Malign Forces
That Can Punish and Pardon:
Structure and Motif
Since the publication of key texts on structure and form in traditional narrative, ballad scholars have sought to apply their methodology to the similar genre of narrative song. The resulting studies have concentrated on two main areas of research: the re-creation of songs using formulas or commonplaces, and Propp’s ideas of function and the tale role (1968). This section presents two essays on structural themes and two on particular motifs within the ballad tradition which build upon the foundations developed in the previous essays. With the recent emphasis on context and interpretation in ballad studies, aspects of performance are now being related to these structural considerations. The study of ballads in their “original” form—associated with dancing, for instance—has led to interesting conclusions about the difference between sung rhythm and the words presented on the page (on aspects of this difference, see Ives 1964: 154; also Toelken 1995: 19–21).

The first contribution, Simon Furey’s “An Oddity of Catalan Folk Songs and Ballads,” takes a performance-based observation as its starting point, delving into a curious situation where the rhythms of traditional dances only periodically coincide with those of the music. In most of Europe, the two genres of narrative song and dance have long since been divorced (Bronson 1959–72: ix), but there are vestiges (in Brittany, Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Catalonia) of a tradition once widespread, which illustrate a largely forgotten power, function, and, indeed, utility for the ballad tradition. Here, as everywhere in ballad studies, oral performance exposes innumerable oddities and exceptions to long-held ideas about the way traditional verse works. Multiformity is present not just in text and tune but in the very patterns we consider fundamental to our definition(s) of the genre.

Such patterns are further addressed in William B. McCarthy’s essay on single-rhyme ballads in the Child corpus. According to David Fowler, the Child collection (1882–98) “encourage[d] the study of ballads without respect to time and place. Not only are they considered ageless, but their characteristics are statically conceived; a ballad either has certain stylistic features or it lacks them (1968: 3). Taking a lead from this sense of frustration, McCarthy draws attention not only to an interesting feature of ballad structure but also to the way anomalous features, such as those examined by Furey, can all too easily be overlooked in songs which may have become too familiar. Structural features can be a
significant indicator of date and evolutionary history. From this perspective, it
comes clear that a particular editor’s, collector’s, or singer’s aesthetic can be a
key factor in shaping our concepts of ballad form.

Motif study has been a fruitful field of research for many years, one perhaps
not so long neglected as the structural anomalies just noted. Using motifs exam-
ined in classic studies (for example, Thompson 1955–58), Nicolae Constantinescu’s
and Larysa Vakhnina’s essays explore the status and treatment of spousal mur-
der in Ukrainian and Romanian tradition, the former through poisoning, the latter
through the widespread international motif of the walled-up wife, “which has
attracted the attention of many, if not most, ballad specialists in that part of the
world” (Dundes 1996: x). Early work on this theme focused on conjectured ori-
gins, later work on the motif’s possible ritual origins in the foundation sacrifice
(x). To the debate, Constantinescu contributes a survey of its Romanian manifes-
tation, set firmly in their regional, cultural, international contexts, throwing light
on gender-based differences in singers’ repertoires. As in most ballad studies, it
appears that the role of the individual singer eventually influences the identity of
the genre itself.

Notes
1. These are, principally, Orlík’s “epic laws” (1965, originally 1909), Stith Thompson’s
motif index (1955–58), Vladimir Propp’s tale roles (1968, originally 1928) and Parry’s
and Lord’s oral-formulaic theory (Lord 1964; Lord 2000). Other influential works
include those of Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1969), and Bakhtin (1981).
2. Among them are Cheesman 1994: chapter 3 (functions), and McCarthy 1990; Buchan
1972; Andersen and Pettitt 1979. Atkinson 2002 (tale roles). For an examination of
the interchange of plot between ballads and folktales, see Taylor 1964.
3. I use the word “corpus” advisedly because I feel “canon” gives the wrong impression.

References
Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series. Aldershot and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate.
Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. University of
Bronson, Bertrand Harris. 1959–72. The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads, with
Their Texts, According to the Extant Records of Great Britain and America. 4 vols.
Cheesman, Tom. 1994. The Shocking Ballad Picture Show: German Popular Literature
Wisconsin Press.
Una cançó vull cantar, 
una cançó nova i linda, 
d’un estudiant de Vic, 
que en festesjava una viuda.

Bon amor, adéu-teu, 
color de rosa florida.

Bon amor, adéu-teu, 
La viuda s’hi vol casar, 
el seu pare no ho volia; 
'l'estudiant se'n dóna anat 
a servir una rectoria.
Quan la viuda ho va saber, 
tingué llarga malaltia.
La viudeta se’n va a l'hort, 
en un jardí que hi tenia, 
un jardí de totes florit, 
rosa vera i satallita.
A la vora del jardí 
un roseret n’hi havia; 
a la vora del roser, 
la viuda s’hi adormí; 
ja en passava un rosinyol

Fig. 1. “L’estudiant de Vic,” from “Cançoner” by Joan Amades in *Folklore de Catalunya*.

Fig. 2. Musical phrasing of “L'estudiant de Vic.”