five-volume archive of ballad versions and alternatives called *The English and Scottish Ballads*. Nevertheless, there have been intense disagreements between scholars about their origins. During the earlier part of this century there was "a ballad war," with one set of scholars arguing that ballads were communal, that they grew out of dances and rituals. Others argued that they were individual, made by one balladeer, informed by communal concerns.

In the same way, no one can quite agree about ballad meter. All varieties of the ballad are based on four lines. Some critics have said that the meter is accentual. Some that it is accentual-syllabic. And some

others in this century that it is foot-verse, with metrical pauses, but not confined by them.

In fact, whatever its name, the early ballad meter is recognizable as a series of small, intense sound-snapshots. Each line has four stresses, or alternately four and three. The rhyme scheme is *abcb* or *abab*. The music builds from verse to verse often making a hypnotic narrative. The form is designed so that the ballad maker's voice is clearly heard. It is a human, downright voice. It chooses plain words and short lines, vivid images and musical rhymes. And more than any other poetic form, except the dramatic monologue, the ballad insists on ordinary, day-to-day speech and vernacular and includes it in its verses.