The Flowering Thorn

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Now She's Fairly Altered Her Meaning: Interpreting Narrative Song
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Songs have an infinite range of potential symbolic and functional meanings to both their singers and listeners. Scholars, like any other proactive ballad audience, bring a world of unique referents and a range of individual background information to the study of traditional song. Through a synthesis of internal and external evidence, the essays in this section tell us much about various song traditions but also about the methodological, and indeed the human concerns, of their authors. We prefer, incidentally, to use terms such as “interpretation” and “meaning” in relation to traditional song, rather than “decoding,” which suggests a studied obscurity (see Toelken 1995: 33). Meaning in folk tradition is complex, rich, and rewarding to study. It is, however, undoubtedly obscure at times. As Barre Toelken (1995) said, “Perhaps we can feel lucky to be pursuing such a topic at a time in cultural history when we can discuss this imagery more openly and no longer feel inclined to think that rural and ‘primitive’ people are too dull to create intentional poetic ambiguity” (2).

These textually and culturally centered studies look at repertoire, symbolic language, motifs, linguistic structures, and character roles internal to the songs. Connecting these in many of the essays are gender issues, which are addressed through interpreting ballads as indicators of sexual, economic, and cultural freedom, and from the perspective of singers’ choice of song in relation to the male and female roles embodied in the texts. From symbolic evidence, Pauline Greenhill infers a range of nonheterosexual meanings, particularly relating to women’s economic freedom versus their usual stereotyped roles. These veiled, often subconscious, meanings allow women unobtrusively to subvert standard assumptions about gender roles in traditional song. In the Scottish context, Lynn Wollstadt looks at the implications of songs that can be described as gender typed by content and investigates whether this differentiation is reflected in male and female singers’ repertoire choices.

Also touching upon gender roles, and their swirling interaction with spiritual, religious, and medical practices, is Luisa Del Giudice’s “Healing the Spider’s Bite.” The intriguing phenomenon of tarantismo, a compelling synthesis of movement, music, and medicine which encapsulates the magical elements of all three, goes some way toward explaining the elemental power of ballads, the most visceral of traditional songs. This same primeval energy is seen, too, in Vic Gammon’s brief look at the “Lamkin” ballad (Child 93), part of his survey of
music, charm, and seduction in British balladry, drawing on a wide range of examples. Here we come face to face with the fine line that separates comfortable, safe domesticity (the singing of a lullaby by a domestic servant) from what we like to imagine is inhuman violence (the same servant’s complicity in the murder of a baby). This is just one example of the visceral, elemental nature of the ballad tradition.

In “The Servant Problem in Child Ballads,” Roger deV. Renwick looks more closely at the master-servant relationship, a common thread in many ballad stories:

But standing by was a little foot page,
To the lady’s coach he run,
Although I am the Lady’s page
I am Lord Barnard’s man. (Child 81)

Loyalty, duty, and morality are laid bare by reading between the lines of classic texts to elucidate traditions of servant authority and disobedience within the context of the ballad world.

Reading between the lines is precisely the method pursued in much of Gerald Porter’s work, especially his recent collaboration with Mary-Ann Constantine, *Fragments and Meaning in Traditional Songs* (2003). “Jesting with Edge Tools,” in this volume, is one of a suite of papers (for example, 1997, 2000) examining specific trades and ethnic types in the broadside tradition of the British Isles. Through songs of the popular press, he maintains, it is not only possible to deduce something about attitudes to the working classes but also, by drawing on a type of reception theory, to interpolate something about the cultural assumptions that singers and songmakers would expect their listeners to have about ethnicity and profession, in this case, the carpenter.

Finally, in a wide-ranging study of “De May Bush,” Cozette Griffin-Kremer shows how song—content, use and function, symbolism—fits sycretically into wider forms of cultural expression, in this case the calendar customs of Beltane, the Celtic midsummer festival. Like many festivals, an eighteenth-century Dublin May Day was associated with misrule, chaos, and inversion. Griffin-Kremer relates the song to the enactment of cultural ritual, cosmological thought and symbolism, and the expression of local political rivalries, breaking down narrow genre contraints to show how different iterations of the same tradition can permeate many levels of society. In such a case, a song can acquire meaning and function unique to each element of the society of which it is a part, an idea implied by Willa Muir’s well-known phrase “living with ballads” (1965).
References